

A Novel

# The Innocent Victims

Siva.Ahrooran





16,  
Mr. K. S. Sivakumaran

With best Compliment of  
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# The Innocent Victims

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## **The Innocent Victims**

A Novel by Siva. Ahrooran

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*For my Paternal Grandfather*

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## One

Suganya stayed awake in bed for half an hour. The bed room was pitch-dark. Now and then she heard roosters crowing in the distance. She thought there must be a couple of minutes to morning five o'clock. Her daughter Ahrani was still lying fast asleep beside her.

A peal of Karumari amman kovil bell began ringing out. 'Amma... Thaye... Save us!' Suganya called out to her goddess in a calm voice. She stretched out her right hand across the pillow, patted Ahrani on the head, and said: 'Pillai! Get up! The kovil bell is ringing. So it's five o'clock sharp. Get up!'

Ahrani stirred from her sleep, still had closed her eyes. 'Amma... I have got no home work today. I want to sleep for some more time', she said softly, moaning, with her right arm encircling her mother's neck affectionately.

'Pillai... Get up... Up! Your sleep is enough. Don't be so lazy. It's a bad habit', said Suganya, gently removing Ahrani's arm around her neck. She got up and switched the room light on. The entire room was engulfed in milky light. All at once Ahrani turned herself to a prone position, and pulled the sheet over her head.

Suganya looked herself in the mirror, readjusted her dress, and repaired her face. When she tried to open the room door, Ahrani requested, 'Ammachi... please switch the light off; keep the

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door closed behind you. Otherwise the cold air from outside will penetrate through the door and disturb this moderate warmth inside the room so that I cannot sleep comfortably.'

'Very nice, then what else?' Suganya said with a smile and did what her daughter wanted.

She entered the living room, went over to the front door, and opened it. She felt a chill in the air, stepped down onto the porch, closed the door behind her. The sky was cloudless and starry. The morning star was glittering in the east. The Portia tree that stood at the corner of the front yard with dense foliage looked like a dark heap against the background of the street lights. The Vavuniya railway station, the dome of the goods shed, and the gopuram of the Karumari amman kovil peeped over the wall. There were several lamp posts around the station, from which yellow light was shedding everywhere. The bright in close range and the faded in long range. The Karumari amman kovil overlooked the station. The railway line lay across between them. The Goodshed road behind the kovil ran parallel to the railway line. On the other side of the road, the house was situated, overlooking the kovil and the station.

Suganya took the sweeper made of the stalks of dried coconut fronds and started sweeping the front yard and backyard, and then the ground under the eaves of the house. Within thirty minutes she finished sweeping.

Then the eastern sky began to grey. There was the dawn chorus- the birds flew chirping across the sky. A lace of mist, typical of February, hung in the air. The environment was blurred, not clear as if to be seen through a transparent poly-thene sheet.

She went into the bathroom. A few minutes later she went over to the kitchen to boil the kettle. She prepared tea. With a cup of tea, she entered the room where Ahrani had sat at the table reading a book.

'Good girl,' Suganya said with a smile, offered the tea to her. As Ahrani began to sip her tea Suganya returned to the



kitchen, in order to make pittu and coconut sambol for breakfast, and then to cook rice and two curries for lunch.

Ahrani had a bath and walked into the room to get ready for school. She wore a spotless white uniform and tie with a design of alternating green and yellow oblique stripes. She combed her hair back neatly with a centre parting, and tugged it into two equal sections for double plaits. She secured at the ends of the plaits with the ribbons; powdered her face and put on a small rounded pottu in black colour on her forehead, in between her eyebrows, just above the bridge of her nose.

'Amma.....' she called out.

In a minute Suganya came to the room to check her daughter. Looking at Ahrani from top to toe, she said; 'Your plaits are symmetrical; uniform okay; powder okay- then everything okay.' She tapped gently Ahrani on the shoulder as a token of appreciation, left the room, smiling.

Ahrani had her breakfast. Suganya filled Ahrani's tiffin box with pittu and curry, and gave it to her. Ahrani got it and put it into her school bag.

Having washed the dishes, Suganya swept the house, and then had a bath. Ahrani sat on the bench on the porch, put her socks and shoes on, and was waiting for her friend Virushali. They both were in grade five, studying at the same school. Virushali's house was located about five hundred metres apart from Ahrani's.

Then Suganya, dressed in a gown, stepped down onto the front yard with a small tray to pluck flowers-hibiscus and jasmine. A row of hibiscus stood along the wall, beside the wall. There were two jasmine vines stood in front of the porch, on either end of it. Those vines had been trained up and arch-like trellis touching the porch. The canopy formed by the vines and the porch were at the same level. It was like an elongated porch.

Suganya went into the pooja room with the flowers she plucked, offered them up to God and worshipped.

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Then Virushali opened the gate. On seeing her friend, Ahrani called out Suganya, 'Amma.... Viru has come!'

Suganya came out onto the porch. After an exchange of greetings, Ahrani and Virushali said 'bye!' in chorus, and walked towards the gate. Suganya stood at the porch looking at them. When they shut the gate behind them, they waved bye-bye. Suganya waved them bye - bye back, smiling. They started walking along Goodshed Road. Suganya went into the room to get ready for her office.

She wore a sari in ice blue with a light blue blouse, brushed her hair with a centre parting and wore it in a single plait. There was a small gold chain with a tear drop pendant around her neck. After she made herself presentable, she locked all the doors and windows, took her bicycle, went out into Goodshed Road, and padlocked the gate behind her.

She tucked up a part of the sari around her left calf under a bicycle clip, threw her right leg over the slanted crossbar-peculiar design of the ladies' bicycle, mounted and rode it northwards, along Goodshed Road. A minute later she reached the top of Goodshed Road meeting Station Road, and turned to the right, into Station Road that lay between Kurumankadu on Mannar Road and the roundabout on the A-9, Kandy Road.

She crossed the rail road crossing, and then turned to the right again, into Outer Circular Road that was almost like the circumference of a quadrant with the clock tower at the roundabout on the A-9 being the centre of the quadrant. She reached the station. There were *mahua* trees with lush green foliage opposite the station. Under the shady trees stood four or five three wheelers, waiting for hire. The station was not still busy-a few people going in and coming out through the entrance of the station. A small restaurant and some kiosks also were situated near the trees, overlooking the station. The road curved around the trees leading to the A-9.

She pedalled her bicycle further along the road, passed the Sindamanipillaiyar kovil, then reached the A -9. and turned to the right. The sun rays struck her face directly. The morning sun was shining in the east brilliantly. The cloudless sky was a bright blue. It was a sign of the hot and humid day. Generally the misty night turns the next day hot - and the colder the night, the hotter the day.

She arrived at the gate of her office, the Department of Irrigation, opposite the Vavuniya Maha Vidyalayam. She took her glance at her wrist watch, which indicated at fifteen past eight. She pushed her bicycle across the front yard of the office towards the vehicle shed.

IE Satkunam had stood in front of the entrance of the office. The IE stood for Irrigation Engineer. Suganya rest her bicycle on its stand and locked it. Taking her hand bag and lunch box out of the basket fitted to the front of the bicycle, she walked to the office. When she got close to Satkunam who stood on the way, 'Good morning, sir,' she greeted with a smiling face.

He didn't smile back at her, but nodded his head approvingly, as usual, greeted, 'Good morning!'

She walked into the front hall of the office, where her table was set. Some other officers also had shared the front hall. She placed her hand bag on a chair, because her table was dusty. She brushed her table clean with a rag and prepared to work, taking the files out of the shelf.

Ten minutes later Vasanthi came into the office. They exchanged greetings. Vasanthi's table had been set next to Suganya's. Pointing at her table Vasanthi said, 'Look! How dirty it's.' She was disgusted at the sight of her table.

Suganya smiled at her, and said calmly; Akka! Yesterday was Sunday, no? That's the reason.'

'You always smile. How can you? What's your secret?'

Vasanthi asked her laughing, wiping her table clean with a brush.

'No secret' Suganya said, smiling.

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They were busy in preparation for their work.

It was at about ten o' clock. Satkunam had sat in the chair in his office scrutinizing a project report.

'Excuse me, Sir!' said Indran, the peon, with a tone of respect.

Satkunam looked up from his file. Indran stood with a cup of tea.

'By then it's getting ten o' clock, no,' said Satkunam, watching the wall clock. When Indran placed the tea cup and saucer on the table, and turned to go out, 'Indran! ask the clerk to come here,' Satkunam ordered him, sipping his tea.

'Yes, sir!' Indran replied, and went out.

In a matter of seconds Suganya entered his office. 'Excuse me, sir!' she said, standing by his table.

'Oh yes, well.... a letter has to be typed , only one A4 page. Either we do it now or after lunch? It's necessary, not urgent. So, it's up to you to decide when,' said Satkunam looking at her face.

'No problem, sir. Let's do it now,' she said decidedly. At once she sat in front of the computer in his office, and turned it on. Satkunam stepped up to the computer, sat down in another chair next to hers. She got ready to type. 'Sir, I'm ready,' she said enthusiastically as usual, placing her fingers on the keyboard.

'Then ok,' he said and started dictating the letter written by him to her. She began typing.

Half an hour later she finished typing the letter. 'Sir! Please, read and check the letter on the screen once. If it's ok, I'll print it out.' She rose to her feet, and stood aside, so as to make him comfortable.

He shifted from his chair to the other one she'd risen from, and read the letter over. 'Everything is correct. All right, give me the print out,' he said, rose from the chair, and returned to his table.

Checking the print preview, she clicked on the print icon. In a moment the printer pushed a printed paper out. She gave it to him. He read the letter once again, and appreciated her, 'Nice! I like your

attitude of being active and enthusiastic.'

She smiled slightly as a token of respect, and said: 'Sir, I've been working here not only for the salary but for the sake of my self satisfaction as well. And also satisfying my superior is my another obligation.'

'Good, good! Keep it up!' He appreciated again.

'Sir, I've some work to do now. So, can I leave?' She asked in a humble voice.

'Ok... Ok... You may go,' he said instantly.

When she stepped up to the door, 'Suganya!' he called. She turned her head to look at him. 'Hang on a minute-come here' he said, sweeping his hand.

She came up to him, asked, 'What's it, sir?'

'I'm due to retire within a month,' he said. She said nothing - just looking at him, quietly. He asked, 'What're you thinking?'

She broke the silence. 'Sir, you're not only my superior but also my well wisher - like my father. This news is bitterly disappointing.'

'Suganya! Don't worry. Probably Mr.Jeyarajah will be appointed as a new IE. He is also a sober man. Even if I leave the quarters, my wife and I are going to live in Vavuniya. We plan to get a rented house at Vairava Puliyankulam on Station Road.'

'So nice sir. Let our houses be located in close proximity to each other!' she said, and returned to her table.

'You seem unhappy' said Vasanthi, looking at Suganya's face.

Suganya told the news to her. Vasanthi said; 'He is sixty, no? He must retire from his service. So, you should stop worrying about his retirement.'

Suganya felt relieved. They were both immersed in their work.

It was at twelve noon. Sanjayan entered the office. Vasanthi saw him come in. 'Hi! Sanje... how are you? After long time' said Vasanthi with a great happiness, smiling.

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'After a long time? It's just only a month,' he said, smiling, 'well akka! I have to see the DD (Deputy Director). Having come to Vavuniya, how can I return to Murukan without seeing you all?'

'You are in jovial mood as always,' said Vasanthi, smiling at him.

He looked at Suganya, asked: 'How are you? What about your daughter?'

'All is well. She's going to sit for the scholarship exam this year. Let's see what happens,' she smiled, 'She may pass, I think.'

'Good! But don't put pressure on your daughter to get her higher grades at the exam. There may cause the peer group pressure in her mind, which is a bad thing that will turn jealousy over her friends. Be careful of these things. No matter whether she gets through or not,' he advised her with a responsibility.

'Thanks', she said, 'but, I shouldn't praise my daughter myself. I want to tell you-she's studious. I never tell her to study. My duty is that I put my signature to her progress report. She'll pass!'

'Touch wood!' he said, instantly. 'Okay, I'm going to that side. What else?'

At once Vasanthi interrupted: 'Sanje! Ranjan has gone to the field. Sundaram sir and the draughts man are on leave today?'

'So I want to see the IE,' he said, walked into Satkunam's office.

Sanjayan was a TA-Technical Assistant by profession, working at the Murunkan office in the Mannar district. A few years ago, he'd been appointed as a trainee technical assistant at the Vavuniya office. His friend, and batch mate, Ranjan too. Then they were promoted TAs. When Ranjan remained at the Vavuniya office, Sanjayan was transferred to Murunkan. When Sanjayan had worked at the Vavuniya office he got on well with the staff - from engineer to minor staff. He treated them as his equals. Even after he left Vavuniya, he visited the Vavuniya office every time he came to Vavuniya. He had forged a good friendship with Ranjan and his

field-related staff. And also, he didn't fail to have even a quick word with the other staff. Vasanthi-the accountant, Suganya - the clerk, Maniyam and Ramesh - the drivers.

Sanjayan opened the door, excused himself, and greeted Satkunam: 'Good afternoon, Sir!'

Satkunam raised his eyes from the file to look at him. 'Good afternoon! Come in, come in,' he said excitedly.

Satkunam asked about Sanjayan's work process. They were engrossed in deep conversation about their field-related matters. Sanjayan had learnt a lot of things from Satkunam as he was a trainee TA. He highly respected Satkunam.

In the middle of the conversation, Satkunam asked the question he ever wanted to, 'leave it all! When are you going to marry?'

'Must do it,' said Sanjayan, laughing.

'Why can't you answer me categorically?' Satkunam got slightly irritated at his answer. Sanjayan was groping for suitable words to reply him.

Satkunam went on, 'Thamp! You're thirty four. You're not still a little boy. Your batch mate Ranjan himself has married two years ago, and has a child. Why are you not interested in marriage? Any personal reason?'

'No particular reason, sir,' said Sanjayan with a smile, 'my parents have been looking for a suitable bride.'

'How long have they been looking for?'

'Since five years ago, but no horoscope matching with mine. That's the problem. Anyhow, I'll extend you the first invitation for my wedding. Is it enough, sir?' asked Sanjayan with a smile.

'Enough... enough,' said Satkunam, laughing, tapping his fingers on the table.

'Okay, Sanje! Let's go for lunch.' Satkunam, not expecting his answer, rose to go out. Sanjayan too.

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### Two

It was a Sunday morning at about six o'clock. Suganya was watering the plants in the front yard. Ahrani had reclined herself in a wicker chair on the porch. The chair was too big for her. She had sat on her back in it, reading her text book.

'Hi thatha!' called out Ahrani, waving her hand towards the gate. Suganya thought it was Satkunam standing at the gate, and turned to look at the gate. Satkunam stood there, clutching the gate. He was wearing a track suit in navy blue, a tee shirt in pure white and tennis shoes.

It was usual that Satkunam would go jogging every morning. In the weekend he would go along Goodshed Road. On other days of the week he would turn back at the top of Goodshed Road. Otherwise he will be late for work. Every time he passed the house, he would stop and have a word. Sometimes he would enter the house and have a cup of tea.

'Uncle, come in,' said Suganya with a welcoming smile.

'No, Suganya. I haven't still finished my jogging. I'll come here today evening with Kamala. She told me she wanted to meet you.'

'Why? Anything special?' asked Suganya in a tone of surprise.

'I don't know why. She'll come here, no. And ask her yourself why,' said Satkunam. Then he turned to look at Ahrani, puckered his lips, kissed his palm, and blew it to her. Ahrani stretched her right



hand, grabbed the kiss, and then did the same in return. Suganya kept looking on smiling. He resumed his jogging.

Suganya got on with Satkunam and his wife Kamala. She called Satkunam 'sir' when he was in the office, and 'uncle' when not in the office.



In the evening Satkunam and Kamala visited her house as he'd told her in the morning. She welcomed them with respect, and asked them to sit on the couch in the living room.

'You both have come here together - what's the reason of this special visit?' asked Suganya with a delighted smile.

'Not a special visit but a routine visit' said Kamala, looking around, and asked: 'Where is Ahrani?'

'Aunty, she hasn't returned from tuition. It's the time she came,' said Suganya, watching the gate through the front door.

'Pillai! Sit down,' said Kamala, pointing at an arm chair opposite them.

'No problem,' said Suganya, leaning against the door frame.

Kamala came to the point. 'Pillai, you know, he is due to retire. So, we're going to throw a party at our house next Sunday.'

'Is it a tea party?' asked Suganya, accepting what Kamala said.

'Pillai, he says to have a tea party, but I want to serve a meal, I mean - a wonderful lunch. What do you say?'

'In this case, I'm on your side. Because, uncle is going to leave the office for good, no. So I think, serving lunch is better than throwing a tea party,' said Suganya approvingly.

Satkunam was just looking on, not interrupting their discussion.

'Ok, then you'll have to come early in the morning next Sunday to help me cook lunch, won't you?' asked Kamala, looking at Suganya's face expectantly.

'Of course, I'll help you. I'm deeply indebted to you both. So

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it's an opportunity to render a service to you' said Suganya instantly and firmly.

Satkunam and Kamala did smile, looking at each other.

On hearing the sound of the gate opening Suganya turned her head towards the gate, and exclaimed happily: 'There Pillai comes!'

On seeing Satkunam and Kamala in the house, Ahrani walked briskly into the house, and Virushali followed behind.

'Ammamma...!' Ahrani called out, got close to Kamala, who was sweeping her arms wide. Kamala hugged Ahrani tightly, and kissed on both her cheeks.

Suganya took a step towards the kitchen to get them tea. Virushali slunk into the kitchen, following suganya, being too shy to see Satkunam and Kamala. Seeing Virushali in the kitchen Suganya said: 'Viru! Don't be shy. Go and speak to them. They're like your grandparents.'

'No Aunt, I feel shy,' said Virushali, with a shy smile, not moving even a little bit.

'It's ok! Then stay here with me, said Suganya, pouring the tea into the cups.

Suganya offered a cup of tea to Virushali first, and then was ready to serve others.

Every evening Virushali returned from tuition she would drink a cup of tea, from Suganya, and go home.

### Three

The following Sunday morning at eight o' clock sharp, sitting in a wicker chair placed on the open veranda of the quarters, Satkunam watched Suganya and Ahrani enter the yard through the gate. He got up from the chair, and welcomed them.

'Come in, come in.' he welcomed with a grin. 'Kamala!' he called out, 'Kamala! Come out! The punctual lady has come with her daughter.'

Suganya rested her bicycle on its stand under the mango tree standing at the yard. Kamala stepped out onto the veranda, exclaimed: 'Ah!' come in, come in. You're the first people attending our party,' said Kamala.

Instantly looking at his wife Satkunam said: 'What do you say? You had told her to come early to help you cook, no? So, they're not visitors but our close relatives.' Then he turned to look at Suganya and smiled. Suganya also did smile gently as a token of acceptance.

He went inside the house. Looking around, Suganya asked: 'Aunty' where is Rohini Akka? There is no sign of their activity inside the house.'

Shaking her head regretfully Kamala said: 'because her husband had an important meeting, they couldn't travel yesterday itself. They've left Colombo just now. I think they'll be here before

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three o'clock.'

Rohini was their only daughter. Her husband was a doctor, who practised at the Colombo National Hospital. They had a child of twelve. Suganya was two years younger than Rohini.

Satkunam then came out to the veranda, and gave Ahrani a bar of chocolate. Suganya was rather dissatisfied, said: 'Uncle, she is not a little girl anymore. She'll has got into the habit of having chocolate.'

'Ahrani is my granddaughter, no'. As far as I'm concerned both Ahrani and my own grand daughter are equal. You need not worry about that. I know what to do,' said Satkunam, looking at Suganya, and tapping on Ahrani's cheek.

Having heard what Satkunam had declared that Ahrani was his granddaughter, Suganya was in raptures. Her face also indicated it.

Ahrani stripped off the gold foil wrapped in the chocolate bar. She broke the chocolate bar in five equal pieces, saved a piece for Virushali, and shared the rest between the four of them.

'Aunty!' shall we begin to cook now?' asked Suganya with concern, with interest.

'Yes, let's!' said Kamala.

Kamala and Suganya walked to the kitchen.

They started engaging in preparation for cooking.

'Pillai! We'll cook vegetarian food first,' said Kamala.

Suganya nodded.

They cooked rice. Cooking the vegetarian dishes was in progress. Then Kamala said: 'Pillai, non - vegetarian dishes must be kept separate from vegetarian ones. Needless to say, you know why. I'm going to cook chicken curry now.' Not expecting Suganya's reply, Kamala stepped up to the other table in the kitchen.

She took a chicken dressed out of the polythene bag, and started to cut it into cubes. She then turned her head to look at Suganya, said: 'Pillai! Only you have to handle the vegetarian

dishes, not to touch these non - vegetarian things. And also, I won't come there, to prevent being clumsy.' Her tone was serious.

'No problem, Aunty. I understand; nothing wrong will happen,' said Suganya, looking down at the dhal curry reducing, smiling.

Kamala also smiled, wondering whether she had talked something unnecessary, then said: 'Okay let's do our work.'

By half past eleven Satkunam's colleagues and the office staff began to come over to the house individually as well as collectively.

Vasanthi had come with her husband. While her husband sat in a chair on the veranda, she walked to the kitchen to see Suganya, and then started to help Kamala and Suganya.

At twelve noon they began to serve the visitors lunch. Both Kamala and Vasanthi served lunch while being in the kitchen, Suganya plated the rice and curry.

After lunch some people were engrossed in conversation. Current politics was the main topic. Some other people clustered around Gopi, who was a comedian and always cracking jokes incessantly. He told something - the others roared. Those in the kitchen heard the peals of laughter.

By two o'clock, the visitors had dwindled to four - Satkunam, Kamala, Suganya and Ahrani. Even then Suganya had not come out of the kitchen.

Kamala, who stood at the veranda, walked towards the kitchen, looking for Suganya, so as to take her to the veranda. In the kitchen Suganya was washing the dishes.

'Pillai! Leave it. I'll do it later,' said Kamala, having a kind of guilty feeling.

'Aunty! Either you or I must do it, no. And also if the pots and pans turn out dry we can't wash up.' Suganya said flippantly, continued washing up.

Kamala said nothing, moved away.

Ahrani was chatting with Satkunam on the veranda. Then

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Kamala appeared there, asking: 'What were you both chatting about?'

'Ahrani, sing a song,' requested Satkunam.

'Oh yes, she has a sweet voice, no. I haven't listened to her song for a long,' seconded Kamala.

Without hesitation Ahrani started singing. They enjoyed listening to her. While she was singing the third song, Sanjayan emerged at the gate. As soon as she had seen him she stopped singing. But he managed to listen to a bit of her third song.

'Sanje! Come in,' welcomed Satkunam with a smile. Kamala smiled: 'Thampi! Come in.' but Ahrani got up from the chair, looked on.

'Sanje, sit down,' said Satkunam, pointing at a chair.

Sanjayan sat down.

'Why are you late? It's getting three o'clock, no,' said Satkunam, glancing at his wrist watch.

'Yes sir, I had a job here to do today. I've come to Vavuniya from Murunkan by one o'clock.' Sanjayan gave a reason for his late coming.

'Then you've had your lunch. You're no longer hungry, no,' said Satkunam with a tinge of sarcasm.

'Sir...r, what do you mean? I'm starving! Before coming here Ranjan has just called me and told of your delicious lunch, which has made me homesick. I'm hungry like a wolf,' said Sanjayan humorously, grinning from ear to ear.

They laughed too. Kamala moved inside the house. In a matter of minutes Suganya came out with a glass of water and offered him it with a smile. Offering a glass of water was a formal invitation to have a meal-taking the glass of water that she'd offered meant the invitation was accepted by him.

He washed his hands, and sat at the table. Kamala came out, carrying a plate of rice, and served him. He started having it. When he drank water in the middle, 'Thampi, don't drink too much of

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water. It will control your lunch, no?' said Kamala with concern. Suganya topped his glass up with water.

'Sanje, you're receiving a good treatment, no,' said Satkunam, laughing at him.

'Sir, we shouldn't go to a party collectively,' said Sanjayan, laughing.

'Why?' Satkunam gazed at him, *confusedly*.

'Sir, if we go there collectively, then the party will be transformed into a feast. If we go there individually, then only can we receive this kind of treatment,' said Sanjayan, having his meal.

'Absolutely correct!' Satkunam agreed with him.

He finished his lunch, sat in a chair, looked at Ahrani, and asked: 'When I entered through the gate, I heard you singing. So, can you resume it now?'

Ahrani looked at Suganya with a shy smile. Suganya mouthed a few affirmative words at her. Ahrani got ready to sing, leaning against the wall.

'First you have to come to a comfortable position, no. Please, come and sit down,' said Sanjayan to Ahrani.

Ahrani sat down, and started singing. They all were listening to her with interest. Sanjayan was beating his palm in time on his thigh, closing his eyes.

As soon as she finished her singing, Sanjayan clapped his hands cheerfully, appreciating her: 'Wow! Excellent timing and perfect pitch also. It's very difficult to sing at the correct pitch without the help of an instrument. I think, the sense of rhythm and pitch is there in her marrow. She is a gifted child.'

'Thanks, uncle,' said Ahrani, smiling.

Suganya looked at her daughter, smiling without parting her lips, with rapture.

Shortly afterwards Sanjayan took leave of them. The other four people chatted until four o'clock.

'Aunty, we have to leave too,' said Suganya.

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'Pillai, stay here until the Colombo people come here,' said Kamala. Then she looked at her husband, asked anxiously: 'Why have they still not come?'

'It's a long journey, no. So, it may be early or late. Don't worry about that,' said Satkunam airily.

Then Rohini along with her husband and daughter opened the gate. 'Look! There your people come!' said Satkunam, pointing at the gate to attract his wife's attention.

Calling out, 'Ammamma...a,' Kamala's grand daughter ran towards Kamala. Spreading her arms, Kamala stepped down onto the yard, and hugged her grand daughter tightly, and kissed her on either cheek affectionately.



## Four

All the members of the staff wanted to have a farewell party to Satkunam, who had retired from service a week ago.

It was a Wednesday by eight o' clock. Most of the staff had come to gather together at the office to make arrangements for the function. The front hall of the office was the venue for the function. But the office furniture had occupied most of the hall. The shelves were moved to the wall. A table was set in the hall three metres off one side of the wall, with four chairs behind the table. A screen of scenery hung down to the floor in the background. The table was beautified a velvet sheet with a floral design was spread over the table on which a vase of flowers sat.

Facing the table, six rows of chairs were arranged with each row consisting of five chairs for the staff.

And the other tables and chairs were moved away in order to spare a space.

At 10 o'clock sharp, a car stopped at the gate. Satkunam alighted from the car, then his wife did. They both were formally invited by the staff to come in.

Satkunam and Kamala stepped slowly up to the threshold of the hall, flanked by the staff. Senior TA Sundaram wore a garland of flowers to Satkunam, and Vasanthi garlanded Kamala.

The formal custom was performed - wearing the pottu with

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a paste of sandal wood, lighting the traditional oil lamp and so on. Satkunam and Kamala entered the hall, sat down on the chairs behind the table, following which the other people took their seats.

Sanjayan also had come from Murunkan so as to participate in the farewell party, and sat in the chair next to Maniyam's. On behalf of the technical staff Sundaram delivered a speech, mentioning Satkunam's achievement in the field. Then Vasanthi made a speech on behalf of the administrative staff, praising Satkunam's cordial relationship with the staff.

Sanjayan turned his head to look at Maniyam, Said: 'Mani Annai, you ought to speak something about Satkunam Sir on behalf of the drivers. You have been here working for more than fifteen years'.

'Thambi, sorry, I can't. I don't know how to, what to speak at a function, in front of the people... he...k...hek,' said Maniyam, tittering, tucking his verti up between his knees, tossing his head.

Sanjayan then leaned forward to look at Ramesh, who also was a driver sitting next to Maniyam, said: 'Ramesh! You can't do it?'

'I can't speak... sorry sir,' Ramesh said with a shy smile, looking down.

The members of the staff, standing next to both Satkunam and Kamala, got photographs taken individually as well as a group.

Those who gathered in the hall were served with vadai, banana and a cup of tea each.

Satkunam, who has retired from thirty two years' service, was felicitated for his service with golden shawl and a memento by Jeyarajah, the new IE.

By twelve o'clock the function came to an end. Satkunam with his wife bade farewell and left the office for good. The members of the staff waved their hands to him amid tears.

The hall was rearranged, and the routine work began to

progress. Sundaram, Ranjan, and draughtsman Joseph were in the technical room, their office. Sanjayan popped into the room, said: 'Okay, I'm going to leave now to Murunkan, after changing the books borrowed from the library.' Sanjayan had been a member of the Vavuniya Urban Council library, and was an avid reader of all types of books.

'Sanje, Sanje... come inside! Why are you in a hurry?' said Ranjan, 'Machan! Rekah told me to take you home for lunch. She insists me frequently to bring you home. So let's go home and have lunch together.'

Before Sanjayan could reply him, Sundaram said: 'Stay here for an hour or two. If you go to Murunkan you won't come here. After a month or two we can see you again.'

'That's why my wife insisted on your coming home,' Ranjan said, smiling.

'Machan, I get salary for my work. So. I should render the service. That's why I've no time to come to Vavuniya,' said Sanjayan, laughing with a sense of responsibility.

Laughing at Sanjayan, Ranjan said: 'Machan, look here! Your duty-consciousness cause me goose pimples.' Dramatically showing his fore arms Ranjan said in jest. Everybody laughed.

Joseph then interrupted: 'Drop these matters, let's come to the point. Well, what about the new IE? Have you heard anything about him?'

'No problem, everything will be fine here as usual. As far as I know he is ok! We can get our shares,' said Sundaram laughing.

'Of course, we can earn. But sometimes he'll get the lion's share,' said Ranjan in an assured voice.

They laughed, but Sanjayan was tight lipped, looking away.

'Sanje!' Ranjan called out. When Sanjayan turned his head to look at him, he said: 'Machan, it's a game. Be interested in the game.'

Sanjayan smiled at him for the sake of smile. Reading

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Sanjayan's mind, Ranjan said: 'Machan, I don't know how to clean it up. If you know the mechanism to clean it up, tell me. I'll definitely join you.'

Sanjayan said nothing, but smiled gently. Looking at him, Sundaram commented: 'Sanje! Everybody in the country has to cooperate to clean up the country. A single person cannot do anything. Nowadays everybody is thinking of the ways of making money. Sanje, you know, it's a government fund, no.? Water is flowing in the river-no matter who drinks it. Don't worry about that.'

'Good answer! Our conscience justifies everything for our own good; I think, it may be human. Otherwise, wrong is wrong, no appeal,' said Sanjayan categorically.

They all remained silent. A few seconds later, he broke the silence. 'Okay. I've disturbed your work. I'm going to talk with some other people.' He got up to go out.

Don't go now to Murukan! After lunch, go there,' said Ranjan hurriedly.

'Ok Machan, I won't go! I'll be here around the office,' said Sanjayan. He passed Suganya and Vasanthi, smiling, and came out. He saw both drivers standing under the vehicle shed. On seeing him they laughed with respect. He walked up to them, and made small talk.

By one o'clock Ranjan came out, took his motor bike from the shed. Sanjayan took leave of them, sat astride on the bike. Ranjan rode off.

Maniyam and Ramesh watched them leaving. Maniyam said: 'Sanje is a nice guy. I wish he were here. He knows how to respect others. *He is never looking down on us.*'

'What you say all is true!' Ramesh seconded.

'When he was here in his training period I'd been getting on with him. He'll become a good engineer.'

## Five

After his retirement Satkunam with Kamala, leaving the government quarters, moved to the new home located at Vairavapuliyankulam on Station Road, in the vicinity of the Pillayar Kovil.

Two weeks went by

Suganya's mobile started ringing. She then was in the kitchen squeezing the milk from the scrapings of a coconut . 'Pillai...' she called out.

'Yes, Amma!' Ahrani responded.

'Pillai, see who's calling! I can't come there. I'm busy now,' said Suganya in a loud voice so that Ahrani could hear in the next room.

Ahrani took a glance at the screen of the phone. 'Amma! Ammamma is calling now.' She pressed the 'ok' button. She, speaking to Kamala, rushed to the kitchen.

Suganya washed her hands, and wiped them on a rag.

Ahrani got close to her. 'Ammamma! I hand you over to Amma,' she said, and gave Suganya the phone.

'Hello! Aunty, you called early in the morning-why?' Suganya asked with a tone of surprise.

'Pillai, our daughter called me in the morning, and told she feels sick, dizzy and likely faint. And also she asked me to come Colombo immediately.'

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'Oh my god!' she exclaimed, and said hurriedly: 'Aunty, nobody is there in Colombo to support her and to look after her child as well. What are you going to do?'

'I'm going to leave just now,' said Kamala decidedly.

'That's right!' Suganya seconded it instantly.

'And the other thing is...' Kamala dropped her voice, not finishing her word.

'Aunty, what's that?' insisted Suganya.

'Pillai, would you mind looking after your Uncle until I return from Colombo? He'll ruin his body, having his meals in restaurants. So, will you offer him the meals?' asked Kamala hesitantly.

'Why not? I'll do it. Don't worry, Aunty,' agreed Suganya without the slightest hesitation.

'Then ok,' said Kamala, laughing, happily.

'Well, at what time do you leave?'

'Just now!'

'Okay, Aunty, I'll call you back. I'm busy cooking.'

'Ok, ok.'

They ended their talk. Suganya was engaged in cooking.

Suganya finished her daily chores. Ahrani went to school with Virushali. At eight o'clock Suganya took her things, and rode her bicycle along Goodshed Road. Reaching Station Road, she turned her cycle to the left to see Satkunam. After short ride she approached his house. Being at the gate she called out to him. He rushed to the gate, grinning with delight.

She took the tiffin carrier from the bicycle basket, and gave it to him. In the tiffin carrier there were five metal pans stacked and kept tightly closed with a handle. 'Uncle! string hoppes and coconut sambol in the top box for breakfast. And rice and curries in the other four boxes. After your meals, don't forget to take your pills; Aunty told me to remind you,' she said hurriedly.

Satkunam listened to her, smiling, nodding his head.

'Uncle! I'll bring your dinner by seven o'clock,' she added.

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'Don't bring here. It's difficult to cook after returning from work. You'll have to do it in a hurry and bring here. So, take your own time. I'll come there for dinner,' said Satkunam, considering the possible difficulties.

She agreed. 'Uncle, when you come there, please bring this tiffin carrier with you. Because I don't have any spare. I have to use it itself tomorrow,' she said, smiling.

'I understood,' he said, laughing.

She took leave, and pedalled her bicycle along Station Road towards her office.

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### Six

Four days later, it was an evening. Ahrani and Virushali were chatting at the porch when Suganya opened the gate. 'Here Aunty comes!' exclaimed Virushali. Ahrani turned her head to look at the gate.

Suganya stepped up onto the porch, asking: 'how long have you been here?'

'Only ten minutes, Aunty,' Said Virushali.

Suganya placed her hand bag on the table in the living room, walked into the kitchen, washed her hands thoroughly, and boiled the water to prepare tea.

When she served them tea, Ahrani asked her with a questioning look: 'Amma! You're still in the sari, not changing it - Are you going anywhere out?'

'Yes, Pillai, Ammamma has come from Colombo. I will just go there and be back within fifteen minutes,' Suganya said to Ahrani, then shifted her look to Virushali, and asked: 'Viru, will you stay *with your friend until I return?*'

'Yes Aunty, until you come back I stay here, chatting with Ahrani,' Virushali agreed.

Suganya took leave of them, and rode her bicycle to see Kamala.



In a matter of minutes she stood at their gate. On seeing her Kamala walked briskly towards the gate, requesting: 'Pillai, come in. Why are you standing there? Come inside with your bicycle.'

'No, Aunty; it's a brief visit. Viru is there at our home, with Pillai. So I can't stay here for more than ten minutes. I've come here just to see you and to enquire after Rohini Akka,' said Suganya as Kamala was approaching her.

Kamala grabbed Suganya's hands. 'Pillai, I owe you a great debt of gratitude for what you have done for past four days when I was not here. You have looked after my husband well, he told me. He doesn't know how to cook even rice, but you've served three meals daily punctually. Thanks, thanks a lot, Pillai,' said Kamala in a shaky voice, losing control of her emotions.

'It's ok!' Suganya mumbled, and smiled as a mark of acceptance of her thanks.

'Pillai, I've never parted from my husband in my life but these four days. After our marriage I followed him wherever he went. He loves me. So do I,' Kamala smiled, and then went on, 'but he is a little obstinate. He'll do whatever he wants. He is too stubborn to admit his mistakes. Otherwise, he is a nice man. But any family dispute doesn't develop between us both. I can adjust myself and give in to him.' She smiled again.

'Why are you both there at the gate? Come inside and talk,' said Satkunam, looking at them, standing at the front door.

Suganya took a glance at her wrist watch. Kamala was in a bright mood, and said: 'Pillai, I'll tell you everything another occasion in detail.

'Okay Aunty, tell me about Rohini Akka. She feels better now?' Suganya asked with a concern.

'Pillai, actually, she scared us off. Nothing wrong with her. She, who gave birth to a baby, doesn't know this. It was a morning sickness because she's conceived,' said Kamala with a sigh.

'Good thing!' said Suganya with a smile.

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'I was worried that our granddaughter was an only child without company. But now I feel happy' said Kamala with a sense of relief.

No sooner had Kamala said it than Suganya thought of her only child, and couldn't help worrying about her daughter. She lapsed into silence.

Kamala also worried over her, thinking that she shouldn't have told like that before her. 'Pillai' called out Kamala in a loud voice to turn her attention back.

'Aunty!' Suganya startled, and looked at the west horizon, which was turning dark. 'Aunty, I'm going to leave now. They are waiting for me.' She took leave.

When she passed the Vairavapuliyankulam Pillayar kovil, she saw a lot of people gathering around the kovil with piety, because it was Friday. She then rode off, praying in her mind.

When she reached the gate it had got dark. Standing at the gate she called out Virushali. Both Virushali and Ahrani stepped up to the gate. Looking at Ahrani, Suganya said: 'Pillai! Wait a minute. In the twilight we shouldn't send Viru alone. So I take her home, and return quickly.'

Ahrani agreed with a nod. Virushali hitched herself onto the carrier of the bicycle. Suganya rode off.

After five minutes, Suganya returned home. Ahrani was reading at the table. Suganya dropped into the couch, and immersed herself in her reminiscences.

Suganya was an only child in her family. She was born and bred at Mulankavil, a luxuriant green village situated on the A-32, Jaffna - Mannar Road, at the south-west corner of the Kilinochchi district. She studied at K/ Mulankavil Maha Vidyalayam, from primary class up to GCE (Advanced level). She'd got through the A/Level examination but the Z-score she'd obtained was not enough to enter a University.

She sat the clerical examination, and passed. She was

appointed as a clerk of the Department of Irrigation, at the Vavuniya office.

She had a cousin, Kesavan, who was her paternal aunt's son, a good eight years older than her. She was betrothed to him at her tender age. It was a custom that the parents in villages would have an idea of the children's marriage in order to bond with their close relations, as an endogamy. Sometimes, what they thought would happen, but no child, after it was grown up, would be compelled to marry the person who had been betrothed to in any circumstances, because things might change when the children were grown up.

Kesavan studied up to GCE (O/L), but could not get through the exam. Then he started to run a grocery. His parents asked him to marry Suganya, to which he said that she was educated more than him. Only if she had no objection to marry, would he be prepared to do. Suganya willingly consented to the marriage.

Their wedding took place in 2004. As the result of their happy life baby Ahrani was born in 2005.

In 2008 the war escalated in full swing. The army began to move forward through the A-32 Road, from Mannar to Pooneryn. The theatre of war also moved along the road, northwards. Mulankavil was situated on the road, because of which the entire village was displaced to various places. They also, with some other relatives were displaced to Kilinochchi. They erected a cottage there, near to which they dug a safety bunker, as the other people did.

One day in the early morning Suganya's mother prepared tea for them in the makeshift kitchen, as usual, and brought it to serve them. Suganya, her husband and her father had sat down on the mat spread on the ground under the mango tree that stood in front of the cottage. Child Ahrani was sleeping inside the cottage.

When her mother turned to go into the cottage to feed the tea to the child, she rose to her feet, saying: 'Amma! I'll feed her. You can rest.'

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Her mother sat down on the mat cross-legged. She went into the cottage, and crouched down beside her child to wake it up gently.

Suddenly a spell of shelling broke out.

She heard the first shell blast at a close distance and then the next one at five seconds interval.

She realized she had no time enough to shift to the bunker, and flung herself over her child. As if to sheathe her child with herself. She rested her forearms on the ground, not putting her weight on her child. She was calling out loudly her God and goddess- 'Amma Thaye... Kali Amma... Pillayare...Murugaa... save us!'

Then she heard the sound of a shell blasting at a very close range. At once she clamped her fists over her child's ears, with her forearms resting still on the ground. Meanwhile the child woke up and found itself under its mother. It looked at its mother, rolling its eyes. With a feeling of happiness it clutched its mother's upper arms.

She heard the sound of dust particles showering over the roof of the cottage, subsequently could smell the odour of sulphur burning. She realized their area was under shelling. It scared her to think it. But she had no alternative but to intensify to pray to her God and goddess for an end of the shelling. 'Pillayare... Murugaa... Kali Ammaa...'

She kept shouting these three names repeatedly.

Fifteen minutes later the shelling ceased. Suganya dashed outside to see what happened. Many branches of the mango tree had snapped off. Most foliage of the tree was strewn across the yard. She stood transfixed with shock.

Quickly recovering herself she lifted her child, walked up to the bunker, shouting: 'Amma... where are you?'

Nobody was inside the bunker.

She stepped towards the foliage strewn, and heard her

father groaning. She started crying out, put her child down on its feet. Crying out, she yanked the branch under which her father had been pinned, towards her. She found him injured, lying supinely on the ground, bleeding from a gash on his groin. He asked, moaning: 'where is your Pillai?'

'She is there. Appa, we're unhurt.'

'Oh, god.... I'm ok. See where Athaan and Amma are lying,' he said, breathing noisily.

At the moment the villagers had gathered together at the yard. Two women held her in their arms. Her child stepped unsteadily towards her. She hugged her child, crying.

The villagers cleared the branches off, as quickly as they could. Her mother and husband were lying dead on the ground. But Suganya was told that they were injured. Some other women also clustered together around her to console her.

Then a tractor came there and stopped at the gate. Her severely injured father along with her dead mother and husband was hauled up onto the trailer of the tractor.

Not being hospitalized her father unluckily succumbed to his injuries. On the way hospital.

Suganya was overcome with grief due to the loss of her husband and parents, during which her mother in law and sister in law were supportive. Her child was a great consolation to her.

She with her child joined the family of her sister in law in order to have the rest of the journey of displacement. From Kilinochchi, Visuvamadu thence to Puthumathalan on the east coast of the Island. At the final phase of the war, they were evacuated from there to the Zone 4 IDP'S camp (Internally Displaced People's Camp). After two months, she with her child was released from the camp because she was a government servant at the intervention of the Department.

She resumed duties. Satkunam was helpful to her, so was Kamala. She stayed with them for three months, and then shifted

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to this house. Ahrani was very affectionate towards them. She called Satkunam and Kamala, Thatha and ammamma respectively. This house was a rented one. The house owners lived overseas. Suganya could get her back wages after her return to work.

'Amma... Amma...' Ahrani called softly, tapping gently on Suganya's shoulder.

Suganya was jolted, breaking her train of thought.

'Amma, what are you thinking about?' asked Ahrani casually.

Suganya said nothing, but grabbed Ahrani's hand, and sat her on the couch beside her. She hugged her daughter tightly. Tears welled up in her eyes. She felt relieved. 'My clever girl, my love, study well,' she said in a calm voice, kissing on her forehead affectionately.

Two minutes later, Suganya loosened her big hug. They both rose from the couch. 'Pillai! go and study. I'll have a bath and come back quick,' said Suganya, looking around the pooja room. She saw the oil lamp burning.

'Amma, I did it, not wanting to disturb you because you looked so tired,' said Ahrani.

'Good!' Suganya said, went into the room, took her spare clothes, and walked into the bathroom.

## Seven

At about fifteen past eight in the morning, Suganya pushed her bicycle to the shed, where Maniyam and Ramesh had been chatting with each other. Even as Suganya approached the shed, they didn't pause their chatting.

'Ramesh, any vehicle should be used. If we have a vehicle not running, definitely the engine of the vehicle will get seized up, not to be useful to anybody. Least idling is important to an engine,' said Maniam.

'Must the oil be drained out of the sump?' asked Ramesh in a serious tone.

'No, you need not drain the oil from this kind of engine,' said Maniam, laughing, 'but all the parts of an engine must be lubricated in order to protect against corrosion and rust.'

What they talked all was full of sexual innuendo. Suganya didn't care, and walked towards the office.

Ramesh was disappointed because she did not react to their indirect remarks. 'Who is that vehicle reserved for? It'll become useless. It's going to gather moss, but not rust,' Ramesh said in rather a loud voice from behind her back.

There was no reaction to what he said. She stepped towards the office.

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'She is a tube light, no,' said Ramesh, looking at Maniam.

'No!' said Maniam, 'she must have understood. But she pretended not to understand it. You don't know the philosophy of women. I'm more experienced in this matter than you.' Maniam laughed, winking at him.

Ramesh looked steadily into Maniam's eyes.

'As I see it, from my own experience, this horse is able to run fast. You can try to fascinate her,' said Maniam, wiping the windscreen with a damp rag.

Ramesh was interested in her, but held it back from telling Maniam.

Maniam took a glance stealthily at him, read his thought, and sensed that he desired her. 'Ramesh!' he called out. And went on, 'don't worry. A parched land welcomes water. She is like a parched land, so you can try to accomplish your mission.'

'I don't know how to move it,' said Ramesh, looking at his face with great expectation.

'Everything depends on the approach,' said Maniam.

'Please, tell me how to approach. You're the master now for me,' said Ramesh smiling, praising Maniam.

Having heard the word he said, Maniam smiled gently. A tinge of happiness was on his face. He said: 'Ramesh, you have to approach her in a friendly manner first in order to impress her with kindness, with politeness.

'One minute!' Ramesh interposed: 'I've behaved in a rude way towards her. So, I wonder whether it's possible that she'll trust me.' A questioning look was on his face.

'Try and try again. Don't lose your confidence.' said Maniam.

'If I were an officer I could achieve it easily. And I'm not so much educated, no.'

'Education! What do you mean?' Maniam got irritated. 'Hey! In this matter education is immaterial. You look smart, well built. Don't worry about that bloody education. If you try you'll succeed -



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You should persevere in your task; shouldn't be shy; shouldn't hesitate to bear your shame?"

Ramesh nodded, wondering what to do next.

'Ramesh!' Maniam called out. Ramesh looked at him. Maniam said, twisting his lips with his thumbs up: 'anyhow, she's a hot stuff!'

Then Sundaram came out of the entrance of the office to the yard, looked at Maniam, and said: 'let's go!'

'Yes sir!' said Maniam instantly. He got onto the driver seat of the jeep, and put the key in the ignition.

### Eight

Having taken a nap after lunch Satkunam got up, and walked into the kitchen to drink water. Kamala was doing the dishes in the kitchen.

He came out onto the veranda, and leaned back in the wicker easy chair, taking the Sunday Times on the stool.

Half an hour later Kamala came there, and saw him reading the paper. Wanting to gauge his mood she asked a question. 'Today is unusually hot, no?'

He lowered his paper to look at her, and said: 'oh yes, the sun is now moving towards the tropic of cancer. It reached the zenith in Colombo on eighth of April. Today is on thirteenth. I think, the zenith must be on Vavuniya.'

Because he was in a bright mood Kamala was prepared to discuss the matter.

'What do you think about our Suganya? We ought to do something for her,' said Kamala with a sigh.

'What do you mean?' asked Satkunam, looking at her with a puzzled frown on his face.

'I want her to remarry,' she said bluntly, and looked directly at him.

'Are you joking?' he asked her with surprise, and then folded

the newspaper up, and tossed it on the stool.

'No jokes, I'm serious?'

'Think! She is a mother of a big child. How can she remarry another man before her own child? Is it a right thing? How does our society view this? People will be saying weird things, no?'

'We need not worry about these gossips. Suganya is like our daughter. She's still young, no. Our daughter, even older than Suganya by two, has conceived now. But what a damn sin! Suganya-poor girl,' said Kamala, wiping the tears brimming in her eyes.

'What can we do for her? It's predestined, may be fate or kismet or whatever, I don't know. But one thing that I know is that a remarriage is not suitable for her,' he said decidedly.

'First, we talk to her about this matter and will come to a decision.' She gave an idea.

'Okay, as you wish, you can do it. Let's see what will happen,' he said half-heartedly.



In the evening at four o'clock, they both came to Suganya's house.

Ahrani, chatting with Virushali at the porch, saw them open the gate, and called out Suganya in a loud voice, 'Amma! Ammamma just coming!' stepping up to them with a broad grin.

Suganya came out and welcomed them. Ahrani clutched Kamala by the hand, and came skipping happily. Suganya said Ahrani: 'Pillai, don't pull Ammamma's hand-she gets pain, no.'

'It's ok,' Kamala said, smiling, and walked up onto the porch with unsteady steps.

They sat down in the chairs. Ahrani saw Virushali creeping into the hall because of shyness, and went after her into.

'You both came around here together. It should be anything special,' said Suganya, leaning against the door frame.

Kamala looked at Satkunam, smiling. But he said: 'Why are you looking at me? Speak to her.' He stretched his hand towards

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Suganya.

Kamala shifted her look from him to her, and said: 'Pillai, we want to talk to you about an important matter.'

Suganya looked puzzled. Kamala came straight to the point. 'Pillai! You are younger than our daughter. She is due to give birth. But you...?' she paused, swallowing hard and then went on, 'You consider me as your mother. If it's true, you must accept what I'm to say. I couldn't bear the sight of your bare forehead without pottu and of your flowing hair without a string of flowers. I long to see you again, 'Sumangali'- (meaning the state of a woman after her marriage, until her husband dies)-with pottu and flowers. Pillai, you are so young... so, will you remarry, please? for my sake... please.'

On hearing what she said, Suganya lapsed into silence. Still silence there. It lasted a few minutes.

Kamala broke the silence, 'Pillai! Give me your response. A nod of your approval is enough for me- I'll do the rest.'

Suganya said: 'Aunty! I have no such an intention.' She poked her head into the door, wondering if Ahrani was there so close that she could overhear what they were talking. And then she went on, 'Aunty, I have a child, who is a great consolation to me and asset to my life. The only mission in my life is to bring up my child well. That's it.' She paused a moment, and then went on, 'Aunty, I've learnt how to live with satisfaction. And also I have resigned myself to my fate.'

'Nowadays, after the war, remarriage is a common thing, no?' said Kamala.

Suganya smiled at her for the sake of smile, and said: 'Aunty, there are eighty thousand war widows in our soil, among whom how many widows have remarried? Hundreds of them have done. The others haven't. I have a job and a permanent income as well. In this respect I'm very fortunate and luckier than most of the war widows. The rest of my life will be for my child's sake.'

Kamala didn't agree with what Suganya said. So, she insisted:

'Pillai, I'm a married woman, and have been living with my husband for thirty-eight years. I passed your age of thirty one long time ago. You can't deceive me. But you are deceiving yourself. Please, listen to me, Pillai.' Kamala was on the verge of tears. Her voice sounded shaky.

'Aunty, you both are here to show me affection, like my parents, and have been fulfilling me by doing all that I want. And my child understands me. So, I've no problem,' said Suganya categorically.

Then Satkunam interposed, and said, looking at Kamala: 'I told you that Suganya wouldn't agree to this, but you didn't accept it.' He showed Kamala his fingers splayed out, and said: look! these fingers are not identical.'

Suganya wiped the tears pouring from her eyes, and said to Kamala: 'Thanks for your concern for me. You are very kind to me.'

Kamala stepped up to her, and hugged her affectionately.

After a while, Suganya walked towards the kitchen to get tea for them. Kamala watched her walking, with a mixture of deep affection and pity.

### Nine

There were three more days to the April new year, the Sinhalese/Hindu new year. At about thirty past twelve, a double cab vehicle stopped at the gate of the office. Suganya sat behind the table, from where she could watch the gate, the vehicle and Sanjayan stepping off the vehicle.

Looking at the driver through the side window, he said: 'okay, Thambi, you need not stay her. Go home. After seeing my friends here I'll catch a Point Pedro-bound bus at the bus stand, no problem.'

'Happy New year, sir!' the driver wished him with a grinning face, sitting at his seat.

'Thanks Thambi, same to you! Let's meet again in the new year,' Sanjayan wished him in return.

When Sanjayan entered the office Suganya greeted him with a welcoming smile. 'Good afternoon!' he greeted.

'Good afternoon, Anna!' she greeted back.

'Well, where is Vasanthi Akka?' he asked, looking at Vasanthi's table that was vacant.

'She's on leave today,' she said. 'Take your seat, please,' she said politely, pointing at the chair opposite her table.

'No Suganya! I want to see my friends,' he said, and tried to

move towards the technical room.

At once she said: 'Anna, nobody is there. Everyone has left for lunch.'

'Have you got your lunch?' he asked.

'No, I haven't still,' she said with a smile.

'I think I've come here at an awkward time?'

'Anna! You are still standing up. Please, sit down,' she said in a polite voice.

He adjusted a chair at the other side of her table, and sat down on it, then placed his bag on another chair, saying: 'I go home today, on my way home I wanted to see you all. Otherwise I have no urgent matter.'

'Then, Anna, I heard something about you,' said Suganya with a smile.

'Oh, what's it?' asked Sanjayan with a mixture of surprise and interest, but not in confusion.

'You made a donation to an orphanage,' she said, revealing the matter, with a feeling of pure delight.

'Oh yeah, I did,' he said, laughing, but did not feel excited.

His immediate reaction to what she'd said made her slightly disappointed. Reading her mind, he said: 'Suganya that is... well it's not a great thing, no.'

'Not a great thing!' she exclaimed, looking at him with wide eyes, then asked: 'How much did you donate?'

'Two lakhs,' he said casually.

'Two lakhs!' she gaped at him.

'Why are you shocked?' he asked her amusingly, laughing.

'It's a large amount that you'd donated, that's why...' she looked puzzled.

'It shouldn't be called 'Donation.' I gave the money swindled out of the department to the orphanage. As if I had returned the money that was not coming out of my labour. I deserved not that money.'

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She understood what he meant. 'So, why did you take the money from the department?' she asked to clarify why he did so.

But his reply was a smile.

'Anna, I don't compel you to tell me. I couldn't infer why you did,' she paused, and then went on, 'I mean, you could have refused to take that money, no. If you don't mind, please tell me,' she insisted.

'No problem to let you know the fact. When my superiors and friends take it, I must do it too. Do you know why? If I refuse it, it should be that I proclaim myself to be honest. They will feel inferior to me, and then they begin to hate me. They think that I regard myself as a man of principle. Consequently I'll lose my friends as well as my peace of mind. So, I have to do it despite myself,' he said categorically, laughing, but wrinkling his face.

'Do all in your family know about this matter?' she asked.

'No, no... they don't know. My father is an honest person. He is a retired school teacher. He taught me everything at my formative years. He inculcated moral principles and social excellence in me. I give my mother all my salary and then after, from her I get money for my expenses. Apart from my salary I can't give her even a red cent. If I happen to give any income to her, I'll have to declare the source of it.'

'So, you donate your share, unaware of your family. But you donate it in your name, is it a right thing?' asked Suganya, looking at him expectantly.

'It's not sure whether God is omnipresent or not. But this corruption is omnipresent,' he said in jest, laughing, and went on. 'there may be corruption in the administration of the orphanage. If I put a big money in the charity box, whoever opens the box may possess it, no. So I give it in my name to avoid an open invitation to corrupt people. Am I correct?'

'Absolutely!' she assured, nodding her head up and down.

He went on, 'and also, nobody here knows about this matter.'



Only did Vasanthi Akka's husband know it, because he keeps in contact with the president of the orphanage. So Vasanthi Akka must have known via her husband, and then she must have told you.'

She smiled at him, said: 'Yes, you are right!'

'Suganya! This is just between ourselves, ok?'

'Yes, I won't tell anybody.' she promised

After a short pause, she asked: 'Anna, can corruption not be eradicated from our society?'

'Bribery and corruption naturally arise out of the right to private property. Everybody is looking for a way to accumulate their private property, and most hate the names of 'BRIBERY, CORRUPTION,' but not the act of bribery or corruption. So, people call them different names - 'support, gift, present, reward' are the nick names for BRIBERY; and 'Game' is for CORRUPTION. No one feels ashamed of their act' he said with some irritation. After a pause, he went on, 'some gentlemen also grease the official's palm to expedite even their legal things, bypassing all rules and regulations, which is the most dangerous thing. I asked those people why they did it, to which they said: 'that is the system.' So, I think it's hard to eradicate bribery and corruption.'

'What if the government is efficient?' she asked, staring at him.

'Nothing will happen!' he said, 'leave the government aside, think if we are good citizens of the country. Everybody should be afraid of either God or his conscience. But neither... Drop the subject.'

He nodded his head indifferently. 'By the way, how is your life going on? Satkunam sir gets on with you as usual?'

'Oh yes, that person is like God, so is Aunty. They both come to our home frequently. And he comes daily,' she said.

He watched her eyes sparkling with excitement. She went on, 'He had a busy schedule before his retirement, and no longer is

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busy, which depresses him. Satkunam sir and Kamala Aunty filled the void left by the loss of my parents. I'll never forget them until my last breath. My daughter also has a strong attachment to them.'

He had the satisfaction of hearing what she said.

'Okay, Suganya, the lunch break is about to be over. Have your lunch and do your work. I'm going to leave.'

'Have you got your lunch?' she asked.

'No, not yet,' he said casually.

'It's too late for lunch,' she said, glancing at her wrist watch.

'I've had just before a vadai and tea. So, I no longer am hungry. And I phoned my Amma and told her that I would come home. So, she's cooked lunch and been waiting for me,' he said, smiling.

She smiled at him. He rose to his feet, and said: 'let's see after the new year.'

He was not brave enough to wish her, 'A HAPPY NEW YEAR' taking his bag he stepped out.

## Ten

It was the New Year Eve. In the morning at ten o'clock Satkunam and Kamala came to Suganya's home. Suganya welcomed them. After an exchange of greetings, they sat on the chairs on the porch.

Ahrani in the room heard Kamala's voice. At once she stepped out onto the porch cheerfully. Satkunam dipped into his trouser pocket and took out a bar of chocolate, and gave it to Ahrani.

'Uncle! Why do you give it to her? She is no longer a small child. Whenever you come here, you bring a bar of chocolate for her,' said Suganya, displaying a sign of rupture in her face.

Kamala said with a smile: 'Pillai! You yourself tell him over and over again, not to give her the chocolate. He himself does it, not minding your words.'

Satkunam said dramatically: 'No one can stop me from offering a chocolate to my granddaughter.' He looked at Ahrani, said: 'have it!'

Then Kamala opened the plastic bag in her hand, out of which she took a salwar kameez and gave it to Ahrani. 'This is for you. See how nice it is,' said Kamala.

The salwar was a butter colour; the Kameez with V-neckline was maroon; the chiffon dupatta was an ivory colour. 'Ammamma! I like it,' said Ahrani cheerfully.

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'I selected it, no,' said Satkunam in a proud voice.

'See how my selection is,' said Kamala, giving Suganya the bag. 'There is a sari for you.'

Suganya dipped into the bag, drew the sari out partially, and took a glance at it. The sari was yellow with a wide border embroidered in golden thread on green.

'Ammamma! Amma doesn't like yellow,' said Ahrani immediately, looking at Kamala.

Suganya got slightly irritated at her comment. 'Hey, talkative, be silent,' she said to Ahrani.

'Don't you like this colour?' asked Kamala.

'It's ok, Aunty,' said Suganya evenly.

Then Satkunam interrupted: 'I know that Suganya doesn't like yellow.'

'So, why did you keep silent when I selected this? You kept looking on,' asked Kamala with an expression of feigned annoyance. Then she rose from the chair, stepped up to Suganya. 'Pillai, give me the bag. I'll give you another one,' she said, stretching out her hand for the bag.

'No problem, Aunty. I can wear it,' said Suganya, not returning the bag.

Kamala said nothing, but twitched the bag out of her hand, and then turned around to look at Satkunam, said: 'Please, take her to Bazaar Street. Let her select a sari as she wishes.'

He agreed. But Suganya was reluctant.

'Pillai, don't delay. Go and get ready.' Insisted Kamala.

'I want to get tea for you,' said Suganya.

'Hey, tea is not necessary now... Get ready,' said Kamala, shoving her inside through the front door.

Suganya entered the room, giggling.

Ten minutes later she came out, in a turquoise top and a black long skirt. 'Pillai, you are beautiful in this dress,' said Kamala, looking at her from top to toe, smiling without her lips parting.

Then a sudden thought that Suganya was a young widow flitted through her mind. Her smile on her face disappeared. A deep sigh emerged from her. 'Oh my God, are you still present here?' she mumbled to herself.

Satkunam got up to leave. Kamala looked at Ahrani, said: 'we both will be at home, won't we?'

Ahrani nodded.

Satkunam and Suganya took leave of them, went out into Goodshed Road. Walking along the road they reached Station Road. On the other side of the road there were two three wheelers waiting for hire. 'Uncle! We can hire a three wheeler,' said Suganya.

'No,' he said, 'let's walk to Bazaar Street. It's a walking distance, no?'

'Uncle, I have to cook lunch after returning home... so, we would rather hire a three wheeler than walk.'

'It's not a problem. We'll take away something for lunch at a vegetarian restaurant,' he suggested in a tone of finality.

She agreed.

The drivers, standing next to their three wheelers, watched both Satkunam and Suganya walking abreast along the road.

Satkunam looked sideways at Suganya, and said: 'Don't look there! They've been watching us, since we came out of the gate. These buggers come from dysfunctional community. I mean, most of them belong to 'that side people.' They have now begun to imagine that they have developed. Actually they are not heroes but zeros. It's not my opinion, but a common opinion.'

'Zeros!' exclaimed Suganya.

'Of course, they are of little value. That's Zeros,' said Satkunam, laughing. And he took a glance once at the drivers with a cheeky grin, looking down on them, and then turned his head to her, said: 'Even though you travel by three wheeler, don't send your daughter alone with them in any circumstances.'

She nodded her head, assured.

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They approached the clock tower junction, crossed Kandy Road, into Kandasamy kovil Road, and turned to the left into Bazaar Street after the Police Station. Bazaar street was not so broad, only a hundred metres in length, linking Kandasamy kovil Road with Horowupothana Road. On either side of the street there were shops in line- textile shops, jewellers and jewellery marts, grocery shops and a few restaurants. Due to the festive season, some other makeshift stalls on the pavement had mushroomed. Crowds of people poured into the street.

They entered a famous textile shop. A lady, one of the salesgirls, welcomed them with a grin from behind the table. She looked at Suganya, and asked: 'Akke! Meyadda endako, Monawada awne?' - Akka! Please, Come here, what do you want? - in a polite Sinhalese words.

'I'm Tamil,' said Suganya, smiling at her, exposing a set of gleaming white teeth.

'Akka, Sinhala ladies also come here... Because you're in bare forehead, without the prominent pottu... so, I thought you are a Sinhala lady,' she tried to justify herself, grinning at Suganya.

'It's ok,' said Suganya, resting her hands on the glass top of the table.

Satkunam, standing next to Suganya, interposed and asked a question towards the salesgirl: 'Okay, are all women who don't wear the pottu Sinhalese?' he laughed.

'And also, Akka looks so pretty to see...' she said, smiling at Suganya.

'Is it so? Are the Tamil women not pretty to see?' asked Satkunam, frowning at her.

She didn't reply but smiled gently, looking at Satkunam and Suganya back and forth.

A fellow customer next to Satkunam said instantly: 'It's a commonly held opinion that Sinhala women are beautiful. Not that a common opinion is completely true, nor is it scientifically proved.

An opinion is not a fact. That's it!

'Oh, yeah!' said Satkunam indifferently, not looking at even his face.

'Uncle!' called out Suganya, to attract the attention of him, thinking that person's comment made him hurt.

Satkunam moved close to her, and stood silently.

'Can I help you?' asked the salesgirl, looking directly at Suganya's face.

'Can you show me a collection of cotton saries?'

'Sure,' she said, took a set of saries out of the glass shelf fixed to the wall, and placed them on the glass top of the table. She started spreading one by one.

'Thankachchi, don't spread all the saries, you know, for the convenience of yours.' said Suganya, and then chose three of them.

The salesgirl fanned out the saries Suganya had chosen on the table, overlapping each other with the border of each sari peeking out.

After carefully considering the colours, designs and textures of the saries, Suganya chose one of them, and asked her: 'Thankachchi, how much is it?'

She told the price, which was exorbitantly high. Suganya started haggling over the price of it.

Immediately Satkunam interrupted: 'Suganya, do you like it the most?'

'Yes Uncle, but the price...? Her voice trailed off.

'No, no!' he said, 'Don't worry about the price. Whatever we like the most is priceless; shouldn't bargain.' He shifted his look to the sales girl, said: 'Pillai, pack this sari.'

She put the sari into a plastic bag on which the name and address of the shop were printed, and shifted it to the counter.

Satkunam paid the bill, received the material, and gave it to Suganya.

When they stepped out of the shop, he asked her: 'Suganya!

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I've forgotten to ask you. Have you got anything else to buy? Blouse material or lining cloth?

'Nothing else!' she said decidedly.

'Then, any underclothes?' he asked, looking at her.

Suddenly she blushed with embarrassment.

'Why do you feel embarrassed? Underwear is a type of clothes that people put on. There is nothing to feel shy. Don't be so embarrassed to speak openly about the factual things,' said Satkunam, not exposing any feeling.

She was silent.

He went on, 'look here! Nowadays, for clothes there are separate stores and outlets, such as gents' wear, ladies' wear, and children's wear. The lingerie also is important to such an extent that a separate store or shop is opened for it. There are many outlets for the lingerie Island wide. I know that you don't know about that. Once you wear a high quality fashionable lingerie you can't resist using it. You have a lot to learn about the lingerie, I think. You know, there is a variety of bras, such as strapless bra, uplift bra, and push-up bra for the maximum cleavage. And also a wide variety of designs.'

He paused from his monologue, and looked at her.

Then too she remained silent. She didn't know the meanings of the English terms of lingerie, uplift, push-up, strapless and cleavage. But she listened to him, looking straight into his eyes, thinking that there must be anything important in what he said.

He went on again, 'the fashionable lingerie gives women glamour and sensuality.' Finally he asked: 'What do you say? Any opinion?'

'No special opinion,' she said instantly, 'Okay, let's move. Uncle, it's getting late.' She wanted to skip the subject, moving a few steps forward.

He moved abreast of her with a quick step. 'Hey! Don't worry. You need not come there. Tell me your bust measurement and cup



size. 'I'll get you a better one,' he said hurriedly. Before she could reply to him, he looked steadily at her bosom.

She felt uncomfortable, hugged the bag in her hand against her bosom.

'36 and B-cup,' said Satkunam, laughing.

Suganya got a shock, didn't look at his face, but wondered how he could judge it correctly by his look.

He laughed for a few seconds, and then said: 'Suganya, look! I know what you're thinking now about. You know, I'm an engineer. So, I can size up everything with my eye.'

'Okay, let's move!' she insisted, looking away.

But he continued, 'Suganya, if you wear a fashionable bra with a right choice, you'll be more attractive than you're now.'

Suganya felt shy. 'Uncle, go away, always joking,' she said, and walked towards Kandasami Kovil Road. He followed her, a few feet behind.

She halted in front of the vegetarian restaurant at the corner, where Kandasami Kovil Road met Kandy Road. He reached her, and said: 'I've irritated you. I'm sorry.'

She looked at his face which was lined up with worry and disappointment.

'Uncle, what happened to you? I'll never get irritated with you. I can talk with my close friends about these things, but can't do about that to the people whom I respect- I consider so,' she said, 'Uncle, you are not my friend but my godfather, I highly respect you Uncle.'

He felt relieved, and then said: 'Okay, it's getting twelve o'clock. So, we both will have lunch, and take away two lunch packets for them.'

'No Uncle!' she objected his suggestion, and went on, 'we'll take away for all of us and have at home itself. That's nice. And also, on Sundays I want to have my meals with my daughter, so does she.' She smiled happily. A strange rapture arose in her mind.

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He realized. 'Ok, Suganya. As you wish we'll do it,' he said, 'I thought about the weight of the lunch packets. But I failed to think about your sentiment. I'm sorry.'

'It's ok, Uncle,' she said, smiling.

They both entered the restaurant.

## Eleven

It was a full moon day, a public holiday. At about one o'clock Suganya finished cooking lunch and came out to the porch. The sun was blazing down from the cloudless, clear sky, as if melting gold mingled with liquid silver showering down on the ground from the sky.

Ahrani had not still returned from tuition class. But it was the time she had come back. Suganya wore a cap, and stepped up to the clothes line in the back yard. She touched and saw if all the clothes had got dry. They all had dried well, and felt like stiff card boards. Taking them off the clothes line, she went into the room and dropped on the bed, spreading out to soften them.

She removed her cap, and stepped out onto the porch. A few minutes later, the gate opened. She thought it was Ahrani, but surprisingly Indrani walked in. At once Suganya stepped briskly up to her, calling out: 'oh, Maami..'

Indrani hugged her tightly and kissed her on both cheeks, with her eyes filling with tears. Suganya held her hand, and brought her to the porch. 'Mami! You've come unexpectedly?' asked Suganya with a questioning look.

'I was eager to see you both in the morning. Immediately, I left Mulankavil and have come,' said Indrani, looking at her affectionately. And then she peered in through the front door.

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There being no sign of Ahrani's activities inside the house, she asked: 'Where is Pillai?'

'She went to the tuition. It's the time she came back,' said Suganya, glancing at the gate. And then she said: 'Mami, you've come, walking under the strong and direct mid-day sun- stay here, 'just coming back.' She went into the kitchen, and five minutes later, came out with a mug of lime juice and offered it.

'Pillai, I myself wanted to drink a mug of lime juice... you yourself have bought it. You've read my mind as always,' said Indrani, laughing at her as a mark of appreciation. She started drinking it.

Then Ahrani and Virushali approached the gate. In a minute Virushali took leave; Ahrani opened the gate and saw Indrani sitting on the bench on the porch. Calling out; 'Appamma...' she came running towards Indrani, and hugged her affectionately. Indrani also embraced her granddaughter warmly with her eyes brimming with tears.

Indrani was Suganya's aunt, younger sister of her father, as well as her mother in law. Ahrani was chatting with her grandmother. Indrani gave her a bag of Karuthakolumbaan mangoes.

'Appamma, how long will you stay here with us?' asked Ahrani, looking at her face expectantly.

'Three days.'

Ahrani was disappointed in her answer. 'Please, stay here longer than three days. At least a week today,' requested Ahrani.

'Don't worry. I'll come again after a week.' Indrani kissed on the top of her head, patting on her back.

Suganya interrupted: 'Mami, come to have lunch.' Ahrani also asked Indrani to come to have lunch. Indrani rose from the bench, laughing, to go into the house.



After dinner Ahrani brushed her teeth, and sat at the table to

study. After doing the dishes Suganya went into the bedroom, started folding the clothes on the bed up neatly. Then Indrani entered the room, and perched on the edge of the bed.

'You're living alone...you're suffering...' said Indrani, with a deep sigh.

Suganya smiled at her, thinking that she began to beat about the bush and later she would come to the point, and said: 'I'm not living alone. You all are here for me, and also my daughter is a good companion for me.'

'Pillai, you shouldn't talk like this,' said Indrani softly.

Suganya said nothing. She took a pillow case, into which she inserted a pillow and fluffed it up. Then she gave it to her. 'Mami, this is for you.' Indrani got it, and tossed it on the bed. 'This is very important now,' she snapped with sarcasm.

Suganya smiled.

Indrani said in a peaceful voice: 'Pillai, listen to me. My daughter is a good five years older than you. Every time she goes wherever she wants, with her husband as a couple, my mind shatters into a thousand pieces, thinking of you. So, you must remarry. Pillai, this is not only my desire but also that of your sister in law.'

Suganya remained silent.

Then Ahrani came to the room, sat beside Indrani, leaned slightly against her, and then gradually rested her head on her grandmother's lap. Indrani was pinching her cheek playfully and tapping on it. Ahrani herself enjoyed it, closing her eyes.

Indrani dropped the matter due to Ahrani's presence.

Suganya felt relieved.

### Twelve

Satkunam had leisurely leaned back in the easy chair, and was watching the squirrels chasing each other across the branches of the mango tree, jinking and jumping from one branch to another, and running.

'Uncle, un...' called out Suganya.

On hearing her voice he was startled, and looked sideways. There were Suganya and Ahrani standing in the veranda. Then Kamala also came out onto the veranda. 'Come in, Pillai,' said Kamala, with a smiling face.

Ahrani went up to Satkunam, offered a present box to him and stooped down to touch his feet.

'God bless you!' Satkunam blessed her, placing his right hand on the top of her head.

Then Ahrani gave another present box to Kamala, touched her feet, and got her blessing itself.

'Today was our thirty - eighth wedding anniversary. I wish our daughter and granddaughter were here,' said Kamala with a tinge of disappointment.

Regardless of what she said, Satkunam, pointing at Suganya and Ahrani, said: 'When these people are here with you why are you worrying? Our wedding anniversary falls once a year, no. You can't expect them to come here every year because our son in law

has a busy schedule. They however will come two days later. So, take it easy.'

'I know that. I believe that I have two daughters and two granddaughters. That's why I wish they all were here on this day,' said Kamala with her eyes being moist.

'Aunty, don't worry. I'll do all for you being in the position of Rohini Akka,' said Suganya, looking at Kamala.

Satkunam squinted at Kamala. 'Stop having a repetitious talk like this with Suganya. You're boring her. Look at her face and understand,' he said in a disapproving tone.

Kamala looked at Sugaya's face. Satkunam winked at Suganya from behind Kamla's back, unaware of which Kamala asked Suganya: 'Pillai, am I boring you?'

'No, I listen to you enthusiastically. Uncle is just joking,' said Suganya, smiling.

Satkunam ripped the present box open. 'Wow! Look here,' he exclaimed. He took a blue colored shirt with pale blue checks, out of it.

Kamala opened her box. There was a maxi in a green colour, batik design. She felt happy.

'Aunty, do you like it?' asked Suganya.

'Yes, that's nice. And your love do I feel in your present, so I like very much anything that you give me.'

Ahrani took a tub of sweet out of Suganya's handbag, opened its lid, took a small cube of sweet, and tried to put it in Kamala's mouth.

'Wait! Hang on a minute,' said Satkunam suddenly, rising from his chair. He went inside and came back with his smart phone. Holding the phone in a position to take a photograph, looking at Ahrani, he said: 'Now do it!'

Ahrani stretched her right hand to reach Kamala's mouth with a piece of sweet. Kamala leant forward, keeping her mouth wide open.

Ahrani fed it to her. Kamala managed to cram it into her

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mouth, and kissed her on the cheeks. Satkunam snapped some shots. Then Suganya put a piece of sweet in Kamala's mouth. He took a photo it.

Satkunam returned to the chair. Ahrani fed a piece of sweet to him. He encircled his arm around her shoulders, and took a selfie.

He turned to look at Suganya, and said: 'Come here!'

She took a piece of sweet, stepped up to him, and tried to feed it.

'Suganya, sit on this,' said Satkunam, tapping on the left arm of the chair. She stood next to him, felt shy, with an embarrassing smile.

'Don't feel shy. Sit on the arm,' said Kamala.

'If you stand up here, it'll be difficult to cover your entire figure in the selfie,' said Satkunam, looking at his phone.

Suganya perched on the left arm of the chair reluctantly. It was difficult and uncomfortable to feed him with her right hand. He got rather irritated, and said: 'Hey! Why are you here in an awkward position? Come to the right side in a comfortable position.'

She rose to shift to the other arm. She gently rested her bottom on it. He transferred the phone to his left hand. When she put the piece of sweet in his mouth he snapped a shot.

'Pillai, why do you feel shy?' asked Kamala, giggling at her.

'Ammamma! Amma is photo-shy,' said Ahrani, laughing.

'Is it so? But she is photogenic,' he said, and suddenly threw his right arm around her back and grasped her right arm. She lost her balance, then tipped leftward and rested herself on his right shoulder. Keeping her in the pose he took a selfie.

Kamala and Ahrani giggled at them.

*Suganya however managed to gain her balance again and rose to her feet. He showed her photos to all. To Suganya too.*

As the others laughed, Suganya said: 'Uncle, delete it.'

'Why are you photo-shy? You're photogenic, no,' said Satkunam, laughing.



'Be it so!' she said, 'Uncle, please delete it,' she begged.

'Okay, you can delete it yourself,' he said, and gave the phone to her.

She didn't know how to manipulate a smart phone. She returned it to him, said: 'Uncle, delete it.'

'Don't worry. I'll do it,' he assured.

Kamala then said with a smiling face: 'You both can come here and stay with us, for good. You're a good company to us both. Your difficulties of cooking in early morning before you go to work, will not be here. I'll be looking after the culinary work. So what else? You need not pay the rent as well.'

Suganya didn't reply.

'Pillai, don't hesitate, feel free. Come here, no problem,' insisted Kamala.

Ahrani kept gazing at Suganya. Before Suganya could reply, Satkunam interrupted: 'Kamala, your suggestion is not good, I think. You women can't live in the same house together, with a cordial relationship. Conflicts are bound to erupt. Then I'll have to become entangled in your conflicts. I'll be like a drum receiving severe blows on both ends.'

Suganya laughed. At once, Kamala said: 'I can be living with my daughter.' She touched on Suganya's head affectionately.

'Aunty, it's not a problem that my daughter and I are there alone, together. We have become accustomed to that life. We can call on both of you, as always, frequently. So, don't worry,' said Suganya, looking at her.

Satkunam interrupted: 'Kamala, what Suganya says is right. Let her live there peacefully. And also, you watch all the Indian TV serials. If they are here, Ahrani will watch TV and spoil her study as well.'

'It seems that you would not allow her to stay here even though she said yes,' said Kamala, pretending to be angry with her husband.

Suganya smiled at Satkunam, then at Kamala.

Kamala smiled at her back, and said: 'It's your smile that has mesmerized me.'

### Thirteen

It was a Monday evening. The office time was about to be over. Suganya stacked her files up, and put some important files in the drawer of her table and locked it. She went into the washroom, repaired herself, and returned to her table.

Then Vasanthi still sat in her chair as if glued, doing something with her mobile phone.

'Akka, we've overrun the office time by five minutes.' Suganya reminded her.

'Okay, let's go,' said Vasanthi.

'You've immersed yourself into the phone for half an hour unaware of your surroundings,' said Suganya, smiling.

'That's true,' Vasanthi said, 'Hey, buy a smart phone, eh.'

'Not necessary,' Suganya said, 'I think that's useless!'

'Don't say like that. It's useful but most people don't know to use it in useful ways.'

'I've got a normal mobile phone to communicate. I consider, this big mobile phone is not a means of communication but a means of killing time. And I have no time to pass,' said Suganya, laughing.

Vasanthi put her phone into her handbag. They both walked towards the bicycle shed.

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Maniyam and Ramesh were there in the shed, standing next to the jeeps. Watching Suganya approaching them. Ramesh started singing quietly, with a romantic look at her.

*'Vazhividu vazhividu vazhividu*

*En thevi varukiraal...*

*Vilakidu vilakidu vilakidu*

*Enai thedi varukiraal...'*

Get out of the way get out of the way get out of the way

There my darling comes...

Stand aside stand aside stand aside

Seeking me she comes...

Suganya inserted the key in the lock of her bicycle, regardless of his singing, not even looking at the place he was standing, but she could hear him singing.

Vasanthi looked directly at him, where as he was staring at Suganya. She got irritated. 'Thambi!' called out Vasanthi in a rather loud voice.

He suddenly stopped singing, and looked at Vasanthi anxiously. He hadn't noticed Vasanthi following Suganya.

'Thambi! The song you sing is a lovely one; SP. Balasubramaniyam sang the song, along with Illyarajah, amazingly. But you sing it, out of time, in a wrong pitch. You spoil the song,' said Vasanthi with a slightly insulting tone.

He said nothing, and slunk to the other side of the jeep.

Suganya and Vasanthi rolled their bicycles to the gate. When they reached the Kandy road, Vasanthi looked at Suganya, and said in an annoying tone: 'He sang that song for you.'

'Yes, I know it,' said Suganya casually. 'Akka, today is not the first time they behave towards me like this. Every single time they come across me, they behave like this. Sometimes it would be worse than what you've seen today?'

'How would it be?' asked Vasanthi with a shock.

'Obscene hinting and talking in double meaning.'

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'Is it Maniyam too?' asked Vasanthi in an exclamatory tone.

'Yes'

'We must take action.'

'Not necessary.' Suganya said, 'if we take action that too will make trouble for me. Akka, we have to think about the consequences first before we women can do anything in our society.'

'What do you mean?'

'They know for sure that I'm a war widow, but see how they behave towards me. Because they are men. Moreover, that boy, Ramesh is younger than me by six or seven years... that's because he's a man,' said Suganya with a vacant look.

Vasanthi lapsed into silence, thinking about what she meant.

Suganya, after pausing a minute, went on, 'Akka, if I confront them, they'll tarnish my image, attacking my character. Most people, even women, will believe what they say. Infact, the other people will want to believe what they say that I'm a bad woman. That's the truth and the fact. Shame is only to me. So I'll tolerate everything as far as I can. And also, Vavuniya is not my native place, so I can't withstand anything unpleasant, you know, with my daughter.'

'Why haven't you told me this matter before?'

'It's a useless thing, complete nonsense. You've got no solution for this issue as well. So, telling it to you is pointless. After all I haven't told even Satkunam uncle and Kamala Aunty.'

'Yes, I realize your complicated situation,' Vasanthi said, then looked at Maniyam and Ramesh through the fence, murmuring furiously through clenched teeth, 'uncivilized barbarians!'

Suganya laughed, and said: 'Akka, they're civilized people. There is no abuse in a barbaric community. Calling ourselves a civilized community, we're doing all abuses and violations.'

'Yes, you're correct,' said Vasanthi, nodding her head.

They got on their bicycles, and rode off.

## Fourteen

Ahrani had got ready to school, before her usual time. She had breakfast and sat in the couch in the living room, waiting for her mother in the bathroom.

A few minutes later the bathroom door opened. Suganya went over to the bed room. Ahrani followed her into. Suganya was standing in front of the mirror fixed to the dressing table. Ahrani in a second climbed on the dressing table top in order to equalize her height to her mother's. She encircled her arms around her mother's neck, and kissed on both cheeks.

'Today is my dearest mother's birthday. My loving mother, who brings up me well with difficulties. Amma! Only you do I love the most in the world,' Ahrani greeted.

Suganya hugged her daughter tightly with moist eyes, kissed on her forehead and cheeks affectionately and said: 'Pillai, study cleverly. That's my wish, so was your father's'.

Suganya lifted her daughter down from the dressing table, took two hundred rupees out of her handbag, and gave it to her. 'Pillai, buy some sweet or short eats from the school canteen, and have them sharing with your friends, eh.'

Suganya came out to the living room, gently pressing her daughter's head against her flank. Then Virushali opened the gate.

Standing at the gate Suganya watched them walking along

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Goodshed Road. Having lost sight of them, she returned to the room to get ready for work.

She took her handbag to leave. Then she saw Satkunam standing at the front door. She got a surprise. 'Uncle! Here I leave, you're here,' she said in an exclamatory tone, with a broad smile, wondering whether he must have come there in the morning to wish her in her birthday.

'In the evening I'll come with Kamala. I've come here now to wish you in the morning itself,' he said, stretching his hand towards her.

'Many more happy returns of the day!' Satkunam greeted, shaking hands.

'Thanks, Uncle!' said Suganya delightfully.

He took a bar of chocolate out of his pocket, removed the cover wrapped around it, and broke off a slab of the bar. When he tried to feed her it, she smiled: 'uncle, give me it. I'll have it.'

'No. I want to feed it to the birthday girl. On that day you fed me, no - do you remember the day?' he said, brought the slab close to her mouth. She opened her mouth reluctantly, but smiling. He put it in her mouth. She tasted it happily.

'Have one more,' said Satkunam, breaking off another slab.

'Uncle! enough!' she declined politely.

Ignoring her word Satkunam brought it again close to her mouth. She kept her lips closed, turned her head sideward. The chocolate in his hand was smeared on her cheek densely as a brown paste.

'Hey keep your face still. I'll retrieve the chocolate paste from your cheek carefully,' he said, wiped off the paste with his index finger folded like a hook. 'Okay, go and wash your face thoroughly, not to be sticky,' he said, sucked his index finger with the chocolate paste, as she was looking on.

She was pleased to see what he did. Her heart was brimming over with rapture. Tears misted in the corners of her eyes. A sudden

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thought of her father flitted through her mind.

She walked to the bathroom, and then made herself presentable, and came back. He stepped down onto the porch. She locked the front door behind them.

'I'll lock the gate. You're getting late for the office,' said Satkunam.

She took leave of him, got on her bicycle and rode off. He padlocked the gate, and walked home.

### Fifteen

It was Sunday morning. Suganya steamed pittu using a piece of bamboo tube as a steamer for breakfast.

Ahrani came to the kitchen.

'Pillai, will you have pittu with banana?' asked Suganya.

'Yes, I'll, Amma,' said Ahrani.

Suganya served her breakfast. 'Pillai, have it. I'm going to take a bath,' said Suganya.

Ahrani nodded.

When Suganya stepped into the living room, Satkunam stepped up onto the porch. 'Uncle, come in, please,' she said with a smile.

Satkunam entered the house.

'In the morning itself you've come here; you look immaculate. Wherever are you to go out?' asked Suganya, smiling at him.

'Hey stop asking so many questions continuously without pausing for breath,' said Satkunam as if irritated, 'I don't go anywhere. I've come here to see you? He laughed, and sat on the couch.

He went on, 'What else can I do? After my retirement I find my whole life boring. No body here even to chat with me. You yourself go to work. Today being a holiday I've come here to chat



with you. Can I always be chatting with Kamala? She's an old woman, always talking about her grandchildren, which too is boredom,'

'Uncle, don't worry,' she said, 'would you like to have a cup of tea?'

'No, I've had my breakfast just now. After half an hour, give me a tea.'

Then Ahrani came there, calling: 'Thatha... how are you?'

'I'm fine,' he said, not excited.

She sat on the couch, next to him.

'Okay, remain you both here, chatting. I'm just coming,' said Suganya. She went into the room, took her spare clothes and walked to the bathroom.

When Suganya took a bath and came back, Ahrani rose to her feet, said: 'Thatha, Amma has come. I'm going to tuition.'

'When will you come back?' asked Satkunam.

'By twelve o'clock. Please, wait here until I come back,' she ordered him affectionately.

'Of course,' he said, laughing and tapping on the top of her head.

Then standing at the porch, Virushali called out, 'Ahra...'

'Coming, just coming,' said Ahrani. She took her bag, and left with Virushali.

Satkunam looked at Suganya, said: 'it seems that you've come here hurriedly, not having dried your hair, which is dripping wet. After catching a cold, then sneezing for four days... go inside, and dry your hair thoroughly.'

She smiled, then shifted to the room to dry her hair.

He took the transmitter, switched the TV on, sat on the couch, surfing TV channels. Flicking through the channels he found an English channel broadcasting songs.

Fifteen minutes later she returned to the living room. He asked: 'what sort of programme do you see on TV?'

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'Only news. Sometimes any Tamil songs. Mostly I read books. As she's studying at the table, I'm reading a book too at the other end of the table, which should be a company for her.'

'Fine!'

When she tried to take a step into the kitchen, he asked: 'where are you going?'

'To make tea.'

'I won't have a tea now. Come here, sit down,' he said, tapping on the couch.

She stood, leaning against the kitchen door frame.

He looked at her. She was wearing a white gown that was collarless, round neck line, short sleeves; and low hemline below her knee; with frills at the hemline and at the ends of the sleeves; with a sash around the waist. Her hair which was loose cascaded down her back.

'You're like a white pigeon,' he said, laughing.

She smiled gently.

Once again he looked at her from top to toe, and said: 'You look so beautiful in this dress.'

She smiled slightly at the TV, feeling shy, exposing her upper incisors. He flicked the TV off. She shifted her look from the TV to him.

'Suganya, can you do me a favour?' he asked.

'Please, tell me, I'll do it. I'm indebted to you and Aunt. Actually, I'm waiting for an opportunity to return the favour,' she said without hesitation.

'You're alone, without your husband, in the better part of your life...' he said. Before he could finish the sentence, she said: 'Nothing can I do for that. That's my fate. I'm alive for my daughter's sake, as I say often.'

'Yes, I understand what you say,' he said, 'your sacrifice for your daughter, must be appreciated. But I'm worried about you - you don't enjoy your life happily,' he glanced at her worriedly.

She was silent, just looking at his face.

He went on, 'are you going to while your entire life away in vain? The period of a woman's enjoyment of her life is shorter than that of a man's. Women's carnal desire almost ends with their menopause, but that of men's lasts their sixties. A man can satisfy a woman sexually at his sixty itself. Enjoy your life, no matter whether you remarry or not. And what do you think about me? I'm still a young man.'

She could hardly believe her ears, the sense organ. She had to pinch herself to make sure she was not dreaming. She kept staring vacantly at him. Her mind went blank. She lapsed into silence.

He interpreted her silence as acceptance. He rose to his feet, stepped up to her, and grabbed the wrist of her left hand, with his right hand. He said enthusiastically: 'Hey, woman, you deceive yourself concealing your feelings. You have a big child, so you can't remarry, I agree. But without remarrying you should enjoy the rest of your life. I'll come here as usual - nobody will suspect me. Don't think that I'm an old man. I'll do whatever you want. Don't worry.' She looked down, in a shocked silence.

He shifted his grab from her wrist to her upper arm. Surprisingly, unexpectedly, he inserted his left hand between her back and her flowing hair. His fingers splayed across her back squeezed and pressed against her back. He hugged her, and kissed on her right cheek.

She froze still in a state of shock. Both of her hands were hanging down as if paralysed.

He kept kissing on her nape and across her collar bone. Because she didn't cooperate with him, he stopped hugging and kissing her. But standing close at her, pointing his index finger at the bare area within the neckline, he said quietly: 'the skin colour of this area is sexy.' Then touching on the upper arm at the end of the sleeve and slowly hiking it up with his finger, he said: 'this too is a

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sexy colour, you know.' His finger kept trailing across her upper arm for a minute.

He stopped touching, and returned to the couch. She still stood transfixed with shock, leaning against the door frame.

He said in a confident way: 'hey, don't be afraid. Don't feel guilty about what happened here. When we do anything unusual at the very first time, our conscience pricks us. Then day in, day out it turns usual - we'll have become accustomed to it. So, don't worry about that.'

Her mind still was numb. She however managed to recover herself from her emotional upset. She took a glance at his face. He was leering at her. A few strands of her hair had become entangled in the links of the stainless steel bracelet of his wrist watch. He untangled the strands, and wrapped them around his index finger. Sniffing at it, he said softly in a deep voice: 'we are from the earth talking about the waxing and waning crescent moon. But the moon is unaware of its appearance. Like wise, you are unaware of yours. You've a good figure. You've picture perfect eyes, lips, bosom, hip. So, you know, you look sexy!'

She suddenly looked at his face with a terrible shock. A moment later, her face puckered. She burst into tears soundlessly, but intermittently raised the sound of hiccup-like, with tears flowing without restraint down her cheek.

'Why are you crying? What happened to you?' he asked, rose to his feet, and got close to her. She was disgusted even to see him. She was staring blankly at the floor.

When he tried to touch her hand, 'don't touch me!' she said, suddenly, in a crack voice, pulling her hand away, as if electrocuted.

'What's wrong with you?' he asked.

'Leave me alone,' she said, sighing heavily.

'Okay, don't worry. I'll come tomorrow morning,' he said, stepping out.

She however, in a matter of seconds, collected herself,

walked up to the front door, and said in a loud voice: 'excuse me!'

He turned around to look at her.

'Don't come here anymore,' she screeched, and shut the door.

But he laughed and walked towards the gate to go home.

She dashed into the bathroom, turned the tap on, and splashed water on her face, collar bone, hand, and wherever he'd touched. Her gown above the waist was almost wet. She came to the living room, dropped on the floor as if a vine had lost its trellis. She started to sob uncontrollably, tapping heavily on her forehead. She felt as if all the supports of her life had completely shattered into a thousand pieces.

She tried to recall her past memory. She sobbed. 'Aiyo! What a fool I'm. I've embraced a venomous snake, considering it to be a garland of flowers. I'm in the position like that of the man who had swum across the deep ocean, later fell into a knee-deep water in a faint and suffocated to death. Aiyo... I don't know whom I can trust in my life,' she spoke to herself.

She felt as if a disgusting creature were crawling on her body. As if his mustache were prickling her face. What he said all was reverberating in her ears. She lay on her back, staring at the ceiling vacantly. After a while, she did get deep sleep.

'Amma... Amma...' Ahrani called out softly, anxiously, patting her mother's cheek.

Suganya woke up with a recoil and found her daughter squatting down beside her. Suddenly she hugged her daughter and started to sob.

'Amma, are you all right? What happened to you? Why're you sleeping here? Your gown is completely wet Did you slip over on the bathroom tiles and fall down? Are you ok?' asked Ahrani anxiously.

'Pillai, don't worry. Nothing wrong with me,' said Suganya, hugging her tightly.

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'Then what makes you cry now?' asked Ahrani.

'Nothing, Pillai.'

'Because of old memories? About my father?'

Suganya said nothing.

Ahrani went on, 'Amma, don't worry. I'll look after you well, not parting you?' Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Suganya made her daughter lie on her lap, patting her daughter on the arm, on the leg, on the head affectionately, sobbing.

Fifteen minutes later Ahrani got up and went into the kitchen. There was no any sign of preparation for cooking lunch. She found some pittu cooked for breakfast in a pan. She realized that her mother hadn't had her breakfast. She took a plate, put the pittu on it, and took two ripe bananas and peeled them. The pittu had turned out dry. She crumbled the pittu, added some sugar, and mashed the pittu and the bananas up with her hand.

Ahrani stepped up to her mother, carrying the food plate in her hand, and sat down on the floor cross-legged. Suganya then had sat on the floor, leaning against the wall. Ahrani fed the mashed pittu to her mother. Suganya wiped off her tears, and started to masticate it, placing her hands on her daughter's lap.

## Sixteen

Satkunam hadn't come to her home for two days. Suganya felt relieved, not seeing his face. While she was cooking breakfast in the morning, Ahrani came up to her asked: 'Amma, why didn't Thatha come here for two days?'

'I don't know why. I think, he'll come today,' said Suganya airily, not taking her eyes off the frying pan.

'Amma, if he doesn't come here today shall we go there in the evening and see what happened?'

'Pillai, let's think about that in the evening. Now, get ready for school. It's about the time Viru came,' said Suganya, wanting to delay her answer until the evening.



In the evening when Suganya returned home from the office, surprisingly Satkunam was there sitting in a chair on the porch, and chatting with Ahrani.

'Here Amma comes!' exclaimed Ahrani.

He turned his head to look at Suganya. She looked down to avoid eye contact, rested her bicycle on its stand, took her handbag out of the basket, and walked into the house, passing him, without smiling at him for even for formality.

Inside the house Virushali sat on the couch, watching TV. Ahrani followed Suganya into the house. Looking at Ahrani,

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Suganya said: 'Pillai, stay here with Viru.'

Ahrani nodded.

Suganya placed her handbag on the table stepped down on to the porch, and closed the door behind.

'I told you not to come here, no. Then why have you come here?' said Suganya in an emotionless voice, not looking at his face.

'You know, there is a Tamil proverb- '*ahsai vedkam ariyaathu*, desire is unaware of shame-', 'said Satkunam, laughing loudly, 'Ha... ha... ha...'

Getting irritated at his response, she took a glance at him. He winked at her. Instantly she looked down, and said: 'You've deceived me; calling yourself like my father, you behave like this.'

'I'm like your father but not your father,' he said.

She was bitterly disappointed, more than ever.

He further said: 'you're like my daughter at the age but actually not my daughter. You're a woman, I'm a man. I'm not calling myself bheeshma, who took a vow of celibacy, in the Mahabharat epic. I had copulated with a woman, and am the father of a child. And you copulated with a man and gave birth. That's the truth and the fact. Will you stop acting as if you knew nothing?'

She didn't expect that he would talk like that. She saw his new face.

He continued: 'you can say that it's our custom, culture, tradition, or whatever sense. First, come to the material world. I think, you're somewhere there... ha... ha... ha.' He laughed, pointing his hand at the sky.

She stood staring at her wrist watch, ignoring him. He smiled at her act, and asked: 'Okay, I've visited your home- won't you serve me even a cup of tea.'

She smiled wryly, and said: 'nothing will I serve you with my hands anymore. My daughter doesn't know about you. So, clear off! Because you have no moral right to sit here.'



'Nice! You're so thankful,' he snapped with heavy sarcasm.

'I know I owed you a great debt of gratitude, for the sake of which I've been treating you like this. Otherwise I'd have treated you differently,' she said ambivalently.

'Hey! Shut your bloody mouth!' he was furious at her. 'What do you say? Otherwise, how would you have treated me? What can you do? Bloody bi---,' he said harshly, with his eyes blazing.

But she didn't lose her temper. Demanding for sexual favour is not a gentleman's quality,' she said in a calm voice, looking away.

Satkunam sprang to his feet, pointing his index finger at her, and said: 'You'll face the dire consequences.'

'No one can wet a person who have got drenched to the skin,' she said softly.

'I'll show you who I'm,' he said firmly, walked towards the gate.

### Seventeen

The next morning Suganya got off her bicycle at the gate of the office and rolled it towards the shed. Standing in front of the shed Maniyam and Ramesh were chatting away. As soon as they had seen her coming inside, they turned into a cheerful mood, started to make jibes at her, laughing in an unpleasant way.

'What's the use of feeding the piece of sweet to an old man?' asked Ramesh.

'An experienced person is welcome everywhere, or to every field... what a lucky bastard!' Maniyam said, with a sigh, then went on, 'Hey, I always like the mango nibbled by a squirrel. You know why? Only can the squirrel identify the sweet mango.'

'That old bugger enjoys the life for the past five years,' said Ramesh, 'I wish I were in the position of that old man.'

When she passed them, Maniyam said: Okay, Okay, no problem. It's a common thing. Don't worry about that. Everyone will have known about that in a day or two. So, there is no alternative but to brazen it out.'

They laughed, looking at her for her reaction to the jibes. She heard all that they jibed at her, but didn't react to it.

She couldn't afford to ignore their hints today, as always, because a little bit of truth was there in what they jibed today—she'd fed a piece of sweet to Satkunam. She wondered how they

must have known it, and if Satkunam might have told them. She was writhing with embarrassment. She felt as if she had staggered to her feet. She tried to walk briskly to hide herself from their sight, but it felt as if her steps had been frozen.

She entered the office. Vasanthi greeted her with a welcoming smile: 'good morning!'

Suganya, as if to ignore it, walked up to her table, tossed her handbag on it, dragged her chair and sat down on it. She closed her eyes, placed her right hand folded on the table, and rested her head on the arm with burying her nose in the crook of the arm.

Vasanthi immediately got up and stepped up to her. Placing her hand on Suganya's shoulder, she asked anxiously: 'Thankachchi, what's wrong with you?'

Suganya raised her head, clutched Vasanthi's hand placed on her shoulder, looked directly into her eyes, and asked a single question: 'Akka, can't a widow live in the world?'

'Hey, what're you talking like this? Those buggers standing at the shed say something bad?' asked Vasanthi with concern.

'No matter what they're talking.'

When Suganya said, her lips quivered. Tears started to dribble down on both cheeks.

'Control yourself- it's office,' said Vasanthi, looking around the office.

But Suganya couldn't restrain herself from becoming tearful.

'Akka! I can't concentrate on my work today. I'm going to take leave today,' she said quietly, almost inaudibly.

'Cool down... cool down. I come with you too,' said Vasanthi, pressing Suganya's cheek against her waist.

Suganya watched, through the window opened, the drivers standing at the shed still, and chatting away. She sat in the chair again, took her handkerchief to wipe her tears off. 'Akka, shall we go, after those men have gone out?' asked Suganya in an exhausted voice.

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'Hey, get up! Don't be afraid of them. I also come with you, no.'

Suganya got up to take a sick leave. Vasanthi took a short leave. They both walked up to the shed. Maniyam and Ramesh kept silent. Taking their bicycles, both Suganya and Vasanthi came out into the road. Suganya rode her bicycle home. Vasanthi followed her closely behind.

They entered the house, and sat on the couch next to each other. Vasanthi asked: 'Tell me now what happened to you?'

Suganya burst into tears, releasing her pent-up frustration. Vasanthi hugged her tight, and left her crying. Suganya had been crying for a few minutes, non-stop.

'Thankachchi, are you okay now?' asked Vasanthi softly, wiping Suganya's tears with the end of her sari. 'Shall I get you a tea?'

'Nothing do I want now,' said Suganya in a broken voice.

'Then okay, tell me now what happened,' insisted Vasanthi.

But Suganya was reluctant to open up.

'Don't suppress your feelings. Only if you open up can we find a solution for all your problems,' said Vasanthi, pillowing Suganya's head on her lap.

Suganya then felt relieved.

Patting Suganya's forehead and cheeks, consoling, Vasanthi said: 'Open up now!'

Suganya started to recount what had happened, in a calm voice. When Vasanthi listened to the story, her face was a picture. Vasanthi managed to imagine as if herself had turned Suganya.

At a point, before Suganya ended her story, Vasanthi got absolutely furious with Satkunam. She couldn't control herself. She opened her mouth to insult him. 'That bugger has been a cat. He's been telling that you are like his daughter to everybody he sees, even to me too, often. He's a wily old fox!' and then she asked: 'Why couldn't you give him a slap across his face,? Her eyes blazed with

fury.

'How can I do it, Akka? I considered him as my own father. And do you mean to cut the hand that has fed me off?' said Suganya, looking at her face.

'It seems that he has systematically planned everything. I think, those drivers are better than this man.'

'Akka, I feel insecure.'

'Don't break your heart. Relax! Everything will be ok.'

Suganya took her head off Vasanthi's lap, sat on the couch upright, and said, looking into her eyes: 'Akka, I could tolerate all that he'd said, but only one thing.'

'What's it?' asked Vasanthi instantly, looking at her with wide eyes.

'He told me, 'you look sexy: which I couldn't still swallow!' said Suganya, started to sob.

'People like him would talk like that. Forget it, forget it,' said Vasanthi, tapping her shoulder. She managed to hold back her anger simmering inside her, and said some consoling words to Suganya.

Suganya appeared relaxed. Vasanthi felt satisfied, took her smartphone out of her handbag, and entered the group viber, in a minute Vasanthi showed a photo uploaded by Satkunam on the wall to her, in which photo taken as a selfie he sat on a chair putting his arm around Suganya's shoulder as she rested herself on his shoulder. Under the photo he put a note- '*Kadalika vayathu oru thadai alla!*' - Age is not a barrier to love!-

There was another photo of Suganya feeding a piece of sweet to Satkunam, with a smiling face. Under the photo he wrote in English: 'A young doe feeds an old lion... Ha... ha... ha...!'

On seeing the two photos Suganya got a terrible shock, said: 'Akka, these photos were taken at their wedding anniversary.'

'Yes, I understood. He deliberately uploaded only these two photos.'

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'Oh yes, it must be. Because he didn't upload the other photos such as the photo that I fed to Kamala Aunty in, and that Pillai fed them both in. So, you're correct. And also I had begged him to delete the photo that I rested myself on his shoulder in,' Suganya explained the situation.

Having listened to Suganya, Vasanthi clenched her teeth, and mumbled: 'cunning fox!' she wanted to give some advice to Suganya, but she didn't, because that day was not suitable to do it.

Clutching Suganya's hand affectionately Vasanthi said: 'Thankachchi, whatever happens... you know, that is...' she stammered.

Suganya smiled gently, and then said: 'Akka, I realize what you try to say. Whatever happens to me, I won't take any decision cowardly, and won't leave my child behind as an orphan.

'Nice girl! Said Vasanthi, smiling, and kissed on her cheek.

Suganya went into the kitchen, and came back with two cups of tea. Giving one to Vasanthi, she sat on the couch, sipping at her tea.

After Vasanthi left, she remained seated, waiting for her daughter, without even changing her sari. Her mind was still occupied completely by her past unpleasant memories.

## Eighteen

By ten o'clock Sanjayan entered the Vavuniya office.

'Good morning Vasanthi Akka,' he greeted. He was in a cheerful mood.

Vasanthi, who had been entering figures in the ledger, heard his voice, looked up from the ledger.

'Good morning, Thambi,' she greeted him back, and then asked: 'Why have you come in the morning?'

'I go home today,' he said happily.

'Sit down,' said Vasanthi, pointing the ball point pen in her hand at a chair next to her table.

'Akka, I want to show my face to my friends and the IE first. After making small talk with them, I'll come back, ok?'

Vasanthi nodded her head, smiling.

He walked to the technical room. Ranjan and Joseph were there.

'Come in, sit down.' Said Ranjan happily. Sanjayan sat in a chair.

'How many days have you taken the leave?' asked Ranjan.

'Two days leave but four days including the weekend.'

'Then, stay with me today.' Ranjan suggested.

'No, Machan, I want to go home today. On the way to

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Murunkan, I'll stay definitely with you.'

'Okay, you yourself go home after a month, why should I forbid now from seeing your mother? First, see your mother, and then leisurely come here,' said Ranjan, laughing.

After a while Sanjayan stepped towards the IE's office. The room was empty. The fan from the ceiling rotated at full r.p.m, whirring. A newspaper on the table was turning its pages by itself. Some scraps of paper under the paper weight were rustling. Then, the peon, Indran came into the room. 'The IE has gone out,' said Indran, looking at Sanjayan.

'When will he return? Ask Sanjayan.

'He told me that he'd return after lunch.'

'Then, Ok,' said Sanjayan.

Indran went out. Sanjayan switched off the fan, and the lights, leaving only one light burning.

He went up to Vasanthi's table.

'Hi, Akka, what's up?' he drew her attention.

'Sit down,' said Vasanthi, looking up at him.

He edged a chair close to the table, and sat in it. 'Where is Suganya? Is she on leave today?' he asked.

'She is on leave for the past three days, as of Tuesday.'

'Why? What's wrong with her?' he asked with concern, raising his eyebrows.

'Must tell you,' said Vasanthi. She told the story of Suganya to him briefly, revealing the important matters.

Sanjayan fell silent. He rested the elbow of his right hand on the table, cupped his forehead in the hand, and looked down.

After two minutes, Vasanthi broke the silence: 'Thambi!'

'I'm in a confused state of mind,' he said, 'I could hardly believe it. I wonder why Satkunam sir behaved like that towards her, the poor lady. It's dream like.' He paused for a minute, and then asked: 'Akka, do you know her whereabouts?'

'Yes!'



'Akka, can you help me? If you come with me, we both can go and see her. Because I can't go there alone, you know,' he said, looking at her face expectantly.

'Yes of course,' she agreed, 'shall we go during the lunch break?'

'Ok, no problem,' he said, and took his phone and entered the group viber application to see the photos Satkunam shared. Sanjayan borrowed a push bike from Ranjan, and stood in the shade of the king coconut tree by the wall, waiting for Vasanthi.

During the lunch break Vasanthi came out.

'Akka, have you had lunch?' he asked.

'I'll have my lunch after returning,' Said Vasanthi, walking towards the shed to take her bicycle.

They reached Suganya's home. Suganya welcomed them. They all exchanged their greetings, and sat on the chairs on the porch. Suganya looked at them questioningly. Vasanthi looked at Sanjayan.

'As of Tuesday you didn't come to the office...' said Sanjayan. His voice trailed off.

Suganya looked at Vasanthi. Nodding her head up and down, Vasanthi said: 'Yes, Thambi knows all the story. I've told him briefly.'

'When will you return to work?' he asked with concern.

'I'm self-conscious, and I feel shy to see the other people in the office,' she said, not looking directly at his face.

'Time heals everything. It'll do your wounds. Don't worry.'

She smiled wryly, and said: 'yes, it heals always my wounds, but leaves the scars.'

'I'm sorry,' said Sanjayan.

Suganya went on, 'now, I'm on no pay leave. I'll return to work when my pain recedes to the level I can bear. In this male dominant society, we women must willy-nilly accept the acts of violence against us and adapt ourselves to the society created by men, without uttering even a single word. If we don't obey, we'll be

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insulted; our image will be tarnished; character assassination will be the result. Then what to say? All men are the same.'

Vasanthi interrupted. 'Hey, what do you mean? Not all men. Gentlemen also are here in our society.'

'It pains me, Akka,' said Suganya, looking at Vasanthi.

Sanjayan, who had been staring at the floor, clicked his tongue, turned his face to look at Vasanthi, and said: 'Akka, don't disturb her. Let her unburden herself. She has been victimized by some men and this male dominant society. Please, put yourself in her position. Then you'll realize.'

'Thankachchi, I'm sorry. Speak now,' said Vasanthi, looking at Suganya. But she did not resume her monologue. She wiped her tears with her palm.

'I'm sorry,' said Vasanthi to him, twisting her lips.

'It's ok,' he said, 'Akka, you know, humans by nature are omnivorous. Among the humans are vegetarians and fruitarians. Vegetarians cannot say they're herbivorous.'

Vasanthi laughed. Suganya also smiled, twisting her lips, not exposing her teeth.

Sanjayan went on, 'this is a male dominant society. In our society there is room for maturity. So what Suganya says is absolutely right!'

Suganya looked directly at him, and said: 'It's the first time you've visited our home. I regret that I'm unable to offer even a cup of tea to you who have come here by lunch time because today is Thursday.' A guilty look was on her face.

'It's ok. Don't feel guilty,' he said instantly.

There is a belief in the community that whoever visits one's home at the very first time on Thursday won't be offered even a glass of drinking water. If offered so, the relationship between the one and the visitor will terminate soon.

Suganya shifted her look from Sanjayan to Vasanthi, and asked: 'Akka, have your lunch with me?'

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'No,' Vasanthi declined, and went on, 'Thangachchi, my lunch box is of full of rice and curry. So, now I can't.

After having made small talk, they three stepped up to the gate. Vasanthi and Sanjayan got on their bicycles, and took leave of her. Suganya stood at the gate until they were out of her sight.

Sanjayan rode abreast of her, and said: 'Akka, I want to see Satkunam sir, and come to the office later.'

Before Vasanthi could respond, they reached Station Road. When she turned her bike to the right, he turned to the left.

Sitting In a chair on the veranda, Satkunam saw Sanjayan coming in through the gate.

'Come in,' said Satkunam, waving his hand.

Kamala came out, and stepped down onto the yard, smiling.

'Thambi, we hardly ever see you in these days,' said Kamala.

A smile was a reply from him.

'Thambi, have you had your lunch?'

'I haven't still.'

'Then, please come to have lunch here.' Before he could reply, she tried to go inside the house.

'Aunty, Aunty,' he called her hurriedly.

She turned to look at him.

'Aunty, I'm just going home. I've come here to see sir. Amma must have cooked for me,' said Sanjayan, laughing, stepping up onto the veranda.

Kamala went inside, laughing, to prepare tea. He sat in a chair.

'Sanje, the Periya pandivirichchan dam is renovated, no. sixty five point three million rupees have been allocated for the work. It's good. You can gain valuable experience in the work,' said Satkunam.

'Ok, sir,' Said Sanjayan hurriedly.

Satkunam realized that Sanjayan tried to change the subject.

'Sanje, what are you thinking about?' asked Satkunam, with a

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questioning look.

'Yes, sir, I want to talk with you,' said Sanjayan.

'What about? Anything personal?'

'Yes, that's... about Suganya.'

Satkunam poked his head into the front door to check where Kamala was. He heard the sound of rattling of eversilver plates from the kitchen. 'Sanje, let's go out and talk about that,' he said, walked to the kitchen to tell her not to prepare tea. Then he went to the room, put on a shirt and came out.

Satkunam and Sanjayan came out into the road. Sanjayan pushing his bike, and Satkunam walked abreast along Station Road, towards the Kurumankadu Junction.

They entered a restaurant, sat at an unoccupied table, facing each other. When the waiter approached them, Satkunam looked at Sanjayan face. 'I want tea,' said Sanjayan.

'A Coke 'bady' and a tea,' said Satkunam to the waiter.

Satkunam turned to look at Sanjayan, asked: 'okay, then what's up?'

'About Suganya?' Sanjayan's voice trailed off.

'I think, you've seen the photos.' Said Satkunam, smiling.

Sanjayan came directly to the point. 'Sir, what are you doing? What happened to you?'

'What do you mean?' Satkunam asked in an exclamatory tone.

'Sir, you know, Suganya was in a difficult situation,' said Sanjayan, clearing his throat.

Satkunam looked around the restaurant, and asked: 'can we speak in English?'

Sanjayan nodded.

'Sanje, I know her better than you do her. A magnet attracts a piece of iron - you must have learnt. I'm a man, she's a woman. What do you find fault with me?'

The waiter served them what they'd ordered, as Satkunam

was sucking up the Coke through a straw, Sanjayan was sipping his tea.

There remained silent for a few minutes.

Sanjayan broke the silence. 'Sir, you try to exploit the situation.'

Satkunam laughed scornfully, and then said: 'exploitation is natural in the world. Tell me a single place where there is no exploitation. Exploitation has existed through human history. Not only the exploitation meant by Karl Marx, but also that exists in the entire human life, in various forms. Every individual acts in their own interests. Be it a family - humans are individuals in the world. Even in a family, husband and wife exploit each other, which is a mutual exploitation. After all a begger exploits others. He says something admiring the egos of others in order to get rupees from them in return. Then what else?'

'This exploitation is not relevant to the case,' said Sanjayan, smiling as if not to accept it.

'Sanje, you want to drive a wedge between her and me. It seems as if you don't want me getting on with her,' said Satkunam, winking at him.

'Sir, what do you mean?' said Sanjayan with a shock.

'Sanje, it's disgusting to stick your nose into one's private life.'

'Sir, I'm afraid to say you are telling lie?

'You mean I'm a liar?' said Satkunam in a disapproving tone.

'Sir, she highly respects you, and trusts you. But you lust after her. It's not nice to approach a lady like your daughter," said Sanjayan in a calm voice.

'Hey man, age is not a barrier for lust, or to love. She's not my daughter. She is a woman, I'm a man, that's it. Do you hate the romantic relationship between her and me? That, as an old man, I enjoy having sex with a young woman makes you jealous?' Satkunam said casually.

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'Sir, I know all that happened.'

'Who told you?'

'Sir, it's no matter who told me. But, leave her alone as she wants. Don't disturb her. Sir, she is a poor lady, an innocent victim of the war. You have been supporting her for a decade...'

Before he could finish her monologue Satkunam interrupted. 'I still support her.'

Sanjayan got slightly irritated, and then continued, 'Sir, whatever you justify yourself, what you did is not right. You've betrayed her trust. It's wrong to upload the photos taken at your wedding anniversary. It's unforgivable that you wrote those comments under the photos.'

'But not a fake photos! Said Satkunam, smiling.

'Sir, it doesn't matter whether the photos are fake or not. You have deceived her in a subtle approach. At this stage of your life you have to go to temple and engage in meditation.'

Suddenly Satkunam flew into a rage. His face twisted. He rose to his feet with a jerk as if he had stepped onto red-hot ember. Wagging the index finger of his right hand from side to side, with struggling for words, he stammered, 'you... you... what.' In a moment he said in a harsh voice, 'Hey, are you complaining? About me? I say, don't advise me! I can go wherever I want. It may be a temple or brothel house. You don't worry about that. Shut your bloody mouth and mind your own business.' He placed his index finger on his lips, as a cross that was a warning sign of 'shut your mouth!'

The other people in the restaurant looked at them. Fortunately, they couldn't understand what Satkunam said, because he spoke in English.

Sanjayan sprang to his feet, stretching his arms out towards him, and said apologetically: 'I'm sorry, sorry. Extremely sorry, sir. I shouldn't have told you like that. I apologized to you for what I've said. Please sir, sitdown.'

Satkunam sat down, so did Sanjayan.

Sanjayan said in a soft voice, looking at him: 'Sir, you are my superior as well as my master, I still consider. I highly respect you. You yourself know that. I'd learnt much professional techniques from you. I will never ever insult you. And also I don't want others to insult you. But, sir, How you've behaved towards her is wrong. She has put her trust in you. You've spoiled everything. You've let yourself down. Actually, you were the only man who earned her trust. Sir, don't tarnish her image anymore. She is a widow, you know.'

'Hey boy, have you ever slept with a woman?' asked Satkunam in a harsh voice.

'Sir, what do you mean?' he got a shock.

'You are inexperienced in this matter. You are too young to advise a person like me. And also you find fault with me. But you are not a crusader of social justice, nor are you a defender of human rights. You got your share of the money swindled out of the Department. Why did you accept it? What you did is right? And, who are you to her? Are you either her husband or brother? So, you have no right to interfere in the problems between her and me. Don't play a part. Clear off!'

'Sir, I am not a person you refer to, nor am I her own brother. But I'm an element of this society. I believe that I've full rights to interfere in this matter. I know about my social responsibility. I can't stand idly by, when you torture her and approach her without her consent.'

'Without her consent!' Satkunam exclaimed, 'when I kissed her, she neither pulled herself away, nor pushed me away. Didn't she tell you that? So, don't worry. Stand aside, just looking on, okay,' he said, 'don't come to me anymore, interceding with me on her behalf.'

'I wonder why you don't know the reason why she behaved like that when you touched her. We gave very different accounts of

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the same event. Our views are diametrically opposed on this matter. So, it's useless to talk further about that. I regret to say you that you are like a real crook!' said Sanjayan.

Sanjayan got up, and took his wallet out of his trouser pocket to pay the bill.

'No, I'll do it,' said Satkunam in a tight voice, not looking at Sanjayan's face.

They parted at the restaurant itself, without saying even a bye.

As Sanjayan rode off, Satkunam walked towards Suganya's home.

Suganya had reclined on the couch, waiting for Ahrani's return from school, keeping the front door open.

Satkunam popped in through the door. At once she got up from the couch, looking at him with a mixture of surprise and disgust.

'Hey, woman, being here like a witch, you do everything. You get me threatened,' said Satkunam, loudly, angrily.

She looked puzzled.

'You, drama queen,' he screeched, 'don't pretend that you know nothing about that. Sanjayan has come to my place and threatened me.'

She wondered why Sanjayan had behaved like this, and said softly: 'I don't know that, but what he did is right, I think. If you can threaten me, why can't he threaten you?'

'Oh yeah, you talk back to me, no. You should be ashamed of yourself for having told him about what happened between us. Who is Sanjayan to you? Whether he is your husband or brother? He also is a man, no. How could you tell him unashamedly that I kissed you.

She didn't want to reply. She was silent, looking down.

'Hey, Suganya, I did you a lot. But you are not prepared to do me a favour,' he said.



She remained silent.

He smiled at her, said: 'in the society all the restrictions have been imposed on woman. Purity or Chastity, or whatever - only for woman. You should realize that you are under the Illusion about the purity of woman's body. Who do you reserve your body for? For nobody, but for soil or for fire. Human body which comes out of the elements turns back to the elements after tens of years. That's the fact. Human's life span is negligible - nothing compared to that of the world, you know.'

He went on convincing her to approve of his idea.

He paused his monologue, and tried to step up to her.

'Stand still there!' she screeched, stretching her arm towards him.

Though, he approached her, and grabbed both her wrists with both his hands, said gently: 'I'm sorry.'

She wriggled her hands free, and said: 'nothing do I have to talk with you.'

'Okay, okay,' said Satkunam in a cool mood and came back at the door, from where he asked, smiling: 'What do I want to do now to you?'

Suganya smiled wryly at him, and said firmly: 'you can speak till you are blue in the face, but I won't give in.'

'Do you want to get on with Sanjayan?' he asked, winking at her.

'He is a gentleman. He is not like you.'

'Just a week ago, I heard from you that I was a gentleman', he roared, and then went on, 'hey, my girl, listen to me attentively. Sanjayan is a gentleman, which I know. But he will not be a gentleman any longer, because he's begun to get on with you. Who that has seen you once won't be sexually attracted by you? Sanjayan is a man too. If you wear a clinging dress that shows off your curves, you'll be definitely like a model. You are so sexy! Please, humour me, I'll show you the real world.' His voice oozed with sex appeal.

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She dropped into the couch. Her face crumpled up. She held her face in her cupped hands and placed it on her lap, sobbing.

'Are you angry with me?' asked Satkunam playfully, slightly ogling at her. He said: I'm waiting for a cordial relationship. I know your weakness well-that's your daughter. If you don't say yes, I'll turn Ahrani against you?

She raised her head from her lap. Her face was wet with tears. A lock of hair was sticking on her wet cheek. She glared at him silently.

'No peacock sheds its feathers willingly; it's feathers are forcibly plucked!' He said without even a look of contrition.

Suganya shouted uncontrollably.

'Do what you can! Now get out of here! Get out!'

'I'll achieve!' he said, smiling, ignoring her insulting word. He went out.

Then the Karumari amman kovil bell started ringing out.

No sooner had she heard it than she burst into tears. Stretching her hands towards the direction of the kovil, she yelled: 'Are you still there watching everything? Why did you spare only Pillai and me alone?'

When Ahrani opened the gate, Suganya went into the bathroom to wash her face.

## Nineteen

It was a Saturday night. At about eight o'clock. Suganya cooked dinner, and came to the living room to take Ahrani to have dinner. But Ahrani was not there, the table was vacant. Suganya walked into the bedroom where Ahrani was lying on the bed, groaning.

'Pillai, what's wrong with you?' Suganya asked anxiously, and then touched Ahrani's forehead and neck with the back of her hand. Ahrani felt hot and feverish.

Ahrani had felt feverish in the afternoon. Suganya as usual had given her a pair of panadol, which had helped to reduce the fever.

'Amma, shall I pop two panadols again?' asked Ahrani.

'No, we had better go to the doctor now,' said Suganya, 'Pillai, if you take panadols, the fever will be temporarily subside, but it will surface in the mid night.'

'OK, then please call Thatha to come here. He'll take me to the doctor,' said Ahrani.

'Not necessary, I'll take you to the doctor,' said Suganya instantly.

'Amma, it's dark outside. How can we both go alone?'

'No problem, we can go together,' said Suganya, gently patting on her back.

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Suganya went to the bathroom. Ahrani got ready, and sat on the couch. Suganya changed into a long skirt and blouse. She undid her hair knot on the back of her head, combed the hair again and wore it in a single plait. She powdered lightly on her face.

She took a new towel out of the wardrobe, came to the living room, and gave it to Ahrani. 'Pillai, remain seated here. I go out to hire a three wheeler, and will be back in a moment,' said Suganya.

Ahrani nodded.

Suganya went out. Standing at the gate, she looked around, and walked along Goodshed Road upto Station Road. She saw a stationary three wheeler at the other side of the road, in front of a restaurant. She immediately crossed the road, and approached the three wheeler, which was empty.

A young man came out from the restaurant, carrying a plastic bag, and saw her standing beside the three wheeler.

'Akka, what are you looking for?' he asked politely.

'I have to hire a three wheeler,' she said.

'Where to go?'

'To the private hospital at Thonikkal, on Quarry Road.'

'Akka, anything serious?' he asked with concern.

'My daughter feels fever.'

'Then ok, I'll come to your gate in a minute,' he said firmly.

'Do you know where our house is located?' she asked doubtfully.

'Yes, that's right behind the Karumari amman kovil, at the other side of the road. I know,' he said assuredly, hurriedly.

'Thanks,' she said, and walked briskly home.

When Suganya entered the house Ahrani remained seated, slightly shivering. 'Pillai, why are you keeping the towel in your hand itself. I gave you it to cover your upper body up,' said Suganya.

Suganya locked the front door behind them, and walked up to the gate, holding Ahrani's arm. The three wheeler sat outside the gate. They got into the three wheeler, and he drove it along Good

shed Road, south wards.

A Police person on the road signaled the three wheeler to stop, with a torch light. The driver stopped the three wheeler and got off.

The Police person approached him, and asked in Sinhalese: 'Anandan... oyada? Thang koheda yanne?

Anandan spoke in Sinhalese too.

'To hospital. A child feels fever.'

The police person looked inside the three wheeler, lighting. Ahrani was shivering, with her head resting on Suganya's shoulder.

'Aney! Pow ney,' he said, and turned to Anandan, said: 'putha, you can't go along this road now. We got a tip-off about Kerala Ganja trafficking in this area, and rounded the area up. It'll last at least half an hour. Use that lane to bypass.' He pointed to the lane ahead with his torch.

Suganya was looking on.

Anandan drove the three wheeler again, and turned it ahead into the lane in order to access Quarry Road.

'Do you know the police person?' asked Suganya.

'Yes, Akka,' he said, 'being a three wheeler driver I meet the police people frequently. The person you've seen just before is a really nice guy, and have sober habits as well. No one can say he is a policeman, because he doesn't behave rudely, and never uses filthy language. He who should have been a monk has surprisingly become a policeman. What a great contradiction.'

He stopped the three wheeler in front of the private hospital. 'Akka, I'm waiting outside until you come back,' he said.

Suganya took Ahrani into the hospital. There were some other patients to see the doctor. Suganya sat Ahrani on a bench, next to whom she herself sat down.

It was nine o'clock when they could see the doctor and come out.

'Akka, what's wrong with her?' asked Anandan expectantly.

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'Nothing serious. It's a normal fever. The doctor gave some pills and capsules, to take the dose every six hours. And he's given a dose now,' said Suganya.

Anandan drove the three wheeler along Quarry Road. Then his mobile phone rang. He took it to see who the caller was. He stopped the three wheeler on the left side of the road, turned around to look at Suganya, and said: 'Akka! Wait for a moment; calling from home.'

Sitting on his seat, he spoke.

'Pillai, Appa is on the way home, just coming. Ok, chellam, Appa coming right now... don't worry! Give the phone to Amma,' he paused, a matter of seconds later, went on, 'hello, Priya, well, a child had a fever. I had to take her to hospital, and now returning from the hospital. I'll be there within fifteen minutes, ok?' 'Oh yes, I got take away kothu from the restaurant you mentioned. You know, Priyaa... don't let Pillai sleep until my return. Okay, bye!'

Then he looked at Suganya, said: 'Today is our daughter's birthday. When I left home in the morning she was sleeping. I had a hire to Puliyankulam. I returned from there at eight o'clock. When I came out from the restaurant, with take away kottu, you were there and told me that your child had a fever. I couldn't say no to you. There were no other three wheelers. So I came.'

'Thanks, Thambi. I'm sorry,' said Suganya regretfully.

'Akka, don't feel sorry. It's our social obligations to sustain you during this hard time. Akka, I know well the difficulties of bringing up a child without husband,' he said, driving the three wheeler.

She got a shock, and was confused, wondering how he could know about her. She wanted to get rid herself of the burden of her confusion.

'Thambi! I don't know how... about me...' her voice trailed off.

'I see you now and again and often see your daughter going

to school and tuition. You are in the position of my own elder sister who is a war widow of having three children. That engineer's family is helpful to you. I frequently see that engineer taking you with him, like his own daughter. I think he is very supportive of you. Whenever I see you I remember my sister,' he said briefly with a sigh.

'Where are you from?' She asked.

'My native place is Visuvamadu. After the war I settled here at Veppankulam on Mannar Road. This is where my wife was born and bred. We have a child of four,' he said, smiling.

'Then, where is your Akka living?' asked Suganya expectantly, with concern.

'She was there at Visuvamadu.'

'Is she alone?' asked Suganya in surprise of tone.

'No,' he said, 'Amma is there with Akka. My elder nephew is fifteen. The youngest is a niece at five. When my brother in law died, she was in my Akka's womb,' he said in a shaky voice.

Tears welled up in Suganya's eyes. She wiped with her palm.

He continued: 'Akka, all of them are studying cleverly. My Akka rears four cows. I also do something. Only hand to mouth life. It'll last until my nephews grow up. Akka, I don't try to talk to you. It's not so good. You know why, needless to say. You're educated, no. By the way, Akka, as usual get on with that engineer's family for the sake of security, you know his name is Satkunam, no.'

Suganya winced when she heard the name, Satkunam. She got slightly irritated within herself.

He stopped the three wheeler in front of the gate. Holding Ahrani, Suganya stepped off the three wheeler, and gave two notes.

He returned a note, said: 'I charged you for only hire, except for waiting. That's because I charged you for the sake of charge.'

Suganya understood what he meant.

As soon as they entered the house, and locked the door behind them, he drove off.

### Twenty

Satkunam had been hanging around at Station Road, watching the top of Goodshed Road from two o'clock on, so as to see Ahrani, who was due to return from school.

He saw Ahrani and Virushali crossing the railway track. Pretending not to see them, he turned his back to them, and looked at a lorry entering into the Goodshed.

A few seconds later, 'Thatha...' called out Ahrani from behind his back.

Satkunam turned around to look at her. 'Hello! How are you?' asked Satkunam in a tone of surprise as if their meeting had happened accidentally.

Virushali stood at few feet ahead of them. Ahrani grinned at her. Virushali understood the meaning of her grin, said: 'I leave and will be at your house at three thirty sharp.' She walked.

'Thatha, why don't you come to our home?' asked Ahrani expectantly, looking at his face.

'Must tell you everything,' he said, 'Let's walk up to that tree and talk about that.'

They crossed Station Road and stood in the shade of the tree. Satkunam went to a shop, after a minute came back a box of chocolate, and gave it to her.



When she put it into her school bag, he said: 'Open the box!' 'Thatha! Amma told me not to eat anything in streets,' she said.

'Why don't you come to our place?' he asked in a calm voice, keeping his face worried.

'Because you don't come to our place,' said Ahrani, getting angry with him playfully.

'Don't you know the reason? Did your Amma tell you anything?'

'I asked her, but she didn't,' she said with her eyes wide open.

'How can she open her mouth to that?' he said, laughing scornfully.

Ahrani looked puzzled.

Satkunam asked: 'Do you know Sanjayan?'

'Yes, Sanje uncle. I know him.'

'Your mother is going to remarry him,' he said bluntly.

She blushed with embarrassment. She could hardly believe what he said.

He went on, 'I told her not to remarry. She's refused my advice but I advised her over and over again. So, she's told me not to come to your home. Well, you know, on Thursday he came to your home after you went to school. Did your mother tell you that?'

She wondered why her mother hadn't told her it, and lapsed into silence.

'Okay, you look hungry. Go home and have lunch,' said Satkunam.

She walked home.

As soon as she'd entered the house, she phoned Suganya's mobile.

'Hello, Amma!'

'Pillai, why have you called at this time?' asked suganya, in a tone of surprise.

'Amma, I want to talk with you.'

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Ahrani's voice sounded shaky on the phone. Suganya asked anxiously: 'Pillai, what happened? Any problem? Are you okay?'

'Nothing, but I want to see you right now.'

'Ok, I'll be there within ten minutes.'

Suganya disconnected the phone.

Twenty minutes went by.

Suganya stepped up onto the living room, and saw Ahrani sitting on the couch, not even changing her school uniform. Suganya sat down beside her, asked softly: 'what's wrong?'

'Amma, I saw Thatha on my return from school.' Ahrani initiated the talk.

'Then what?' asked Suganya indifferently.

'Amma, he said something about you? Her voice trailed off.

'What did he say?' asked Suganya, not paying attention, with a vacant look.

'Amma, he told me that you're going to remarry Sanje uncle...'

'Nonsense!' Suganya said, 'don't believe what he said.' She thought that he'd intended to spread malicious rumours about her.

'Amma! Sanje uncle had come here on last Thursday... he told me...' Ahrani stammered.

'Tell me,' said Suganya, staring into her eyes, expectantly.

Ahrani told her all that he'd said. Then she asked: 'Amma, why did you tell Thatha not to come here?'

Holding back the tears that welled up in her eyes, Suganya said: 'Pillai, you're too young to understand this matter. After you've grown up, merely three years you'll be mature enough to realize that what Amma did is absolutely right!'

Ahrani remained silent. Suganya, patting on Ahrani's back, said: 'Pillai, change your uniform, wash your hands and come to have lunch.'

Ahrani took the box of chocolate out of her school bag, and gave it to Suganya. 'Amma! Thatha gave it,' said Ahrani, walking

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towards the room to change her uniform.

Suganya took a glance on the box of chocolate, on which box was printed, '*surprise*'. She got irritated, chucked it on the couch, and walked into the kitchen.

### Twenty - one

Two days later, in the evening Suganya got tea and served it to Virushali first, and then to Ahrani. Both Virushali and Ahrani sat on the bench next to each other with their legs dangling over the side of the bench, sipping their teas.

Suganya came out onto the porch, sat in a chair, with her tea. 'Pillaikal, it's a bad habit to dangle your legs when eating or drinking something,' she said softly.

They stopped dangling their legs, and went on sipping their teas. Suganya enquired as to their studies.

Then Kamala opened the gate.

'There Ammamma comes!' Ahrani exclaimed, jumped down from the bench, and stepped briskly towards Kamala. Suganya cast a welcoming smile in Kamala's direction, and rose to her feet.

When Kamala stepped up onto the porch, Virushali went into the kitchen, collecting the empty cups; and came back to the porch, sidled up to Suganya, and said quietly: 'I'm going to leave now.'

Suganya nodded. Virushali took leave.

Kamala and Ahrani sat on the bench, next to each other. Kamala held Ahrani's hands in hers.

'Aunty, would you like to have a cup of tea?' asked Suganya politely.

'No!' Kamala declined, and went on, 'I've come here to enquire as to why you both don't come there to see us.'

'Aunty, I've a plenty of work. Leisurely we'll come', said Suganya, smiling.

'Hey, don't tell me a lie. I'll hit you,' said Kamala, biting her lower lip, and in a dramatic way, raising her arm and slapping in the air as if to hit Suganya.

Suganya smiled at her. Ahrani was just looking on.

Kamala said: 'Pillai, don't hide me anything. What's the problem between you and him? I asked him, to which he told me to ask you. What's going on here?'

'No problem, nothing!' said Suganya, 'I have some disagreements with him.' She wanted to keep the matter secret from Kamala.

'You two are like school children...' Said Kamala, laughing. Then she continued: 'He is an old man, no. Can't you give in to him? There is a Tamil proverb: '*Vidduk koduththavan keddup ponathillai*' Who gives in will not be spoilt.'

Suganya said nothing, but smiled with her lips closed. Then she asked: 'Have a cup of tea, Please, Aunty.'

'It seems as if you won't let me go home if I don't have the tea that you make,' said Kamala, laughing, 'ok, bring your tea!'

Suganya went into the kitchen. Kamala started to chat with Ahrani.

A few minutes later Suganya offered a cup of tea to Kamala. They made small talk.

When the east sky began to turn red, Kamala got up to go home.

'I want to go to the grocery at Station Road', said Suganya.

'Then, come with me.'

Suganya went into the house to take a bag and her purse, and then returned there, and said: 'I'll come back in a moment. Pillai, stay inside the house.'

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Ahrani nodded affirmatively. Kamala hugged Ahrani tight and kissed her on either cheek, before leaving.

Kamala and Suganya walked abreast along Goodshed Road to reach Station Road.

Kamala parted at Station Road and walked home. When Suganya crossed the road, she saw Anandan, the three wheeler driver, standing at his three wheeler. He saw her too, but ignored her, looking down, not even a smile of formality.

She realized why he behaved like that she smiled within herself, and go to the grocery.

## Twenty - two

It was in the morning ten o'clock. When Satkunam approached the Commercial Bank, a voice asked from behind him: 'Sir, why are you here?'

Satkunam looked back. Maniyam was there, laughing.

'Mani!' Satkunam exclaimed, and then said: 'I want to withdraw some money. And I have to ask you the same question.'

'Oh, sir, the IE went into the bank. I'm waiting for him,' Maniyam said, 'sir, I have something to ask you and make it clear.' He laughed cheerfully.

'What?' asked Satkunam, staring at him, with his eyes wide open.

'Sir, you ask me what, as if you knew nothing,' Maniyam said, laughing, 'you too pretend not to understand what I mean. That is, that clerk woman fed you...the sweet'

'Oh yeah, you know a little. Yet, much had happened,' said Satkunam indifferently, as if he had neglected Maniyam's remark, because he wanted to make Maniyam inquisitive.

'Sir, what do you mean?' asked Maniyam, laughing.

'What you asked me is a tip of the ice berg, you know,' said Satkunam cryptically.

'Sir, anything interesting between you and her?' asked Maniyam. What Satkunam said fired him with enthusiasm for the

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matter.

'Hey man, how can a cat protect a parrot?'

'Sir, then what? Whether short eats or full meal, I wonder,' asked Maniyam, curiously, laughing with exposing his betel stained teeth.

'Do you think that I'm an old man?' asked Satkunam, narrowing his eyes.

'Sir, is that true?' asked Maniyam to reassure the matter.

'Hey man, it's natural that Sugar ant is crawling with - it isn't questionable. But if salt is crawling with ants - it's unusual, as to which you can ask a question why,' said Satkunam.

'How long has it lasted?' asked Maniyam enthusiastically.

'Don't ask me such question?' said Satkunam, winking at him.

'Sir, please tell me if it still goes on,' said Maniyam. 'Sir, I don't mean to pry into your private life. I'm interested in the matter, about that woman.'

'Now, she hates me. Even if I visit her home she doesn't welcome me,' said Satkunam with his lips twisted.

'Is it so? What's the reason why she behaves towards you?' asked Maniyam with a questioning look.

Maniyam had asked the question that Satkunam wanted him to ask.

'I think, she wants to remarry, that's why she's started to hate and neglect me,' said Satkunam.

'Whom is she due to remarry? Do you know about it?'

'Our Sanjayan,' said Satkunam, bluntly, clicking his tongue.

'Is it true?' Maniyam asked. He got a terrible shock.

'Why get a shock?'

'Because he is a nice guy-handsome and educated too. He can marry a bride in Jaffna with a fat dowry. He need not marry a widow. Sir, advise him not to marry her,' said Maniyam with concern over Sanjayan.



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Satkunam was confused. He didn't know what to tell him, nor did he expect that Maniyam would react like that.

'Well, I advised him in all the possible ways I could, but no avail.'

Then, IE Jeyarajah came out from the bank, greeting Satkunam with a smile. They made small talk. Then after Satkunam entered the bank, Jeyarajah got into the jeep.

### Twenty-three

It was at about eleven o' clock. Suganya had immersed herself in her work at her table. IE Jeyarajah called her into his office.

When she went into his office, he looked up from the paper he was reading, greeted her, smiling, 'Good morning! come in.' Then he pointed at a chair at the other side of the table, and said: 'take your seat.'

She sat down in the chair, looked at him, wondering why he asked her to come in.

'I heard something about you. It's good. Having heard I felt happy,' said Jayarajah, smiling.

She was confused, and looked at him in perplexity.

'You look perplexed as if you knew nothing,' he said, raising his eyebrows.

'Sir, actually I don't know what you're referring to,' she said.

'Satkunam Annai told me the matter that you're going to marry Sanje.'

She got a terrible shock. She was to the verge of becoming unconscious. She smiled faintly, looking at the paper weight on the table. She wondered what to say next.

Jeyaraja went on, 'Sanje is a good boy. He'll look after your daughter herself. So, you need not worry about that. Anyway, wish you all the best!'

'No sir, that is...' Suganya was struggling to find words. Her heart started to beat fast. In a moment her entire body was throbbing. She felt weightless. Beads of sweat began to appear on her face, neck and arms.

'Are you ok?' asked Jeyarajah with concern. He placed a glass of water on her side of the table.

Suganya realized that the situation had become more complicated and worse so that she couldn't disentangle herself from it.

'Sir, can I go out?' she asked a permission politely.

'Ok, you may go!' he said immediately.

She rose to her feet, stepped up to her table, and sat in her chair with a shudder.

Vasanthi wondered why she had flagged after her return from the IE's office' and went up to her.

'What happened? Have you made any mistake? Did the IE scold you?' asked Vasanthi without a pause.

'No, nothing, Akka,' said Suganya in a calm voice.

Vasanthi put a chair beside her and sat on it. 'Thankachchi, tell me what happened?'

Suganya told in a muted voice what had happened in the IE's office.

Vasanthi fell silent, looking at her face pityingly.

Suganya went on, 'Akka, I don't believe that I can restore the status quo anymore. But I can't quit the job itself. I don't know what to do next. Thinking of myself I wallow in self-pity. What a great shame to that man too!'

She referred to Sanjayan as 'that man.'

Vasanthi offered a few words of comfort to her, patting on her arm.

'Thankachchi, let's talk later about this matter. Now wash your face to look fresh. Whoever sees you may understand in a different sense.

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Suganya got up from the chair. Vasanthi watched her going to the wash room from behind her back with a mixture of sympathy and sorrow. She tried to analyse the problem to find an appropriate solution in every possible way she could, but every way took her to a dead end. She didn't know what to do next. She now felt impotent. Her feeling of impotence that she couldn't solve the problem moved her to tears.

Suddenly in her mind flitted a thought that she could call Sanjayan to consult with him about the problem at that juncture. She thought that he would be able to find the best solution to a problem in any circumstances. He was her last hope.

She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. Taking her mobile phone, she got up from the chair and stepped out onto the front yard. Standing at a secluded spot she called him.

'Hello Akka,' called out Sanjayan.

'Sanje, how?' Vasanthi's voice was rather shaky.

'Akka, anything wrong?' he asked hurriedly, instantly, in a tone of surprise.

Vasanthi recounted what had happened all for the past few days since he last left Vavuniya until now. He listened to her carefully.

She finished recounting the story. He was silent without uttering even a word.

'Hello, hello... Thampi,' called out Vasanthi, wondering whether the line went dead.

'Staying on the line itself. I'm just thinking about what to do next', said Sanjayan softly. 'Akka, now my position is as if I went to a river to bathe but returned smearing mud on my entire body. I've never expected that Satkunam sir, like a third class person, would behave like this. I'm bitterly disappointed, Akka. Everything has gone wrong. Suganya's position has become worse as if she jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. She is a poor lady, no. I've really messed up her character,' said Sanjayan, in a tone of regret.

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'Are you busy now?' asked Vasanthi.

'Oh yes, I'm in the field. Setting out to reconstruct the channels is progressing.'

'So, I've disturbed you, no. Can we talk later?' asked Vasanthi with a guilty feeling.

As if ignoring her words Sanjayan said: 'Akka, I want to see Suganya. I'm just leaving here. But I won't come to the office. Can you take her to your home?'

'Of course! I'll take her to our home,' said Vasanthi firmly.

'Then ok, I'll take a short leave after lunch, and come there by bus.'

She cut the line and walked into the office. She saw Suganya sitting in her chair and looking rather relaxed.

'Come to have lunch?' asked Vasanthi.

'Akka! I don't feel hungry,' said Suganya twisting her lips.

'Hey, what do you say? You have to look after your body yourself. Nobody else won't,' said Vasanthi in a tone of advising.

'Have your lunch, Akka, I'll do it later,' said Suganya.

'Later!' Vasanthi exclaimed, and said: 'the lunch break is about to be over. Then what?'

Suganya didn't reply but got up to wash her hands. Vasanthi too.



At about three o' clock Vasanthi's mobile vibrated in her hand bag. She took it out and spoke for a few seconds. Then she approached Suganya and said: 'I'm going home.'

'Why?' asked Suganya with a questioning look.

'I'm going to take you to my home,' said Vasanthi.

'Akka, no problem. I won't commit suicide,' said Suganya, looking at her cupped palms.

'Thankachchi! Sanje comes to our home. He wants to see you right now.'

'Why?' asked Suganya, with shock.

'I think that he must have heard something. You know, about

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this matter,' said Vasanthi.

'I feel odd to see him,' said Suganya in a timid voice, nipping at the tip of her right little finger, gently.

Vasanthi watched Suganya's face blushing with embarrassment. She smiled at her without parting her lips.

They both left the office.

Vasanthi's house was located at Rambaikulam, one kilometre from the Vavuniya town, on Horowupothana Road, and in close proximity to the Holy family Convent.

They both rode their bikes along Horowupothana Road, reached Vasanthi's home. Vasanthi opened the gate and entered in. Suganya followed her in.

Suganya sat in a chair on the veranda. Vasanthi went into the house. Her husband hadn't still returned from work. Her son was fifteen and daughter thirteen. They both had gone to tuition classes. Her mother came out to the veranda, laughing at Suganya. They greeted each other.

Vasanthi came out, said: 'Thankachchi, I called him. He told me that he would be here within five minutes.' She sat in a chair from where she could watch the gate.

A few minutes later, Sanjayan opened the gate. Suganya and Vasanthi got up from their chairs.

'Thampi, come in... sit down,' said Vasanthi, casting a welcoming smile.

Sanjayan sat in a chair.

'Thampi, have you got your lunch?' asked Vasanthi.

'Yes, I've had it just now.'

'Then, can you have a cup of tea?' she asked again.

'Yes, of course, but now I want to talk to her,' he said, looked at Suganya. She was standing beside the chair, looking down.

'Okay, you can talk to her,' Vasanthi said, and then looked at Suganya, said: 'Thankachchi, sit down.'

Suganya smiled at her for the sake of smile, and sat down in

the chair. Vasanthi and her mother walked into the kitchen.

Sanjayan initiated a talk, breaking the silence.

'Suganya! How are you?'

His question made her laugh. She said nothing.

He went on, 'Suganya, I'm sorry. I'd talked with Satkunam sir about the matter. But I didn't really expect that he would behave like this.' With a rueful smile he looked at her.

'I know you'd done it for my good. But that a vain attempt brought disgrace on you. I don't still understand why he turned nasty, and behaved like this,' she said. Her voice trembled with sadness. Her eyes were brimful of tears. She wiped her tears with her handkerchief.

'Suganya, don't worry!' he breathed.

'I couldn't help worrying,' she said softly.

They remained silent for a couple of minutes.

He broke the silence.

'Suganya...' he called out softly.

She looked directly at him, silently, calmly.

'Suganya, I don't know what you think about me. But I want to be frank forever. Satkunam sir has spread a rumour everywhere. I want the rumour to turn true. You know, if you don't mind, I want to marry you!' he said in a calm voice.

A strange rapture flashed through her mind, then disappeared. Her eyes dropped to her lap on which she'd placed her hands fidgetting with her handkerchief.

He went on, 'I've come to this decision, not because of having pity on you. Not even because of that there is no alternative other than to disentangle myself from the shaming rumour.' He paused to look at her. She kept looking down still.

He continued, 'My parents go on match making for me. I must marry a woman. If that woman is you, I'll be happy. I can't compel you to marry me. It doesn't matter if you don't like to marry me, But, despite the fact if you like to marry me, if you deny

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my proposal for your daughter's sake, or for the sake of anything else, I can hardly accept it. I'll look after Ahrani, there is no doubt about it.'

He paused his monologue. She was still silent.

He resumed, 'looking at a man, no one can judge him. But human life is based on mutual trust. I don't know to weigh my words... You know, you can put your trust in me. And I won't interpret your silence as acceptance. Because you are in a confused state of mind, I know. No one can take a right decision with a confused mind. So, consulting a person who gained your confidence on this proposal, you can take the final decision. I expect your response in two days.'

She still kept looking down, without uttering a single word.

'Suganya...' he called out in a soft and deep voice, 'please, look at me once.'

She instantly looked up and glanced at his face. His eyes were bright, like a child's. 'I blush to say, I love you very much!' he said. He looked down, so did she, simultaneously.

At once he rose to his feet. 'Vasanthi Akka,' he called out.

Vasanthi came out. He stepped up to her, said: 'Akka, I leave here.'

'What's the hurry? Please, have a cup of tea before you leave. I haven't served tea before, because I shouldn't disturb you both,' said Vasanthi.

'Akka, it's not a problem. I've talked with her about an important matter. So I can't stay here any longer. I go to Murunkan, now,' he said, and walked towards the gate, not expecting her reply.

Vasanthi looked at Suganya. She was sitting in the chair silently, looking down. Vasanthi went up to her.

'Thankachchi,' she called out gently.

Suganya looked up. Tears were welling up in her eyes.

Vasanthi was surprised. 'Thankachchi, what did Sanje say? What happened here? He never hurts others,' asked Vasanthi,



expectantly and curiously.

Suganya told her all that he'd spoken. Vasanthi's eyes were shining with excitement.

'What's your opinion on this proposal?' she asked with a questioning look.

'Akka, I'm in a disturbed state of mind. I'm unable to think deeply,' said Suganya, staring at her with a blank expression on her face.

Vasanthi said in a confident way: 'Suganya! Sanje is honest, straight forward, and broad minded. He is a boy of discipline and doesn't know how to think wrong. Thangachchi, I've never requested you to remarry. But now I beg you to marry him. You'll be happy-more than happy. Don't worry about your daughter. He'll look after Ahrani well, I assure you. Put your trust in him. He'll be a good husband, as well as a good companion to you.'

Suganya was still silent.

Vasanthi got slightly irritated, and went on, 'Mm... that's your weakness. You must tell something as a response. *'Mounam sammatham'*- silence is acceptance- is a Tamil proverb. Please, change this attitude. This is the reason why that man, Satkunam hugged and kissed you.'

Suddenly Suganya gave a broad grin, exposing a set of her white teeth, cupping her eyes and nose with her hand.

'Hey woman, take that grin off your face!' said Vasanthi In a dramatic way, waving her hands towards her. She bit her lips to hold back her laughter, but she couldn't.

Suganya kept smiling on.

Vasanthi rose from the chair, stepped up to her and pinched her nose playfully.

'Ah...h... Akka, I feel a pain in my nose. Aiyo... stop pinching please,' shouted Suganya, keeping her mouth wide open.

Vasanthi took her clawed hand off Suganya's nose, and said: 'Thankachchi, go home now, think deeply. We'll discuss it tomorrow.'

Vasanthi's mother served them tea. After tea Suganya got up to leave.

### Twenty-four

The following day Suganya came to work. When wheeling her bicycle to the shed she saw Maniyam and Ramesh standing at the shed.

They didn't utter a word between them till she parked her bicycle and walked past them. After she passed them, from behind her back, Maniyam asked Ramesh: 'I can see a change in you-why?'

'Yes, she's going to marry Sanje sir. She's his future wife, no. He'd been helpful to me during my hard time while my mother had been hospitalized,' said Ramesh sheepishly, inaudibly.

But, she managed to hear what he said. She felt happy. When she entered the office Vasanthi welcomed her with a broad smile, asked eagerly: 'you seem in a bright mood - has the decision been made?'

Suganya smiled, not parting her lips. And then said: 'Akka, give me his mobile number.'

Vasanthi took her mobile, and selected the name list. Then two men entered the office to see the IE. She didn't like to read out his number to her in front of them. She took a scrap of paper and jotted his number down.

Suganya walked up to Vasanthi, and got it and put it into her hand bag.

Vasanthi was rather disappointed, asked: 'Why? Don't you

Speak to him?'

'It's getting eight-thirty. Our talk may last half an hour. I'll have to take the working time. So, I'll talk to him during the lunch break.'

'You're the fittest woman for him,' Vasanthi said, 'first call him and tell your decision.'

Suganya agreed. Taking her mobile phone she stepped out to the yard, stood by the exterior wall and pressed his number.

Sanjayan was in the Murunkan office. His mobile rang. He took it out of his trouser pocket and looked at the screen. It was an unknown number-not in his name list.

With a surprise, thinking it may be a wrong number he accepted the call.

'Hello' he said gently.

'Hello, good morning,' greeted Suganya.

Hearing a female voice, he got confused. 'Yeah, good morning,' he said hesitantly.

'I'm Suganya speaking,' she said in a friendly manner.

'Oh... ok... ok,' he said enthusiastically.

'How are you?' she enquired formally but with a tone of concern.

'Fine!' one word answer came from him.

'I've to tell something to you. When will you come to Vavuniya?'

'I must be here today because of the channel work to be done today itself. And nobody is here to manipulate the theodolite,' he said, after a pause, went on, 'I want to see you too, but no way! What to do? So, can I come tomorrow after lunch?'

'Then ok,' she said instantly.

'And this is your mobile number?' he asked.

'Yes, this is mine!' she confirmed.

'Can I save your number?' he asked hesitantly.

'Yes, of course,' she said, laughing.

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'What about my proposal?' he asked gently in an expectant tone.

'Will you believe it only if I open my mouth to say affirmatively?' she said, giggling, and then said: 'Yes, green light!'

'Ok... nice...i'm glad,' he said quietly.

They both were laughing for a couple of minutes, not speaking.

## Twenty-five

It was the next day at about one o'clock. Sanjayan came to Vasanthi's house as he'd said. Suganya and Vasanthi welcomed him.

They exchanged their greetings.

He sat on a chair on the veranda.

Vasanthi looked at Suganya, said: 'why are looking on? Sit down!'

Suganya perched on the edge of a chair. 'Sit comfortably,' said Sanjayan, looking at her. She shifted into a comfortable position in the chair with a smile.

'Okay, stay here, talking. I'm going to make tea,' said Vasanthi, walking towards the kitchen.

Sanjayan and Suganya had sat, facing each other, a mere two metres apart. But they were silent. Each one wanted the other one to speak.

'Suganya, why are you silent?' he broke the silence.

'Only you have to talk,' she said, twisting her lips as if to smile.

'I'd told you before about my parents. I have an only brother. He is elder than me by five. He is an accountant. His wife is a school teacher. They have a daughter who's five. And now Anni has conceived; the baby is due by the first of September said Sanjayan. (elder brother's wife is called affectionately 'Anni')

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'Good,' she said, smiling.

'And I go home today. I'll let them know about this proposal,' he said.

'Do you expect them to agree to this proposal?' she asked, instantly, expectantly.

'To be frank, I won't expect that they all will agree whole heartedly, immediately. My father himself taught me to behave like this. You know, to be honest, to be duty conscious and to be socially conscious. So, he won't object,' he said, smiling, 'I think my brother will say something disapproving. Let's wait and see what will happen.'

She said reluctantly: 'I think that you don't know a lot of things about me. So I want to let you know. But I don't know where to begin.' Her voice trailed off, but her smile still was on her face.

'Not necessary,' he said, 'I'll never ever reopen old wounds. I know about you briefly- that's enough - Needless to say.'

'I have a problem,' she said.

'Your problem is mine. You can say 'We have a problem.' Don't worry about it. Share it with me. Let's find a solution for it,' he said casually, but confidently.

'I have to let my daughter know about it,' she said.

'She may be very surprised when she learns about this matter. Sometimes she will be upset herself,' he said, trailing the fingers of his right hand across his forehead, and then asked: 'Do you have any idea how to approach this matter?'

'I am afraid of upsetting her. Mami always insists me to remarry. I call her to come here. I'll tell her this problem. She can convince my daughter,' she said, 'meanwhile the scholarship exam is around the corner. So, after the exam we can tell her. I think, that should be the right moment to reveal this matter to her. What do you think?'

'Absolutely correct! Now it's July. The exam will be next month. We can wait for a month, no problem. If we hasten to do it,

she will sometimes get upset and spoil her study,' he said, agreeing altogether with her.

They further discussed some other important things they have to face.

Vasanthi came out and asked him to have lunch. 'Akka! Amma has cooked for me. I'm going to leave now,' he said.

'It however takes three hours to reach Point Pedro,' said Vasanthi with concern.

'It doesn't matter. Amma has been waiting for me,' he said smilingly.

'Then, have a cup of tea, please.'

'Yes, of course.'

Vasanthi served tea and biscuits to him and to Suganya.

Sipping his tea, Sanjayan said: 'Akka! I cannot meet Suganya in public places before our marriage. So, if we have to meet we'll come here, to your house. This house is the rendezvous for us until our marriage.'

He laughed. Suganya smiled at Vasanthi. Then Vasanthi said: 'you are welcome -more than welcome. It's a pleasure to help you.'

He took leave of them, went out into Horowupothana Road and took a shortcut to walk to the bus stand- walking along the wall of the Holy Family Convent, and turning into Kandasamy kovil road, thence to the A9 and the bus stand.

He got on the Point Pedro-bound bus that was about to leave, and sat by the window comfortably. The bus, ten minutes later, started to travel northwards, along Kandy Road. Passing Mankulam, Kilinochchi, then Elephant pass, it reached Kodikamam, the + junction, and made a right turn into Kodikamam-Point Pedro Road, off the A9.

By thirty past three, the bus pulled at the Point Pedro bus stand. The driver perched wearily on the driver's seat, resting his hands on the steering and kept watching the passengers getting down.

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When Sanjayan alighted from the bus, he looked at the driver, and said: 'Thanks, Annai.'

The driver was pleased with him. 'You're welcome, Thampi. Take care!' he said enthusiastically.

Sanjayan must catch another bus to go home. His home was on the route- no: 751 that runs to Jaffna from Point Pedro, through the Coast Road up to Valvettiturai, thence turns to the left off the coast.

He got on the 751 route bus that was the next turn to leave, and took his seat on the window side, right behind the driver's seat.

When a few minutes went past, the driver turned the ignition key on and drove northward the bus. A minute later the bus reached the northern most coast of the Island.

Point Pedro is the northern most city of the Island. There is a harbour; correctly speaking it's a jetty. Because the sea, the Palk Strait at Point Pedro is not so deep so that a ship can come to the quay. The ship is anchored at least one kilometre off this rocky coast. Barges ply from the ship to the quay, and vice versa.

During the war period, it was a hub harbour. The ship and barge services had been in operation to carry people and cargo from Point Pedro to Trinco malee, and vice versa. The City of Trinco was a passenger ship; and the Sigiriya, Kumana, Lanka Sri, Habarana were cargo ships. And also the Lanka Mudidtha was operated for both passengers and cargo.

Hartley College, a famous boys' school, is located on the land side of the coast road, Kankesanturai Road, next to the harbour. And Methodist Girls' High School is next to Hartley College. Between those two schools runs College Road that is perpendicular to Kankesanturai Road.

Sanjayan watched the sea through the window. The sea was calm because of prevailing 'Chozhaham'- the strong wind blowing from the south- west to the north- east. The narrow stretch of lime reef was protruding from the surface of the water at about forty



metres off the coast, and was parallel to the coast line.

The bus passed both schools, reached Supparamadam- a village, and then approached the crematorium for Hindus and the cemetery for Christians. They were next to each other, without any demarcation.

Passing the cemetery Sanjayan got down from the bus, and walked into a narrow road, southwards. There was a rice mill on the left side of the road, at fifty metres off Kankesanturai Road. The vegetable plots, especially onion and chilly, flanked the road.

On the right side of the road there was an Amman kovil, next to which was a *kerney-a* rectangular well with steps inwards to reach the water of it.

Sanjayan saw his friend, Arul, standing in the shade of the banyan tree that stood opposite the temple. Arul also saw Sanjayan, and walked briskly towards him. Some other people were there in front of the kovil. They exchanged greetings with Sanjayan. Then after, Sanjayan and Arul moved away to a secluded place.

'Machan, I want to discuss a matter with you,' said Sanjayan.

'Any problem?' asked Arul in a tone of surprise.

'It's not a problem, but an important matter that I must reveal you.'

'Okay, by the way, have you had your lunch?'

'No, I haven't still.'

'Then, go and have your lunch first. We'll talk leisurely.'

Sanjayan took leave of him, walked along the road and turned to the left. He passed four houses, and turned to the right into a lane to reach his house.

Murugesu, his father, standing at the front yard saw him open the gate.

'Thampi!' he exclaimed, and then turned to the house, called out his wife, Danalakshmi, 'Danam! Thampi is here.'

Danalakshmi came out at once, stepped down onto the yard,

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up to him. Taking his bag in her hand, she said: 'Thampi, I've been waiting for you since cooking lunch at one o'clock. Why so late?'

Sanjayan sat in a chair on the veranda, stretched his legs.

'Thampi, don't sit in the chair; go and have a bath,' said Danalakshmi.

'I feel utterly exhausted,' he said.

'Then, have your meal now. One hour later, you can have a bath,' she said with a questioning look.

'I want to have a bath now,' he said, rising from the chair.

He went into the room, took his towel and sarong, and stepped up to the well in the north-east corner of the back yard.

Half an hour later, he came to the kitchen. 'Thampi, don't wait any longer. Gas will be produced in your empty stomach,' said Danalakshmi with concern.

'Amma, I had a cup of tea with some biscuits. My stomach is not empty now,' said Sanjayan, smiling.

He took a small rectangular wooden plank, placed it on the floor in a comfortable position, on which he sat down cross-legged. She placed a plate before him, served rice and curries- chilli fish curry, brinjal curry with fried fish. He started to have his meal. She placed a *sempu* of water on the floor beside his plate, and was looking on with a great affection.

Then he wondered how to open up the matter, having his meal.

Danalukshmi cleared her throat, and said: 'Thampi, we've received a horoscope matching well with yours, eighty percent. There were some photos of hers on the table. If you say yes, we can proceed with the proposal.' Her face was bright with happiness and satisfaction.

'I think that you don't need this proposal,' he said softly, looking at the plate.

'Why? What do you mean?' she asked in a surprised tone.

'I want to marry a lady in Vavuniya,' he said, not taking his

eyes off his plate. His voice trailed off.

She didn't get angry, nor irritated, but on the contrary she smiled and said: 'Thampi, look at me!'

He looked up from the plate.

'Thampi, why have you not told me this before? If you had told us, we would have married you to her.'

'I decided only two days ago.'

'It's ok', she said, 'let's talk to Appa about it.'

'Amma, you yourself talk with him,' he said, feeling shy.

'What about her?' she asked with a questioning look, curiously.

'She is a clerk in the Vavuniya office. Her name is Suganya. She is a nice lady,' he said, giving the first information.

Having had his meal, he went into the living room and sat at the table. Five minutes later he heard the sound of his parents talking with each other outside. His heart was beating fast.

After a short while, Danalakashmi came into the living room, said: 'Thampi! Appa ask you to come out.'

He went out to the veranda. He couldn't look directly at his father's eyes because out of embarrassment. He stood beside the door frame, looking down. His father's legs and feet were visible to him.

'Thampi, sit down here,' said Murugesu, pointing at a chair, sensing the reason why he felt so embarrassed.

Sanjayan sat down on the floor cross-legged, rested his back on the wall. He was still looking down to avoid eye contact.

Murugesu said: 'Thampi! Amma told me about it. We have no problem. Let's move this proposal properly. We want to see her parents. Tell her to ask her parents to come here to our place, or otherwise tell us her whereabouts. We'll go and see them.'

Sanjayan was silent, still looking down.

'Thampi, any other problem?' asked Murugesu, in an enquiring voice.

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'Yes, Appa,' said Sanjayan affirmatively.

Then Danalakshmi interrupted. 'Thampi you're telling a different story now...' she looked at Sanjayan, then at Murugesu. Her eyes were dull. Her face looked upset.

Murugesu looked at her steadily, and gestured her to keep calm.

'Thampi...' called out Murugesu, gently.

'Appa!' said Sanjayan as a reply.

'Thampi, you yourself have to speak,' said Murugesu softly, looking at him expectantly.

Sanjayan raised his eyes to look at his father's face reluctantly to gauge his mood and reaction. Murugesu was staring at him with a puzzled look on his face.

'Appa, she is a war widow. During the Vanni war, her parents and husband had died because of shelling.' He stopped speaking, and looked down, expecting his parents' response.

A sudden silence fell. It lasted a couple of minutes.

Murugesu broke the silence, asked: 'Thampi, is she younger than you?'

'Yes, Appa, by three years younger than me.'

Danalakshmi looked at her husband. Murugesu said: 'Danam, call Moothavar to come here.'

'Moothavar' meaning 'elder man'. Murugesu referred to Dananjayan as 'Moothavar'

Before she could rise to her feet, Dananjayan opened the gate.

'There Moothavar comes!' she exclaimed.

Dananjayan stepped up onto the veranda, asking Sanjayan: 'Thampi, when did you come?' he sat down in a chair.

Sanjayan said nothing, looking down.

'What're you thinking of? What's wrong with you?' asked Dananjayan, looking at him.

Before Sanjayan could reply to him, Murugesu interrupted.

Looking at Dananjayan, he said: 'We're discussing an important matter. Now we expected you to be here.'

'Oh, what's it?' asked Dananjayan.

Danalakshmi revealed the matter to him.

Expressing his dissatisfaction with the proposal, Dananjayan said: 'Thampi, nowadays it's common to marry a widow. Only does the widower remarry the widow. Does any bachelor marry a widow- I've never heard. You're an eligible bachelor, educated as well. you're of high value in the matrimonial market. So, why need you marry a widow?'

Sanjayan remained silent.

'Thampi, what's your answer?' asked Dananjayan, looking at him. 'What's the meaning of your silence?'

Murugesu looked at Dananjayan, said: 'Everybody has a right to pick his life partner. Ilayavar wants to marry her. Let him do it.'

'Ilayavar means 'Younger man.' Murugesu referred to Sanjayan as 'Ilayavar.'

Dananjayan argued with his father for fifteen minutes, and finally agreed with him.

'Okay,' said Dananjayan, looking at Sanjayan, 'I accept your proposal too, because Appa and Amma are prepared to do it.' Sanjayan was not happy but rather satisfied. Looking at his father he said: 'Appa! I have one more thing to reveal you.'

Murugesu stared at him, raising a questioning eyebrow. Danalakshmi and Dananjayan looking at him, puzzled.

'Appa, she has a child itself...' said Sanjayan. His voice trailed off.

Murugesu fell silent. Dananjayan got annoyed at him, and rebuked. 'You want to marry the mother of a child. Why didn't you think about your self-prestige or our family respect? I really couldn't understand you!'

Danalakshmi looked at Sanjayan, and said: 'Thampi why are you telling the story little by little? Disclose everything first.' Then

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she asked: 'How old is the child?'

'It's a girl child. She'll sit the grade five scholarship exam in August,' said Sanjayan.

Dananjayan got a terrible shock. 'Hey boy!' he said with some irritation, 'she is ten, a good five years older than my daughter. I thought you're smart and intelligent. But you are a fool. You've done a sheer stupid thing. Have you taken leave of your senses? What a shameful thing to do!' he cupped his forehead in his right hand, and looked down.

After a moment, he looked at Sanjayan, asked: 'Is she of our religion?'

'Yes, Hindu,' said Sanjayan.

'What's her caste?'

'I don't know,' said Sanjayan softly, but casually.

'*Dai peyaa!*'- Hey fool- said Dananjayan furiously. 'Are you mad?'

Murugesu said, looking at Sanjayan: 'Go inside!'

Sanjayan got up, walked inside and sat at the table.

'We made a mistake, for which we should blame ourselves,' said Dananjayan.

'What do you mean?' said Danalakshmi, with a surprised look.

'Yes, Amma. We should have married him off at the right time,' he sighed.

'Why are you talking like this?' said Danalakshmi, 'for four years we've been seeking a good bride for him. No horoscope matched with his. Then what can we do? Everything in life is fated.'

'Amma! I think he has got entangled with her. She must have set a trap for him,' said Dananjayan, 'Amma, does he go to her house frequently?'

'Hey, Thampi, you're talking nonsense! said Danalakshmi. 'He is your brother. He'll never behave like a third class man. I think there may be something else,' she said firmly.

Murugesu looked at Dananjayan, and said: 'Thampi, what Amma says must be right. He has a problem that he cannot share with us. Otherwise he is a man of principle. And also I've never received any complaint against him from anybody until now. He is honest and perfect. He being my son, I don't say this. That's the truth.'

'Appa, I'm sorry,' said Dananjayan apologetically, 'I know him very well. I spoke out of anger at him.'

'Yes, I see it,' said Murugesu, and then asked: 'Well, what's your final opinion about this proposal?'

'Appa, to be frank, I don't want him to marry her,' said Dananjayan.

Murugesu nodded his head indifferently, and shifted his look from him to Danalakshimi, asked: 'What do you say about that, Danam?'

'Thinking about what the people in our village will be talking in different senses I feel embarrassed but, after Ilayavar gave her the word that he would marry her, can we do, nothing' she said with a mixture of sadness and embarrassment. After a pause, she went on, 'You have a knowledge about our society better than me. So, your decision will be mine.'

Murugesu realized that his wife was unhappy. He was staring at her sympathetically.

'Appa!' called out Dananjayan. 'Appa, what do you say?' he asked.

'He has a right to choose his life partner. We can't forbid him from marrying her. I have no objection to him marrying her,' said Murugesu earnestly.

'Appa, do you speak like this? If he marries her how can you face our society?' asked Dananjayan confused.

'He knows too what you say now. I believe for sure he will make a right decision under any circumstances,' said Murugesu.

'Appa, how can you take it so easy? I can't!. And he doesn't

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know her caste as well,' said Dananjayan in a rather loud voice.

Danalakshmi interrupted. 'Thampi, speak quietly. The next-door neighbours can easily overhear what you say,' she said gently, in a serious tone, once looking around.

Looking at Dananjayan, Murugesu said: 'I know your feeling, and I do realize your situation you'll have to face. But, I taught my students that they shouldn't discriminate on grounds of race, gender, religion or caste. How can I go back on my teaching now? We should practise first what we preach. So, we shouldn't try to find out her caste by enquiring secretly.'

Dananjayan remained silent with an expressionless face.

Danalakshmi said to him: 'Thampi, her village is not the proximity of ours, far away from here. Her community is unknown to ours. Her people are unfamiliar to ours. So, it's manageable.'

Dananjayan said in a disapproving tone, looking at his parents: 'okay, if we marry him to her, we'll have to hang our heads in shame. This marriage will bring a lot of problems.'

Murugesu told Danalakshmi to call Sanjayan. 'Thampi...' called out Danalakshmi loudly.

Sanjayan came out to the veranda, and stood at the door, leaning against the door frame.

Murugesu looked at him and said: 'Thampi, both Amma and I won't forbid you from marrying her. But Anna doesn't accept it.'

Sanjayan turned his head to Dananjayan.

'Thampi, firstly she's a widow whereas you're an eligible bachelor. Secondly, she's the mother of a child, who has grown bigger as well. And thirdly you don't know about her caste. Don't forget that we're living in a caste-ridden society. You have to make a decision after weighing the pros and cons. There is no harm in thinking over your decision once more,' said Dananjayan, in a calm voice, looking at Sanjayan. Dananjayan's face lined with worry.

Sanjayan replied confidently: 'Anna, you see this problem in black and white. There should be an adjustment for anything. You



know, she's a war widow, as well as an innocent victim of the war. You have to see the things from her position. If she were your sister or sister in law, you would talk differently.'

'Her problems are not ours,' said Dananjayan instantly.

'No, you can't say like that,' said Sanjayan, 'as she is a war widow her problems are ours. It's our collective responsibility, no?'

'I'm not a progressive like you, nor conservative. I'm an ordinary man, running parallel with our society,' said Dananjayan.

Sanjayan smiled wryly, and said: 'Anna, I can't run parallel with our society.'

'Thampi, are you going to do the shameful thing?' asked Dananjayan softly.

'I've promised to marry her,' said Sanjayan instantly, confidently.

Dananjayan got irritated. 'So, you don't ask permission for it but give us information about it. If we object it, will you go against our wishes?' he asked.

Sanjayan said nothing, looking down.

Dananjayan went on, 'I wonder why you are so adamant that you can't understand what I say. What did you see so much in her?' his voice was harsh.

Sanjayan didn't expect that Dananjayan would ask such an awkward question. He was disappointed with his brother. He nodded his head gently, looking down.

Murugesu gestured for Dananjayan not to speak further with Sanjayan.

They remained silent for a few minutes. It was a pregnant silence.

Murugesu broke the silence.

'Well, Thampi, your decision is final,' he said, looking at Sanjayan.

Sanjayan said: 'Appa! You yourself taught me- 'Do whatever you thing right.' So, I want to marry her, which is the right thing too.'

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'Then ok, you can do it,' said Murugesu.

Sanjayan felt happy, but still kept looking down.

Murugesu went on, 'Thampi, she is a widow, which is not a problem. But she has a big child, which is the problem. You know why, we can't have a wedding ceremony for you both. Neither the wedding procession nor the rituals that have to be performed at a wedding dais cannot be made in front of our people, before her own child. We cannot invite our people properly to the wedding. And she won't like it too. You know why.'

'Yes, I understand all what you say,' said Sanjayan quietly.

Dananjayan interrupted. 'Appa, how can you talk about the wedding? The world will laugh scornfully at us,' he said, and then looked at Sanjayan and said: 'Later on you'll regret for your impetuous decision, and realize that what I say now is correct. But then you'll fall into the abyss that you can't escape.' He said so vehemently, rose to his feet and walked briskly towards the gate.

Danalakshmi got up and went after him, calling, 'Thampi... Thampi... stop!' Murugesu signalled to her to come back, not to call him.

She stepped back up to him.

'Danam, let him go. We'll talk with him later,' said Murugesu, casually.

'He goes out raging with anger... you tell me not to stop him,' said Danalakshmi with a questioning look.

'He's bitterly disappointed at our decision on this matter. Anyhow we can convince him. He's our son, no. He'll go nowhere leaving you,' said Murugesu.

Sanjayan looked so worried.

Murugesu glanced at him worriedly for a few moments, then said: 'Thampi' it's pointless to worry about that now. We can't find fault with your brother. Needless to say you why. Living in this society he fears for it.'

Sanjayan nodded, regretfully.

## Siva. Ahrooran

Then they heard goats bleating from the backyard.

'The goats have started bleating. I have to feed them now. We'll talk later,' said Murugesu, rising from the chair to go to the backyard.

Danalakshmi got up too, said: 'It's getting dark. I've some domestic chores. Let's talk later.' She went into the house.

Sanjayan stepped down onto the front yard. He looked at the west sky. The sun stood poised like a red hot coin on the horizon, peeking above the palmyrah grove at a distance. There was not a single ray of the sun, but only the dusky light spread all over the surroundings. There was a single palmyrah tree that stood at the corner of the front yard. It creaked and groaned in the *chozhaham*-blowing strongly from the south- west. Its dry leaves were hanging along the stem, when its tender leaves stood vertical. All the leaves had created an ellipse, nearly a circle like a man with dishevelled hair and beard. The circumference of the ellipse looked serrated.

He watched the fluffy redish orange cloud in the west sky drifting towards the sea. The wind was wheezing in his ear incessantly. Their pet dog kept sniffing at his calves, wagging its tail.

He stood quietly musing on the events of the day.

### Twenty-six

The following day was Sunday. At about nine o' clock Sanjayan, after his breakfast, walked towards his brother's home that was located on the same lane, fifty metres from theirs.

When he opened the gate, Dananjayan came towards the gate, rolling his moter bike, and passed him not speaking to and looking away.

Sanjayan looked at him, but didn't speak to him. He stepped onto the varanda. Devi, Dananjayan's mother in law, saw him first. 'Thampi come in... sit down,' she said with a smile.

'Mami, where's Anni?' he asked, looking around, and sat down in a chair in the living room.

'Thampi, she's inside the room. She's had a bath just now. I think she's changing clothes,' she said, knocked gently at the door, and said: 'Pillai, Sanjey has come here.'

'Yes, coming. Tell him to hang on for a moment,' said Rajini from behind the door.

Five minutes later, Rajini opened the room door, stepped out. On seeing her Sanjayan stood up.

'Thampi, sit down,' said Rajini with a gesture at him, smiling. She, heavily pregnant, walked slowly at a steady pace up to the chair opposite his, and sat down on it. She rested her right hand on the bump of her stomach, with her left arm on the arm of the chair.

After she settled comfortably in her chair, he sat in his chair, until which he remained standing up.

He cleared his throat and asked softly: 'Anni, did Anna say anything?'

'Yes, I know,' she said. Her lips curved into a tentative smile. She looked around and said: 'Thampi! Anna told me everything last night.'

He was silent, looking at her, as if to expect her to say something.

She went on, 'He and I discussed the matter last night inside the bedroom. At first he set his face against the marriage. I tried to convince him to agree to it. We stayed up late. Yes, we did sleep only early morning three o' clock.

'What's his stand point? When I'd entered the gate I saw him. But he looked away and went out, not uttering a single word,' he said, wondering whether he set still his face against the marriage.

'This only goes half way to convincing him. I'll try whenever I meet him alone. Don't worry about that. Let's wait and see!' she said smiling.

'Thanks, Anni', he said, paused for a few seconds, and then went on, 'I've come here now to let you know about the matter. But you not only gauged everything before I tell you, but have also tried to convince Anna. It's like a miracle. I've to pinch myself to make sure that I'm not dreaming.' He smiled, looking down.

'Thampi, It is no miracle. Anna told me everything- what you'd said, what Mama had said, what Mami had said, and what you all had conversed with each other at your home. So, I realized all,' she said laughing with short breaths as if she would suffocate.

Then Devi came there carrying a cup of tea and offered him it. 'Thampi, stay here talking with your Anni. It's a relaxing moment for her. But I have plenty of work,' she said, laughing, and returned to the kitchen.

Rajini said: 'Thampi, as Mama had said, we can't have a

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traditional wedding ceremony. So it should be a simple one. I think that we had better have the wedding function at Vavuniya with a handful of people, that is, our family members and friends. I hope you understand it.'

Sanjayan nodded his head affirmatively.

She smiled at him, and asked: 'Thampi, what happened to you? Can you tell me when and where you met her?'

He smiled back at her too, and then related the story in chronological order. Her face was a picture. At the end of the story tears welled up in her eyes and dribbled down her cheeks. She burrowed her face in the left sleeve of her maternity gown and wiped her tears on it.

'Anni,' he called out.

She looked at him.

He said: 'Anni, this is between ourselves. I've told you everything because you must know it. As a woman you can realize it.'

'She is my sister. I'm supportive to you and to her too,' said Rajini in a confident way.

'Thanks, Anni.'

'Don't say thanks. When Anna told me about the matter, I realized that you wouldn't have made any mistake, because I know about you. That's why I tried to convince him,' she said.

'But, I was afraid of upsetting you because Anna didn't accept it. You also would stand for Anna...' his voice trailed off.

She laughed, then said: 'I always stand up for my husband. No doubt.' She went on, 'because this is our intra-family matter, I myself have a duty to solve the problem of our family. Only my husband sets his face against your marriage. So I have to convince him. Our daughter is younger than Ahrani, which, he sees, is a problem. But that's not a big problem, I consider. His anger will slowly drain away. Thampi, I won't reveal this matter even to my mother. I'll tell her only the final decision. Whatever will happen

shall also happen well. Don't worry.' She paused her monologue.

'Anni, if only we have the marriage after three months can you participate in it, no. What do you say about my opinion?' he asked, looking at her expectantly.

'After the final decision has been taken, why should you delay? It's pointless to delay the marriage. And also, the longer you delay, the worse her situation gets. You had better discuss this matter with Suganya, and fix a suitable date,' she said.

'Anni, will you, however, convince Anna?' asked Sanjayan with a smile.

'Thampi, I'll try my best,' she said firmly.

Rajini's daughter, Varshi, emerged into the living room, and saw him sitting in the chair. She came running towards him, shouting, 'Sithappa...'

'Sithappa' means 'Younger father.'

He hugged her. She encircled her arms around his neck affectionately, and nuzzled his nose. 'Sithappa... your nose is like the beak of a parrot,' she said with a slight lisp.

'Your nose also is like that,' he retorted in jest, smiling.

Then Devi entered the living room, saying: 'both of your noses look very similar. Like Danam Machal's nose.'

Sanjayan gave a chuckle of delight, and pinched gently her chubby cheeks playfully. Rajini smiled at them both.

By ten o' clock Dananjayan opened the gate. 'There Thampi comes!' Devi exclaimed, and walked towards him.

Dananjayan gave her a bag full of vegetables, and rested his motor bike on its kick stand.

When he came into the living room, Sanjayan looked directly at him. But Dananjayan went into the room, looking down.

Sanjayan wrinkled his face, and looked at Rajini. 'he won't agree with it,' he mouthed, resting his chin on Varshi's shoulder.

'Don't worry,' said Rajini, waving her left hand at him gently.

Sanjayan got up from the chair, removing her arms around

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his neck. Varshi stood up aside.

'I'm going to leave now,' he said.

'Bye Sithappa,' she said, waving her hand.

'Anni, you're my last hope. Everything rests in you,' said Sanjayan, looking at Rajini. He walked towards the gate, not waiting for her reply.

Sanjayan reached the Amman kovil, and stood in the shade of the banyan tree, waiting for his friend Arul. The main road was visible to him. Though there appeared the mirage over the road, in the shade of the tree the climate was a cool. The wind was blowing unceasingly with an irregular speed- lightly or strongly. The wind murmured in the banyan tree and some other trees- *Vahai* (a sirissa tree), *Marudhu* (Arjuna tree).

He met Arul and conversed with him about the things that might have yet to be done. Their conversation lasted a couple of hours, which was interrupted several times by some of the devotees as well as passers-by. They all were living in his village, and made small talk with him- as always their questions were, 'When did you come from Murunkan?', 'Then, Thampi, when will you go to Marunkan?'

Sanjayan and Arul took leave of each other at one o' clock. When Sanjayan returned home Danalakshmi had sat in a chair, waiting for him to serve him lunch.

He changed into sarong and came to the kitchen.

Over lunch...

'Thampi, what did Anni say?' asked Danalakshmi, smilingly, with a questioning look.

'She's agreed to it. Only Anna objects it. But Anni tries to convince him.'

'I'll convince him too,' she said confidently. 'Thampi, what's her daughter's name?' asked Danalakshmi with interest.

'Ahrani.'

'How about her?'



'She's clever, and a well brought up child. She'll pass the scholarship exam.'

'What about Suganya?' she asked with a smile.

'Amma, she is a nice lady of exemplary character. She has never hurt any person mincing with words. So kind and highly sentimental. Once you get to know her you'll like her,' he said in a serious tone.

'Thampi, what about her appearance? Her complexion?' she asked, smiling.

'Neither fair nor dark,' he said, laughing.

'She has a long hair?' she asked enthusiastically.

'Yes, yes, it's wavy and long,' he laughed with amusement, 'Amma, the hair that grows outside the scalp is not important but the brain that is inside the scalp is important.'

'What you say is right, but our women give the greatest importance to the appearance' she said. 'Thampi, do you have their photos?' she asked eagerly.

'No, I have got no photos. I'll send you later,' he said with a kind of guilty feeling.

After lunch, he took his phone and went to the back yard. He stood at the goat shed. He called Suganya.

When her phone is ringing, suddenly a thought floated into his mind that Ahrani might pick up the phone. When he was about to cut the line off Suganya's voice sounded at the other end. 'Hello, how are you?' she asked pleasantly.

He had butter flies in his stomach.

'I've been afraid of Ahrani, wondering if she would pick up the phone,' he said.

'Don't worry. She never picks up my phone,' she laughed. 'If she happens to hear my phone ringing, she'll take it to me, not pressing 'ok' button. Actually, that's what has happened now,' she said softly, with happiness.

'Nice!' he said. 'Where is she now?' he asked with concern.

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'She is now having lunch in the kitchen. I've come out from the kitchen.'

'I think, I've called you untimely,' he said with a sense of guilt.

'It's not a problem,' she laughed. 'Okay, any special reason to call now? What do your Appa, Amma, Anna and Anni say about that?' she asked quietly, in a questioning tone, with eagerness.

'Don't worry about that. Everything is fine here. They want to see your photos,' he said. His voice trailed off.

She fell in silence.

'Suganya,' he called out softly.

'Yes, I should have given you the photos. Actually it's my mistake. I don't know how to send them now.'

'It's not a problem, eh. Send them to me via phone,' he said casually.

'But I don't have a smart phone,' she said, giggling.

'Oh, that's another problem,' he said, 'you can seek help from Vasanthi Akka.'

'Mm... I understood what you meant. I'll send you the photos tomorrow, because Vasanthi Akka went to Colombo yesterday night-she'll return tonight.'

'Ok.'

'Will you be there tomorrow?' she asked with a feeling of doubt.

'No!' he said, 'I'll go to Murunkan tomorrow early morning. You can send the photos to my mobile. Then I'll forward them to Anna.'

'Then, ok!'

'One more thing,' he said, 'Please, send Ahrani's photos too.'

She said nothing, but laughed. The laughter was meaningful. He realized it and laughed.

'Ok, I'll do it,' she said.

'Well, I'll call you tomorrow from Murunkan.' He disconnected the line and turned around.

Then Danalakshmi came towards the shed, carrying a basin of water and placed it on the ground. The goats in the shed pulled hard on the tethers towards the basin, bleating in chorus.

There was a sack of rice bran in the corner of the shed. She took the rice bran out of the sack with her cupped hands and put it into the basin. She thus did thrice, added a bowl of coconut oil cake and stirred using her hands.

He placed his phone on a bench, came up to her, and asked: 'Amma, where is Appa?' he lifted the basin up, stepped up to the goats, and placed it before them so as to water them.

They started to drink the water quickly. He poured much more water into the basin with a bucket. They drank it and licked the bottom of the basin clean- no more dregs of the rice bran. Then, they raised their heads from the basin, bleating as a mark of satisfaction. Two kids were there frisking around his legs. The male goat tied to a post reared up, giving the tether a yank, with a deep bleat.

He washed his hands. Danalakshmi went up to him, and asked: 'Thampi, who have you spoken with? Is it the lady?'

'Yes, I asked her to send her photos,' he said casually.

'Have you told her that Anna opposed the proposal?' she asked, with a questioning look.

He smiled at her, and said: 'I haven't and I won't. If I tell her it she'll get a bad impression of Anna. She thus will keep him at arm's length in her entire life.'

'Then, ok. This is what I thought to tell you,' she said, nodding her head.

### Twenty-seven

It was Monday evening by four o' clock. Sanjayan was standing on the bank of Giant's Tank. The wind made waves on the tank. The choppy waters glittered in the evening sunlight. The birds kept wheeling above the waters in the golden sky, with occasionally skimming over the surface of the waters to catch fish. Several fishing canoes were floating in the tank, spreading over a wide area of the waters. A man or two appeared in every canoe, paddling. Some other people enjoyed watching the scenery.

Then Sanjayan's phone rang. Suganya was at the other end.

'Hello, how are you?' she asked in a soft voice, giggling.

'Fine!' he said, 'surprisingly you've called me from the office.'

She laughed, and then said: 'well, I send you some photos from Vasanthi Akka's phone.'

'Nice!' he said in a tone of satisfaction, 'what's Vasanthi Akka doing?'

'She tries to send the photos,' she said, 'bye, I'll call you later.'



It was the same day at five o' clock.

Murugesu and Danalakshmi were chatting with each other. Then Dananjayan opened the gate. Rajini stepped in through the gate. 'Here Pillai comes too!' exclaimed Danalakshmi with a surprise. She got up and walked towards her daughter in law.

Murugesu, sitting on the chair, was just looking on, smiling.

Rajini sat in a chair.

'Pillai, you should be careful of walking the streets during this period,' said Danalakshmi with a mixture of happiness and strictness.

'Mami, I've walked here along the lane with utmost care,' sighed Rajini, smiling.

Danalakshmi turned to Dananjayan, asked: 'Thampi, why have you taken here this heavily pregnant woman?'

Before he could reply, Rajini interrupted. 'I want to see you both,' she said.

'If you had sent word that you wanted to see us, we both would have been there in a moment,' said Danalakshmi, smiling at her, with a feeling of pure delight.

'We have to discuss a matter with you both. We can't do it in our house. There is no privacy. That's why...? Said Rajini, wrinkling her forehead. Then she looked at Dananjayan, said; 'So, I've come here with him.' And again she looked at Danalakshmi, and said: 'Mami! Thampi sent me some photos.' She smiled at Dananjayan.

'Yes, Appa. He sent the same photos to my phone itself. He was so adamant,' said Dananjayan, laughing.

'Show me them!' said Danalakshmi, stepping up to him.

Murugesu said nothing. But his face was bright with excitement. He took his glasses out of the case, and wore them.

Dananjayan realized that his father was keen to see the photos. He got close to his father and squatted down next to the arm of the chair he'd sat on in order to show the photos clearly. Danalakshmi sat next to the other arm of his chair.

Dananjayan moved the screen of the phone with his index finger, holding the phone in front of them.

There popped up a Suganya's photo in which she was in a light green sari.

'This is the latest photo, I think,' said Danalakshmi, 'because

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she is without wearing a pottu on her forehead.' Both regret and sympathy mingled together in her voice.

On seeing the photo Murugesu smiled, without his lips parting.

Dananjayan swiped his finger across the screen. Another photo of hers appeared. 'Hey Thampi, why do you not let us see the photo?' said Danalakshmi disapprovingly.

'Amma, there're fifteen odd photos. See all the photos first. Then let's come again for the second round,' Dananjayan said, smiling, looking at the phone.

'Ok, ok,' said Danalakshmi, looking at the photo.

Sitting in the chair Rajini locked her eye on three of them, smiling, with great satisfaction.

'Thampi, show me the little girl,' asked Murugesu.

Dananjayan touched on an Ahrani's photo. The photo came in the front in larger size. 'Poor girl,' Murugesu murmured. Then he looked at Danalakshmi and said: 'Danam, this too is our grand daughter.'

'Yes, yes,' said Danalakshmi happily.

They both were looking at Ahrani's photo. Dananjayan looked at Rajini. She nodded her head, watching her parents in law proudly.

After seeing all the photos, Murugesu said with satisfaction: 'she's ok, no?'

Danalakshmi turned to look at Dananjayan, and asked: 'Thampi, what do you say?'

'Amma, you all have agreed to this marriage. I think it's pointless that I remain opposed to the marriage. I'm compelled to tolerate it for the sake of you all,' he said disapprovingly.

Murugesu looked at him, and said: 'Thampi, I know about Ilayavar. He is not unrelenting. There may be a lot of things that he cannot share with us. He may be even a victim of circumstance. I don't know, but I feel like that. Anyhow, she must be a nice lady

because she has fascinated him. He is prepared to live with her together. You or I, or somebody else cannot forbid his marriage. I'm his father. I was an instrument for him to be born here in this world. Even then, I cannot possess him. I cannot dictate terms to him. He is a man with all the rights. That's the fact. I hope you understand.'

'Appa, we are Tamils living in Jaffna. Ours is a Caste-ridden community,' said Dananjayan.

'Yes, I accept what you say. Worrying about the community we cannot ostracize him, we have to get on with him. I don't know whether she is our caste or not. But, one thing is true that whom he marries, is my daughter in law,' Murugesu said, then looked at his wife.

Danalakshmi nodded her head approvingly.

Dananjayan fell silent.

Murugesu went on, 'Thampi, we don't know still about that lady. Once we get to know her we may like her. Then we'll say that he'd taken a good decision. So, it's premature to talk about the result. First we have to believe that he's taken a right decision.'

A look passed between Dananjayan and Rajini. Taking notice of it Danalakshmi looked at Rajini, and asked: 'Pillai, what're you thinking of?'

Murugesu also looked at Rajini.

Rajini said: 'What Mama said is correct, and the fact. Actually we don't know about Suganya. She may be the most suitable for Thampi. No one thrust this marriage on him. Thampi wants to marry her. He himself can understand whatever we understand. So, it's pointless to talk further about the matter.'

'What Pillai said is right,' said Murugesu, nodding his head approvingly.

Dananjayan looked at his wife, and asked: 'What about the caste problem?'

'Caste is still deeply rooted in our society, I agree. But Thampi is important to us, more than our society. We cannot be shunning

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him for the sake of the society. We shouldn't lose him in the name of caste. And also, Thampi is a gentleman as well as a community responsible person. We appreciated everything that he did. Now if we are opposed to the marriage he'll definitely be disappointed. But one thing, if we are opposed to the marriage he'll go against our wishes. No doubt!' Rajini paused her monologue.

Dananjayan remained silent, contemplating.

She went on confidently, looking at him: 'I don't know why you're so adamant. But I hope we can be living in concord with Suganya. Don't worry about the society. Things will change with time. I plead with you to agree to the marriage wholeheartedly.'

The other three were staring at Dananjayan's face expectantly. Eventually he gave a nod approvingly, and said: 'ok!'

Murugesu stared at Rajini. 'Pillai, you've understood Ilayavar well,' he remarked, raising his brow in surprise.

Her smile lifted the corner of her mouth. She said: 'Mama, I was born and bred in this village itself. Before my marriage I called him Sanje. After the marriage I call him Thampi as my husband does. Most of the people in our village like him very much. In our village, as far as I know, there was not a single social event that Thampi didn't participate in. If Thampi leaves this village for good, this village will feel the loss of him.'

Dananjayan silently agreed with what she said.

Murugesu looked at his wife, smiling. Danalakshmi felt euphoric, and was proud of her son. She got up from the chair, smiling.

'Mami! Where are you going?' asked Rajini, in a tone of surprise.

'Pillai, you have to go home before the dusk. So, I'm going to get tea for you all,' said Danalakshmi. She went into the kitchen, not waiting for her reply.



## Twenty-eight

It was a Wednesday night. Seven o' clock. Ahrani was at the table, writing an essay. Her grandmother, Indrani, was looking on, from at the end of the table. Suganya was in the kitchen preparing dinner. The entire house had fallen silent.

Indrani walked up to the kitchen door, and stood there clutching the door frame, watching Suganya.

Suganya turned her head to the door, smiled at her, and then looked at the frying pan again.

Suganya had called Indrani in the morning and pleased her to come immediately to Vavuniya. She hadn't told even the reason why she'd called her. But, at once Indrani had left Mulankavil, excited, and arrived at Vavuniya at about two o' clock. But until now Suganya didn't tell anything to her as to why she called her, nor did Ahrani. And also everything was going on as usual. How ever Indrani didn't fail to sense that a bizarre situation prevailed in the house. She was patient, awaiting for Suganya to open the subject.

Half an hour later, after dinner, Ahrani resumed her study. As Suganya went into the room, Indrani followed her into. Suganya sat on the bed, from where she could see Ahrani sitting at the table in the living room through the door that was ajar. Indrani saw conflicts in her eyes.

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Suganya cleared her throat, and said: 'Mami, I want to talk with you about a matter.'

'Tell me what,' said Indrani, with concern, and sat on the bed, next to her.

'Mami, I've taken a decision without consulting you,' said Suganya apologetically.

'Pillai, you need not worry about that. Tell me whatever you want to,' said Indrani, soothingly, resting her hand on Suganya's.

Suganya wanted to tell her the full story. But she felt shy to reveal the matter that Satkunam had desired her. So, she decided to keep the matter about Satkunam secret from Indrani. She began to tell the story hesitantly.

Every now and again she stopped speaking due to the overwhelming timidity during which she took a pause, looking down; and then resumed speaking.

Indrani was listening to her carefully, not disturbing her, not even during the pause. Her moods kept varying- contrasting moods-now happy, now sad. Her face was a picture.

When Suganya finished speaking, Indrani's eyes grew misty. 'Pillai, your decision is absolutely right. I've been asking you to remarry. But every single time I asked, you didn't accept it. So, now I'm happy, more than happy with your decision. I'll be supportive to you, don't worry,' said Indrani in a soft voice, patting on Suganya's back.

'Mami,' called out Suganya quietly.

'Pillai, what? Tell me.'

'I haven't told Pillai about this. I don't believe that she'll take it lightly,' said Suganya, gazing at her daughter sympathetically, through the door.

Indrani followed her gaze, said: 'Pillai, don't worry. I will deal with the problem.'

'Mami, we must be careful of handling this matter. We shouldn't be in haste,' said Suganya.

'Pillai, sooner or later we must let her know it. Leave things to me, I'll convince her,' said Indrani confidently.

'Don't talk to her about that now,' said Suganya firmly.

'Why?' asked Indrani, looking at her with wide eyes, then went on, 'Pillai, after we have decided to do an action, we shouldn't delay it. If we do it so, that action will definitely fizzle out. So we have to finish an action as soon as possible. I'll convince her now,' said Indrani, rising from the bed.

Suddenly Suganya grabbed Indrani's arm, and sat her on the bed again, said: 'Mami, listen to me, please. Not even a month for the scholarship exam. We shouldn't disturb her on the eve of the exam. We had better talk with her about the matter after the exam.'

Indrani thought for a moment. 'Yes, you're correct,' she said in an assured voice, and then asked: 'Pillai, have you told this matter to the engineer and his wife?'

'No, I haven't' said Suganya airily.

'Why haven't you told them?' asked Indrani in a disapproving tone.

'Must tell them,' said Suganya instantly.

'If they know about it, they'll feel so happy,' said Indrani. Then she asked: 'Do they come here as usual?'

'Yes!' Suganya lied to her wittingly.

'Then ok,' said Indrani, 'Pillai, I'll leave tomorrow and come back on the eve of the exam, preparing to stay here for a week.'

'Ok, Mami.'

When they both gazed at Ahrani simultaneously, she was studying for her exam with determination, unaware of the fact, that they were discussing a matter involving her.

Suganya took pity on her daughter. Tears sprang to her eyes, she looked down, wiping her tears. Indrani said a few comforting words to her.

### Twenty-nine

Danalakshmi opened the gate, came in, carrying a big bag full of culinary goods in her arms. She struggled to shut the gate behind her but she couldn't, because of the heavy bag in her arms. So, she left the gate open, went into the kitchen, put the bag down, came out to shut the gate.

Murugesu sat in a chair on the veranda, contemplating. It's seemed as if he was unaware that she passed the veranda twice. She stepped up to him, asked gently: 'What're you thinking so deeply about?'

Her voice broke his train of thought. 'You've come!' he exclaimed, twisting his head to look at her. 'I'm thinking of our Ilayavar.'

'About Ilayavar!' she exclaimed in a tone of questioning.

'Has he got money on him?' he asked with a questioning look.

'I gave him only five thousand rupees when he left home last Sunday.'

'He'll have to spend thousands of rupees on the wedding preparation,' he said.

'He doesn't have that much money on him.'

'We have to deposit money in his bank account'

'Oh yes,' she said, 'We must do it.'

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'Why not do it now? It's ten o' clock now. I can go to Point Pedro and transfer the money from my account to his,' he said, and got up from the chair.

'Tuesday is not suitable for auspicious matters,' she reminded him instantly.

'Oh, I've forgotten it,' he said, sat down in the chair again.

'I want to talk something with you,' she said smiling.

He looked at her face, raising his eyebrow.

'Shall we go to Vavuniya and see that lady?' she asked eagerly.

He thought for a moment, and then said: 'Danam, I think, there is a problem. Ahrani hasn't stil known about the matter. Should we go to Vavuniya we ought to see both of them, both Suganya and Ahrani. And Thampi knows what to do. So, we can go there when he invites us to come there.'

Realizing it she nodded her head approvingly.

### Thirty

It was the Grade five scholarship examination day. Suganya took Ahrani to school in her bicycle. The other students came there with their parents- either father or mother; uncle or aunt; or elder sibling.

Suganya parked her bike, walked along with Ahrani up to the tree that stood in front of the exam hall. Virushali had already come there with her father. Seeing them, she came running towards them.

'Viru! At what time did you come?' asked Ahrani cheerfully.

'Five minutes ago,' said Virushali hurriedly, then looked at Suganya. 'Aunty,' she called out delightfully, bowed low to her with her open hands together.

Suganya placed her right hand on Virushali's head and blessed her; and then asked with concern: 'Who have you come with?'

'With Appa,' said Virushali, pointing to the spot where her father was standing.

Suganya turned to look at him. They looked at each other, smiling, nodding their heads. Ahrani stepped up to him, and got his blessing. They both came to the place where Suganya and Virushali were present.

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Ahrani and Virushali fell into chatting with each other.

Virushali's father looked at them, and said: 'Pillaigal, the exam is about to start. Talking distracts you, and spoils the freshness of your mind. So, don't talk until the exam is finished. Please, be silent!'

('Pillaigal' is the plural of 'Pillai'- 'Child')

They both took his advice, and fell silent.

The supervisors and invigilators of the exam made all arrangements. Then they allowed the students to enter the exam hall, at the right time.

When Ahrani and Virushali were ready to walk towards the hall, Suganya wished them: 'good luck'

'Wish you all the best' greeted Virushali's father.

Both Ahrani and Virushali walked, waving their hands. Suganya and Virushali's father were looking at them till they disappeared into the hall.

The parents gathered together in front of the hall. Every parent seemed to be overwhelmed by the thought of the exam, whereas every child student was cheerful, appeared unworried and relaxed, without exam fever. It seemed as if the exam were for parents themselves.

One of the parents spoke in a loud voice to those gathering in front of the hall. 'Please, listen to me. The supervisor tells us to go away, and to stay at the entrance, keeping ourselves out of our children's sight.'

The crowd started moving towards the entrance. Suganya and Virushali's father walked together up to another tree that stood behind the wall of a building of the school. Then Virushali's father left, leaving her alone.

Those who took the students to the exam hall started chatting with each other, in separate groups. But Suganya wanted to seclude herself from the other people. The potential problems concerning the marriage continued to occupy her mind.

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Virushali's father came again nearer to her. 'Thankachchi,' he called out in a gentle voice.

'Yes, Annai,' said Suganya with a jerk, being aware of the surroundings.

'Only ten minutes more for the first part to finish,' he said.

'Then they'll come out,' she said, glancing at her watch to make sure of the time.

'We can offer some refreshments to them, no. So I go out and buy something to eat or drink,' he said, and turned to go out.

'No, you need not go out,' she said instantly, 'I've got two cartons of milk. That's enough for now.'

Having seen the students coming out in twos and threes, the parents started to move towards them eagerly. In a minute they all got together. There was a din of excited chatter.

Ahrani and Virushali had come to their parents.

'Amma, everything is good,' said Ahrani cheerfully.

Suganya looked at Virushali.

'Aunty, some questions are doubtful,' said Virushali.

'Don't worry about that now. Do the next part well,' said Suganya, tapping on Virushali's head. She undid the zip of her hand bag, took a carton of milk, and offered it to her. 'Pillai, drink it.' Then she gave another one to Ahrani.

'Ahrani... what's the answer for the third question?' asked Virushali, removing the straw sellotaped to the carton.

'Third one is the answer,' said Ahrani confidently, inserting the straw into the hole of the carton.

'Oh, I've marked the second one?' said Virushali, twisting her lips with a disappointment.

Virushali's father, who'd been looking on as yet, interrupted. 'Pillaigal, don't talk about the question paper you've answered. Finish the exam first.'

They both fell silent, started sucking up the milk through the straw. Having drunk the milk Virushali belched.



'Amma, I want to rinse the taste out of my mouth,' said Ahrani, looking at Suganya's face.

Suganya gave a bottle of water. Ahrani took a mouthful of water, swirled it around her mouth and swallowed. She did so once again, and gave the bottle to Virushali.

Virushali passed the bottle to Suganya.

'Why?' asked Suganya with a surprised look, 'Don't you want to drink water?'

'No, Aunty,' said Virushali, smiling, 'I like the aftertaste of milk. But I want to wash my hand and lips because my fingers and lips feel sticky.'

'Ok, use it'. said Suganya, holding out the bottle.

'No, Aunty. This is drinking water. Please keep it with you. At the other side of the school premises there is the tap water to wash.' said Virushali, not taking the bottle.

'Viru, I'm coming with you too. My hands also feel stickly,' said Ahrani, getting the empty cartons and staws from Suganya.

They both walked up to the tap, put the waste in the litter bin, washed their hands and mouths, and wiped with their handkerchiefs.

The exam resumed after an interval of fifteen minutes.

Virushali's father looked at Suganya, and asked: 'Why are you here standing alone? You may go that side and stay talking with the other people. What're you thinking of? Your face lines with worry. Don't worry about Ahrani. She'll finish top in the exam. So, forget about the exam.'

A smile flitted across her face. 'No, nothing,' she said.

'Okay, I go that side,' he said and moved away.

Then Suganya's mobile vibrated inside her hand bag. She took it out and looked at the screen. It was Sanjayan calling. Suddenly she felt a strange happiness. Her heart started throbbing quietly. There was a sparkle of excitement in her eyes.

She pressed the 'ok' button.

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'Hello,' she said softly.

'Yah, Suganya,' he called casually. 'Well, where are you? at the school?' he asked.

'Yes, at the front wall of the school.'

'I think that the first part has been over. Have you met her? Have you offered her anything to drink? What's she said about the paper?' he asked a set of questions without pausing for breath.

She was delighted that he paid proper regard to Ahrani. She answered him enthusiastically. 'She's done the first part well, she says. I've offered a carton of milk. Now she's writing the second part.'

'Are you feeling happy now?' he asked a formal question so as to gauge her mood, and the state of mind.

She herself could understand why he asked such a question. She didn't want to tell a lie to him. 'Mm... I'm not sure I feel happy. Well, actually not happy,' she said, 'she is cheerful now, thinking of the exam being over today. But she's unaware of a bitter disappointment waiting for her. That matter will make a profound impact on her, I know for sure. I'm afraid even to imagine how she's going to react. She's going to kill me with her questions,' she breathed.

'Sorry, Suganya... I'm extremely sorry,' he said in a soft voice with regret.

'I don't say this to make you worry. I'm just telling you what I feel, and it's my obligation as well to let you know whatever I feel,' she said quietly.

'I know the feeling,' he said, 'the child's world is totally different from the adult's. A child has an exaggerated sense of its own importance. In this respect Ahrani will set her face against the marriage. But you can convince her, I think. The problem is that you can't intercede yourself with her for you. Someone else can do with her on your behalf. If you try to convince her, she may be suspicious of you. I think, your Mami can do it.'

'Yes, she's come yesterday itself.'

'Then, no problem. Don't worry about that. And, have you any problem, don't forget to call me, okay?'

'I understood!'

'Then ok, relax! Everything will be ok.'

They ended their telephone conversation.

She took a quick glance at her wrist watch. There were only five minutes remaining for the exam to be over. She tried to relax herself with the thought of the exam. But the impending problem preyed on her mind.

The students came out of the hall, walked in file along the narrow passage, and spilled into the front yard of the school, chattering. They walked briskly, looking for their people, like white pigeons fluttering their wings.

Ahrani came running towards her mother in a euphoric mood. 'Amma... I've done well,' said Ahrani confidently, with her face wreathed in smiles.

Virushali came there with her father. They all made small talk.

'Ahran, shall we go to the theatre in the evening?' asked Virushali.

Ahrani looked at Suganya's face for the response. Suganya nodded her head approvingly.

'Then ok, I'll be at your home at four o' clock,' Virushali said hurriedly, and followed her father towards their motorbike.

'Amma, what happened to you? You look unhappy. Your eyes are dull. It's uncharacteristic of you,' said Ahrani, looking at Suganya.

'No, nothing,' said Suganya, 'I'm happy.' She placed her hand on Ahrani's head.

Then, a classmate of Ahrani walked up to her, smiling, with her mother.

'Ahran... what about the exam?' she asked.

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'It's ok!' said Ahrani, smiling.

'You'll pass the exam definitely. Any exam is a cakewalk to you, no,' she said, and then looked at her mother, and said; 'Amma, this is Ahrani.'

Her mother laughed at Ahrani, then at Suganya.

Ahrani looked at her mother and said: 'Amma, this is Sumanchala, my classmate. That is her mother.'

Sumanchala's mother said: 'Pillai talks often about Ahrani. That's why I want to see who that Ahrani is.'

When they took leave of each other, Ahrani said: 'anyhow, the exam is over. That's it!'

Suganya thought that her daughter's exam was over whereas her exam was due to start.

Suganya and Ahrani were walking towards the bicycle shed.



Standing at the porch, Indrani saw Ahrani open the gate, and Suganya wheeling the bike in through the gate.

'What about the exam?' asked Indrani, sounding genuinely interested, casting a welcoming smile in their direction.

'Appamma! I'll pass the exam with higher marks,' said Ahrani confidently, cheerfully, walking briskly towards her.

Indrani hugged her tight and kissed on her forehead. 'I know, I know,' said Indrani, 'Come, have lunch.' She kept hugging her granddaughter, took her inside the house, chatting jovially.

Suganya entered the living room and reclined on the couch. She was not in the mood even for changing her sari. She sat there staring blankly.

'Pillai', called out Indrani softly.

Suganya looked at her with a slough of despair.

'Pillai, come to have lunch', Said Indrani.

'Mami, I don't feel hungry. Please serve it to her,' said Suganya. At that moment as though she wanted to seclude herself from the entire world.

Then Ahrani came there too, having changed out of her school uniform. 'Amma, why are you here, not changing out of the sari. Please, come to have lunch together today. Amma, get up, please get up,' said Ahrani with a brimful of energy, pulling her mother by the hand.

But Suganya remained sitting, refusing to budge.

Indrani interrupted. She looked at Ahrani and said: 'Pillai, leave your Amma alone. It seems that she is thinking of something else. Come with me, we both shall have lunch. She'll have her lunch later when she feels hungry.'

Indrani and Ahrani moved towards the kitchen. Suganya heard them talking inside the kitchen.

'Appamma, I have no tuition class for a week, today on. No school, no tuition, no exam. I'm going to sleep soundly, continuously for three days,' said Ahrani, laughing, 'Appamma, You Know something, I'm going to the theatre today with Viru's father to see a Vijay film.'

'Ok, Pillai,' said Indrani, 'go wherever you want. Now have your meal.'

After lunch Indrani and Ahrani came out of the kitchen, closing the door behind them.

Suganya still kept sitting on the couch. Ahrani got close to her, asked: 'Amma, why are you here still?'

'I'll have my lunch after half an hour,' said Suganya, fanning herself with the end of her sari.

Indrani interrupted. 'Pillai, leave your Amma alone,' she said, 'we'll go into the room. I want to chat with you.'

Indrani tried to go into the room, gripping Ahrani's arm.

'Appamma, leave me for a moment,' said Ahrani, wriggling her hand.

Indrani loosened her grip, and let her go. Ahrani switched on the ceiling fan and turned the regulator knob to the maximum. Suganya's stray hairs began to flutter, and the loose parts of her sari

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were fluttering. Ahrani felt satisfied.

'Appamma, please come. We can go now,' said Ahrani, holding Indrani's arm.

They both stepped up to the room door. Suddenly Suganya turned around to see Ahrani. But she could see her daughter's back only. Indrani closed the door behind them.

Inside the room Ahrani sat on the bed cross-legged. Indrani perched on the edge of the bed.

'Pillai, you have to listen to me carefully. I know you're a clever girl. You have a keen mind. So, you can understand what I say,' Indrani said in a calm voice.

'What about?' asked Ahrani instantly, looking into her eyes.

'About your mother.'

'About Amma!' exclaimed Ahrani. She looked puzzled. 'Well, Amma looks so worried. But she doesn't say anything. Do you know why?' asked Ahrani in a tone of surprise.

Indrani started speaking. Ahrani listened to her carefully. Indrani didn't want to put the matter bluntly. So she was beating about the bush. Ahrani's mind was wandering to see the point. But she kept her ears open for the matter.

It had taken Indrani half an hour to come gradually to the crux of the matter.

Sitting on the couch, Suganya could hear the dull sound of Indrani talking inside the room. But it was not so clear that she could understand. It was like a distant rumble. Every now and again she took a glance at the wall clock and at the door closed, back and forth. She wondered how her daughter would react to the matter. Then she experienced a high level of anxiety that she'd never felt before. She was a nervous wreck.

The room door opened with a light sound. Out stepped Ahrani, being followed by Indrani. Ahrani walked slowly up to Suganya. Indrani had halted by the wall.

Ahrani stared at her mother silently. Suganya's eyes had

already dropped to her lap. But she was fully aware that her daughter was standing beside her. Her heart started beating fast. She felt it pounding inside her. She was not brave enough to look at her daughter's face directly.

'Ammachchi...' called out Ahrani in a soft voice. She sat on the couch next to her. 'Ammachchi... are you going to remarry?' she asked, coming straight to the point.

Suganya wasn't shocked to hear it but was tormented by a guilty feeling. She kept silent.

Ahrani felt an intense sense of sadness at her mother's silence. She touched her mother lightly and affectionately on the lap.

Suganya was deeply moved by Ahrani's affectionate touch. She looked at Ahrani's hand on her lap. Her entire body felt as if it would be electrocuted.

'Ammachchi... Appamma told me that you are going to marry Sanjay Uncle. I know that's a barefaced lie. Thatha also had once told me like this, about you. I asked you, remember? You said no,' said Ahrani, looking at the side of Suganya's face. 'Ammachchi... look at me,' said Ahrani gently.

Then too Suganya didn't look at her face. Ahrani held her mother's chin lightly and turned the face towards her.

Despite Suganya's face towards Ahrani's, Suganya kept looking down, emotionless.

'Ammachchi, look at me... please, look at me Ammachchi,' begged Ahrani.

Suganya was overwhelmed by feelings of sadness. Tears brimmed in her eyes. She tried to check her tears.

'Ammachchi, look at me, say something. Don't be silent, please, Ammachchi,' she begged again, holding her mother's chin.

Suganya was unable to hold back her tears. A tear drop or two fell onto Ahrani's arm. Then Ahrani realized without a shadow of doubt that her mother had decided to remarry. She spoke in a

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shaky voice, shedding tears: 'Ammachchi... what happened to you? I'll look after you in the last years of your life. I'll become a doctor. You need not worry about that. You tell me that you are living for my sake. What wrong am I doing? Don't leave me alone. Ammachchi, don't leave me alone, please. Why do you want to marry him? I beg you not to...'

At that moment, in Suganya's heart swelled with a feeling. The name of the feeling was not yet known. Sadness; sorrow; dismay; despair; shame; hate; helplessness; or a mixture of all those feelings. Her heart was beating fast with in her rib cage like a big bird trapped in a small cage. Her breath was ringing in her ears. Her inner world shattered into a million pieces. She buried her face into her cupped hands with her elbows resting on her lap, sobbing soundlessly. Her face was wet with tears behind her cupped hands.

'Ammachchi... Ammachchi... look at me, please,' Ahrani sobbed.

Suganya remained motionless in that posture. Indrani kept looking on, leaning against the wall, with tears welling up within her eyes.

Ahrani failed to make her mother talk to her, even look at her. She stood up with a feeling of hopelessness and rolled her eyes, looking for her grandmother. She saw Indrani standing immobile by the wall. She looked at her grandmother with a glimmer of hope. But Indrani looked at her granddaughter with a feeling of pity. They both started moving briskly towards each other, simultaneously.

'Appamma... Amma says nothing... why?' asked Ahrani with a despairing look.

'Pillai, your mother is a poor woman. Don't disturb her, my child,' said Indrani, wiping Ahrani's tears dribbling down the cheeks, with her hands.

Ahrani hugged Indrani tightly with her arms encircling Indrani's waist, pressing her face against Indrani's stomach, sobbing. Indrani was patting affectionately Ahrani on the head and



back, saying a few consoling words.

After a while, they both slipped into the room, hugging each other. The room door closed with a click.

On hearing the sound of clicking, Suganya turned around to look at the room door. She started crying louder, being tortured by her inner feelings, slapping on her forehead repeatedly. She was sweating heavily, even as the ceiling fan was rotating overhead in full r.p.m.

Half an hour later, Indrani came out of the room, and found that Suganya still kept straring vacantly.

'Pillai, are you still here?' asked Indrani in a gentle voice and she sat on the couch.

Suganya turned her head to look at Indrani. Overwhelmed by feelings of guilt about not responding to her daughter's questions, and not even looking at her face, she started to sob uncontrollably with her shoulders heaving.

'My child begged me to look at her- I couldn't. I was not brave enough even to see her. Then how can I respond to her innocent questions. My innocent child has left this poor mother, having come to her own conclusions. What an unlucky woman I'm, Aiyo...' she breathed.

Indrani put her arm around Suganya's shoulders. It comforted Suganya to feel Indrani's arm around her. She rested her head gently on Indarni's shoulder. 'Mami, what's she doing?' she sobbed.

'Pillai, I tried to convince her. Lying on the bed with her head pillowed on my lap, she's been listening to me patiently. Her sobbing subsided. Afterwards she went to sleep. I've put her head down gently on the pillow, and come out.'

Suganya gradually ceased sobbing. Indrani got up from the couch, walked to the kitchen, and returned with a glass of water. 'Pillai, drink some water!'

Suganya took a gulp of the water.

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'Pillai, get up and have a plate of rice,' said Indrani softly.

'Mami, I have no appetite. But I have a splitting headache with a tingling sensation inside my head. My mouth feels bitter,' said Suganya, clutching her forehead.

'That's because you're under stress. Don't think too much, Pillai. Change your sari first. Get up... Pillai, get up! Go to the bathroom and refresh yourself with a bath,' said, Indrani, tapping on Suganya's shoulder.

Suganya rose to her feet and stepped into the room, where Ahrani was sleeping soundly in a supine position. Suganya stood beside the bed and looked at her daughter steadily, closely, affectionately, and sympathetically.

A couple of minutes later, she wiped the tears brimming in her eyes, took her spare clothes and walked to the bathroom.

After a refreshing shower, Suganya went into the kitchen.

'Pillai, come and sit down to have your meal,' said Indrani, taking a plate.

'Mami, I don't want to have rice,' said Suganya instantly.

Indrani gave a questioning look at her, holding the plate in her hand.

'I want a cup of tea. That's enough for now,' said Suganya, wrinkling her face up.

'Ok,' said Indrani. She made a cup of strong tea, and gave her.

Suganya drank it, came out onto the porch, sat down on the floor, and leaned against the pillar, stretching both legs. She then watched a jasmine vine on the trellis swaying gently in the breeze. She felt as if the vine had comforted her by waving by itself.

She closed her eyes with a sense of relief. She then only could see her inner world, where her frustrations and stresses persisted, still not fading away.

'Aunty... Aunty... Aun...'

Suganya opened her eyes with a jerk, and found Virushali standing on the porch, looking at her.

'Aunty, why are you sitting down on the floor?' asked Virushali, narrowing her eyes.

'I wanted to stretch my legs. I have dull pains in the knees,' said Suganya.

'Yes, Aunty,' said Virushali, 'I know. Appa told us that you'd been standing until the exam was over.'

Suganya looked at her with just a suggestion of smile.

'Aunty, where is Ahrani?' asked Virushali.

'She's sleeping in the room,' said Suganya.

'Sleeping!' exclaimed Virushali. 'We want to go to see the film today,' she said, walked towards the room, not waiting for Suganya's reply.

Being in the kitchen, Indrani had seen Virushali pass the kitchen door, she closely followed her, wondering whether Ahrani would reveal the matter to her close friend.

Inside the room Ahrani had woken up from her deep sleep. She felt as fresh as a morning lotus. But it lasted only a moment. The next moment, the feeling of despair began to creep up in her mind. Her thoughts turned to that fateful afternoon.

When she saw Virushali entering the room, her thoughts stopped wandering.

'Ahran, why didn't you get ready? Appa will come here to take us to the theatre. It is a good film with several fighting scenes. Surabi told me that she'd seen the film in the Vasanthi theatre,' said Virushali jovially.

Indrani, who had followed Virushali, halted by the door, looking on.

Virushali perched on the edge of the bed, next to Ahrani. Looking closely at Ahrani's face, Virushali got a shock, and then had the sense that Ahrani was worried about something. 'Ahran, you look as though you have cried your eyes out. What's wrong with you? Haven't you done the exam well?' she asked anxiously, slipping her hand into Ahrani's.

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'Virus, I've done the exam well. I'm angry with Amma. That's why...?' Said Ahrani, casually, gazing at Indrani, who stood by the door, looking on, from behind Virushali's back.

Virushali turned around to follow Ahrani's gaze. She saw Indrani standing there, said: 'Appamma, why are you there? Come here.'

Indrani stepped up to the bed, laughing, and sat on it.

'Ahran, you'll come with me to go to the cinema, won't you?' asked Virushali with a questioning look.

'I can't come today,' Said Ahrani with a flinty look.

'Don't worry. I can ask Aunty to go to the cinema. She'll say yes definitely,' said Virushali confidently, rose to her feet.

'Don't go there. I'm not in the mood for seeing a film,' said Ahrani listlessly.

'Okay, we'll go to the cinema another day. I've told Appa to come here to take us to the theatre by five thirty. So I have to tell him not to come here,' said Virushali. She got up from the bed, came to the living room, called her father on the land line in order to inform him of the cancellation of their programme.

Then Indrani asked, looking at Ahrani: 'Pillai, will you have a cup of tea?'

'Yes, of course,' said Ahrani, 'but I want you to get tea for me. If anybody else makes tea for me, I won't drink it. You know who I'm referring to, don't you?' said Ahrani adamantly, with her arms flailing angrily, in an adult-like manner, which amused Indrani. But, with an expressionless face, Indrani nodded and got up to go out. No sooner had she come out of the room than she smiled broadly by herself with a sense of relief. Virushali, who put the receiver down and turned around, saw her come out of the room with a broad smile.

'Appamma! Why are you smiling by yourself? Asked Virushali, laughing.

'No, nothing,' said Indrani, 'well, stay with your friend. I'm

going to get tea for you.' She hurried past her to the kitchen.

Virushali rejoined Ahrani in the room. After Indrani offered tea to them, she came up to Suganya. 'Pillai, it's getting four o' clock. Come to have your meal,' asked Indrani with kindness.

'Mami, I am not hungry now. I had better have dinner, skipping the meal now' said Suganya in a dry voice. After a momentary pause, 'Mami, what's she doing inside the room,' she asked expectantly, taking a deep breath, with a note of desperation in her voice.

'Pillai, don't worry. I'll manage to convince her. It shocked her once she had heard about the unusual news like this.

A flicker of hope appeared in Suganya's mind. She tried to calm herself down. But she couldn't. Her face lined with worry.

'Pillai, please keep yourself calm. I know she can't hate you, neither can you. She'll accept it but not instantly, which we can't expect. So, don't worry. Take it easy,' said Indrani soothingly.

Ahrani and Virushali then stepped down onto the porch. Virushali came up to Suganya. 'Aunty, why do you still keep sitting on the floor? You still have the knee pain? Massage will reduce the pain. I know how to massage the aching muscles and joints with oil. I massage Amamma's legs frequently. Shall I do it for you?' asked Virushali, squatting down beside her.

'Not necessary.' said Suganya, Placing her right hand on Virushali's head, affectionately. 'Pillai, at what time are you going to the cinema?' She asked.

'Aunty, we've cancelled the programme. Because Ahrani is not in the mood to see a film. We both want to see the film together, chatting with each other. Then only we can enjoy the film,' said Virushali, smiling, then turned around to look at Ahrani.

Suganya also looked sidelong at her daughter, wondering how she reacted. But Ahrani was staring at the jasmine vines spread across the trellis as if attracted by them. As if she had found them very first in her life.

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'Aunty, she's angry with you. But she's overhearing us,' whispered Virushali in Suganya's ear, giggling.

At five o' clock Virushali took leave of Suganya and Indrani, walked towards the gate, flanked by Ahrani.

'Ahran, why are you so angry with Aunty? Poor Aunty... go and talk to her,' said Virushali with a kind of sadness.

'Ok,' said Ahrani in an emotionless voice.

Virushali started to walk home. Ahrani shut the gate, walked into the house, not even turning her head towards the porch. But Suganya watched her walking past. Indrani entered the house, following Ahrani.

Suganya kept sitting on the porch, lost in thought.

'Pillai, why are you here sitting in the darknees?' asked Indrani. Her voice interrupted Suganya's train of thought. She became aware of the surroundings.

The darkness had descended on the ground. The bright light in the living room projected on the porch like a rhomboid. A dim light spilled from the kitchen window. A male voice with a peculiar style of speaking announced in both languages over the loud speaker of the railway station. A locomotive idling on the rails made a roaring sound, rhythmically, at a constant pitch.

Suganya got up, walked into the living room, switched on the porch light, and went into the Pooja room where she saw the standing lamp before the god and goddess in the picture frames burning with a steady flame. When she came back to the living room, she heard both Indrani and Ahrani talking in the kitchen. She went into the room, took the towel, and stepped into the bathroom.

She reclined in the couch again. She was in a sombre mood, staring blankly at the television turned off.

By seven o' clock, Indrani came up to her. 'Pillai, come and have your meal,' she asked.

'Has she had dinner?' asked Suganya.

'No, she hasn't. And it's seven o' clock, no,' said Indrani, 'I'll give her later.'

Suganya took a glance at the wall clock, and said: 'Mami, I'll have my dinner after her.'

'Pillai, she had her lunch. But you didn't have even your lunch,' said Indrani in a disapproving tone.

'It's ok, Mami, let her have her meal first,' said Suganya firmly.

Indrani returned to the kitchen, not saying anything to her, and served Ahrani her dinner.

After dinner, Ahrani came into the living room, saw Suganya sitting on the couch, and went over to the room, pretending not to notice. But Suganya managed to see Ahrani walking past, out of the corner of her eye.

Indrani followed Ahrani into the room. Suganya rose to her feet and walked into the kitchen. Couple of minutes later Indrani returned to the kitchen.

'Mami, what's she doing?' asked Suganya with a questioning look tinged with regret.

'She went into the bathroom to brush her teeth,' said Indrani casually, taking a plate.

Suganya took a deep breath, sat down on the floor cross-legged, and started to have her meal, silently.

Indrani was looking on.

After dinner, Indrani went into the room, where Ahrani was lying on her side in the bed, and said, looking at her: 'Appamma, sleep beside me in the bed. Anybody else shouldn't come here to sleep.'

'Ok,' said Indrani. She came to the living room, up to Suganya, who'd sat in the chair. 'Pillai, I sleep inside the room beside her,' she said.

'Yes, Mami. You have much things to talk with her,' said Suganya, nodding in approval.

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'Pillai, don't worry. Thinking too much is useless. So, sleep as early as possible,' said Indrani, patting on her head, and then walked into the room, closed the door behind her.

Suganya turned off all the bulbs inside the house, leaving a single bare bulb burning dimly at the porch. She wondered why Sanjayan hadn't still called her. The living room being dark, she fumbled around to walk up to the front window. She however drew back the curtain. The porch light spilled over to the darkened living room from the window. Despite the light in the living room was too dim, it was enough for her to walk up to the table and take her mobile phone.

She settled herself on the couch, and pressed Sanjayan's number.

'Hello,' called Sanjayan gently.

'It's me, said Suganya softly, and went on, 'I had expected your call, but you didn't. So, I call you.'

'You would be in a problematic situation. I didn't want to disturb you by calling. But I've been waiting for your call. When I saw your name pop on the screen of my phone, I really went hot and cold. To be frank with you, I'm anxious and in a state of panic. And I eagerly anticipate the result,' said Sanjayan with a kind of enthusiasm mingled with nervousness.

'Well, I tell you what happened here first. Afterwards we'll discuss the matter,' she said.

Suganya began to relate what happened there from the beginning, since he last called her when she was in the school. Her voice faded to a whisper- inaudible to Ahrani inside the room.

Sanjayan listened to her, silently, paying the most attention, not interrupting her.

She ended her monologue with a deep sigh.

He remained silent. They both heard each other's breath. About a minute went by. 'Why are you silent?' she asked quietly, 'say something.'



'Are you ok?' he asked gently.

'Mmm... ok,' she breathed.

'I let you calm down,' he said, 'well, don't worry. The problem has been solved!'

'Solved!' she sounded surprise.

'Yes, absolutely!' he said with conviction.

'How can you hope so?' she asked softly.

'We have to analyse the events that happened today logically, from a ten-year-old child's point of view, and come to the conclusion. Ahrani is intelligent and extraordinary at her peer group. But the matter is that she is too young to understand this particular problem. A couple of years later she will come to realize,' he said, 'Suganya, you know, I had expected that once she got to know about it she would suffer from stress, and feel frustrated and depressed. But on the contrary, only her anger is the reaction to it. So, don't worry about that.'

'I cannot understand clearly what you say,' said Suganya in a questioning tone.

'You know, suffering from depression, mental stress, frustration and such is dangerous for people, especially for children. A long term mental stress, and depression influence the children's personality development. But anger is a not a problem. It recedes with time, gradually. That's what I meant.'

'Yes, I understand,' she said.

'Passion turns compassion; compassion turns passion. Both are two sides of the same coin. That is, both feelings come out of the same energy source,' he said, 'Suganya, even though Ahrani got angry with you she had done her daily routine. She had her meal. Even brushing her teeth at night is a part of her daily routine. So, her anger at you will recede and she will talk to you as usual. But you have to wait for a day or two.'

She felt relieved.

He went on, 'so, don't worry. When her passion turns

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compassion she'll come up to you by herself. Well, she loves you the most. She can't hate you!

She got a surprise. 'I'm surprised by what you say that she can't hate me. You know why? Mami also said the same to me,' she said. The surprise still persisted in her voice.

'That's the fact!' he said, laughing, 'two and two make four, but not five. Indrani Amma concluded from Ahrani's reaction and expression. And I came to the conclusion logically by what you said to me. The same answer arrived by different methods.'

'Yes, that's right,' she said approvingly.

'There's another reason as well,' he said, laughing.

'What's it?' she asked softly.

'Ahrani is Suganya's daughter, no. How can she hate others?' he said, laughing.

She giggled at his remark, and then asked with concern: 'have you had your dinner?'

'No, I haven't,' he said airily.

'Why haven't you?' she asked with kindness, in a tone of surprise.

'I got a food parcel for dinner. It lies on the table. I was not in the mood to have my dinner before knowing the result from you. How could I have my meals when you were in hot water? So, I had neither lunch nor dinner, he said with a laughter, which was a sign of satisfaction.

Her eyes grew misty.

'Do you feel hungry?' she asked kindly.

'I had a cup of tea that was offered in the office in the evening. The tea took the edge off my appetite,' he said, gently laughing.

She took a glance at the screen of the phone. 'It's past nine o' clock. Please, go and have your meal. Sometimes the food parcel may smell bad,' she said hurriedly.

'It may be. Only the curry packed in a small bag may smell

bad. It's ok, I can have the dry pittu with a glass of water,' he said, smiling.

She remained silent. She had no words in her mind to say at that moment.

He went on, 'Don't worry. After the marriage, you'll serve me wonderful meals, won't you? I heard you can cook deliciously.'

She gave a chuckle of delight. He laughed quietly.

'Okay, I'll call you tomorrow. Please go and have your dinner,' she said with concern.

Their conversation ended.

She placed her phone on the stool in front the couch. She was in a little relaxed mood. She heaved a sigh, reclined on the couch, musing on the events of the day. In a matter of minutes, she drifted into sleep.

### Thirty-one

Two days went by.

Ahrani hadn't still been prepared to speak to Suganya. She had avoided even eye contact with Suganya. Indrani had played an intermediary role in the situation in the house for the past two days.

The third day broke.

In the early morning, as usual, Suganya began to sweep the front yard. Indrani, who'd slept beside Ahrani in the bed, got up and slipped out of the bedroom, not disturbing Ahrani's sleep, and then went into the bathroom.

By six o' clock Ahrani woke up. The pale light of dawn spilled from the window. She heard birds chirping outside. She didn't want to rise from the bed. There was no important work for her to do today because her exam was over.

The school vacation was to last two weeks more. The tuition classes also were suspended until the next week, only for those who'd sat the scholarship exam. Ahrani had anticipated eagerly that vacation for months to enjoy going to the cinema, visiting her friends, playing with them, and chatting cheerfully with each other. But, what she'd thought and what happened were diametrically opposite. Her best friend Virushali herself couldn't enjoy

thoroughly that vacation. She had come there for the past two days to persuade Ahrani to speak to Suganya, despite being completely unaware of the matter between Suganya and Ahrani. And also she didn't like to pry into the matter. All she wanted was to make Ahrani speak to Suganya.

Ahrani was still lying on the bed, staring vacantly. Suganya stepped up onto the living room, saw Indrani speaking on the land line. She went into the kitchen, boiled the kettle and made tea.

Indrani then came to the kitchen.

'Mami! I've got tea today after two days. Please give her a cup,' said Suganya, smiling, 'I'll drink my tea later.' She went out of the kitchen, not waiting for Indrani's reply.

She went into the room to take her spare clothes. Ahrani, lying on her back in the bed, saw her come in, and looked sidelong at her mother's back.

Suganya turned around to go out. Then she found Ahrani casting a sidelong gaze at her. At once Ahrani turned over onto the front dramatically.

Suganya walked towards the bathroom. Indrani entered the room with a cup of tea. 'Pillai, have your tea,' said Indrani, looking at Ahrani's back.

On hearing Indrani's voice Ahrani raised herself up on both elbows and sat upright on the bed cross-legged. She took the cup of tea and had a sip. Suddenly she experienced a strange feeling of pleasure. She finished drinking and gave the empty cup to Indrani.

Indrani nodded her head, and walked towards the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

After having a bath Suganya entered the kitchen. 'Mami, has she drunk the tea?' she asked expectantly.

'Oh yes, said Indrani, laughing, 'I didn't tell her that you'd made the tea.'

Suganya felt relieved, smiled at her.

'Pillai,' called Indrani in a soft voice.

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Suganya looked at her.

'Pillai, I must go to Mulankavil today.'

'Why? Any problem?' asked Suganya in a tone of surprise, with wide eyes.

'No problem,' said Indrani, 'well, at the second phase under the housing scheme for the war victims, our names have been included in the list. I must sign the form today before the Grama Sevaka- 'Head of the village.' So, I go there today and will come back tomorrow, ok.'

'You must go there,' said Suganya in a dry voice, 'I don't know what she'll say. Please, go and talk to her about the matter.'

Indrani went into the room. A couple of minutes later she returned to the kitchen. 'Pillai, she says she's going to come with me to Mulankavil,' she said, looking at Suganya's face, expecting for a reply.

Suganya thought in a moment, and said: 'Okay, take her to Mulankavil. After the exam, she's staying at home, going nowhere, poor girl. Mami, please take her to visit our relatives at Mulankavil.' Her voice was shaky. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

They both remained silent for a few moments, gazing at each other.

Breaking the silence, Suganya said: 'I'm going to get ready for work.' She went out, wiping her tears.

When Suganya entered the room, Ahrani was not there. She'd gone into the bathroom. Suganya changed into a sari, got ready for the office, came to the living room, and sat on the couch.

Indrani then finished cooking breakfast, came up to Suganya, and said: 'Pillai, have your breakfast.'

'Mami, I'll have it after you both have taken leave,' said Suganya instantly.

Indrani went into the room where Ahrani was taking her clothes out of the wardrobe and stuffing them into her satchel.

'Pillai, come to have breakfast,' said Indrani.

They both went into the kitchen, had their breakfast, and got ready to leave.

Suganya walked up to the gate and opened it. Indrani and Ahrani followed her behind, carrying their bags.

Indrani hugged Suganya and kissed on her cheeks. Ahrani stood a few feet ahead of them, on the roadside.

Indrani stepped up to Ahrani, said in a disapproving tone: 'Pillai, what're you doing now? Don't behave like this at the moment of parting. Say something to Amma.'

Ahrani went up to Suganya. 'Bye, see you,' She said in a dry voice, emotionless, not even looking at her face. There were no hug, no kiss, no affection - nothing in what she did.

Suganya didn't fail to notice that the word 'Amma' had gone missing in what she said, which tugged at her heartstrings. She didn't utter a word. Ahrani turned around and walked up to Indrani. Both Indrani and Ahrani were walking along Goodshed Road. Standing at the gate, Suganya kept watching them. They both reached the top of Goodshed Road and turned the corner.

Suganya lost sight of them. But she remained standing, motionless, with sadness.

Ahrani halted at the street corner on Station Road. 'Appamma, hang on a second,' she said, looking at Indrani, wrinkling the face; and then moved towards the fence of the good shed premises. She looked at the gate from behind the shrubs by the fence. She saw her mother stand immobile by the gate, gazing blankly at the point where they'd disappeared.

A strange melancholy descended on her. Tears started to brim in her eyes. She felt Indrani's hand on her shoulder, and turned around to look at her.

'What happened?' asked Indrani, with a surprised look.

Weeping uncontrollably, Ahrani said: 'Appamma! Standing at the gate, Amma is watching the point where we've disappeared. She looks unhappy... poor Amma. Look at her. She is

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wiping her tears with the end of her sari. All the people going in the street look at her. But Amma is completely unaware of the surroundings. Appamma, I can't come with you, leaving Amma. I'm going to return home now?'

Not waiting for Indrani's reply, Ahrani began to retrace her steps towards the home. Indrani followed her close behind.

Suganya was astounded to see them pop at the corner of Goodshed Road. She wondered why they were coming back, watching them approaching her, with a surprised look.

When Ahrani got close Suganya, she looked down and walked past her into the house. Indrani halted beside Suganya, told her what happened, and took leave of her again with great satisfaction.

Suganya felt relaxed with a kind of happiness mingled with excitement. She shut the gate behind her, and walked back briskly into the house to see her daughter.

Meanwhile, as soon as Ahrani entered the room, she chucked her satchel in a corner of the room, sprang herself onto the bed, and lay in a prone position, hugging the pillow. She heard her mother's foot steps approaching her.

Suganya got close the bedside with measured steps, and perched on the bed, and then placed her hand on her daughter's head.

Ahrani then felt an inexpressible feeling. All of sudden she shifted her head from the pillow to Suganya's lap, rolled her face onto her mother's stomach, with her arms encircling the waist, and hugged her mother tight pressing her face against the stomach affectionately. She couldn't restrain herself from weeping with her head along with her trunk heaving.

Suganya was patting her daughter affectionately on the head, back, arms and legs. Tears welled up in her eyes and began to dribble down the cheeks.

Ahrani rolled her head onto her mother's lap, and looked



at her face intently. 'Ammachchi...' called out Ahrani softly, with kindness.

Suganya threw her arm around her daughter's shoulders, raised them a bit upwards, hugged tightly, and showered kisses on her, affectionately, sobbing.

She spoke in a voice, throbbing with emotion. 'Pillai, you're still in a child's world. The child's world is the diametrical the opposite of the adult's. You are now a truly extraordinary girl. A year or two later you can get to realize that what Amma does is a right thing. I love you the most, more than this whole world. I want to express myself now, here to you. But you're not mature enough to understand it. I have no alternative now but to apologize to you, if I hurt your feelings. Pillai, forgive me... my child, forgive your mother... forgive this poor woman.'

She closed her eyes tightly. Two beads of her tears dropped on her daughter's cheek. Ahrani wiped her mother's tears with her hands, and said: 'Ammachchi, don't cry... I tell you? Don't worry, I couldn't hate you. I wanted to retaliate by ignoring you. But I couldn't... Ammachchi.' She was weeping incessantly.

Suganya wiped Ahrani's face with the end of her sari. 'Pillai, you haven't had my cooking since your exam was over. If I cook lunch for you, will you have it?' asked Suganya, patting her arms.

'You say, I haven't had!' Ahrani exclaimed, then laughed with an amused look on her face. 'Amma, in the morning Appamma offered me a cup of tea. I know, that tea was not prepared by her, but only by you,' said Ahrani, cheerfully, putting her arms around her mother's neck. Her wet eyes sparkled in the light.

Only a sheepish grin could Suganya give her.

'Amma, can we go to the cinema today?' asked Ahrani, nuzzling Suganya's nose.

'Yes, of course!' Suganya agreed, nodding her head. 'We

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will go for the matinee show.'

'I'm going to call Viru,' said Ahrani cheerfully. She sprang out of the bed, and picked up the receiver of the phone.

'Hello Viru, how are you? I've started to speak to Amma...'  
she went on, laughing.

Suganya took her mobile phone, and pressed Vasanthi's number.

'Hello, Akka, I'm going to take French leave today?' said Suganya, laughing.

'What happened?' asked Vasanthi expectantly.

Suganya told her what happened in the morning. Then after she called Sanjayan. They spoke for only two minutes because he was in the field.

Suganya changed back into her maxi, came out of the room, and saw her daughter sitting on the couch comfortably and singing now, after the past few days.

Suganya stood by the couch, looking at her daughter. The song Ahrani was singing soothed her, and took her to an entirely different world.

## Thirty-two

Just a week before the wedding, Sanjayan had come to Vasanthi's house, in order to discuss the arrangements for the wedding, with Suganya and Vasanthi.

Vasanthi, her husband and Sanjayan had sat in the chairs on the veranda, chatting away about different things.

Every now and again Sanjayan took a glance at his wrist watch to check the time.

Vasanthi and her husband laughed at him. Vasanthi said: 'Thampi, it's just nine thirty. We told Suganya to come here at ten o'clock. I'm sure she won't be late. She'll be here at ten o'clock sharp. She is a woman of punctuality.'

Sanjayan Smiled at them, not saying any thing.

At five to ten, Vasanthi saw the front wheel of a bicycle peek through the gate. 'Oh, here she comes!' exclaimed Vasanthi.

Sanjayan and Vasanthi's husband turned their heads to look at the gate. Suganya entered the yard, pushing her bike, smiling at them.

They three stood up to greet her. Suganya rested her bike on its stand, and stepped up on to the veranda,

They all sat in their chairs simultaneously, and then began to discuss the arrangements.

'How many people do you intend to invite to your

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wedding?' asked Vasanthi, looking at Sanjayan and at Suganya.

'Only a select few,' said Sanjayan, looking at Vasanthi, then shifted his look to Suganya.

Suganya nodded in affirmation.

Sanjayan went on, 'Akka, we don't have a wedding ceremony in a hall. I mean it's not a ceremonial occasion. We have to inform our relatives and friends that we marry. So, it's like a small party. Neither a wedding hall nor a wedding dais. We don't need a printed invitation as well.'

'Yes, I understand,' said Vasanthi.

Suganya was looking at Sanjayan's face, with her face lining with a strange regret.

'Thampi, do you like to invite Mr. Satkunam?' asked Vasanthi, looking at Sanjayan and Suganya back and forth with a questioning look.

Sanjayan looked at Suganya briefly, and then shifted his look to Vasanthi.

Vasanthi went on, 'What he did is unforgivable and intolerable. We shouldn't show him a little sympathy. He is a venomous snake. But now defanged.'

Suganya felt ambivalent towards Satkunam whereas she was affectionate towards Kamala. Sanjayan and Suganya exchanged glances.

Sanjayan looked at Vasanthi, and said: 'Akka we can't forget the good that one does to us. Satkunam sir was my superior and my master. I had learnt much professional techniques from him. That's why I'm a good TA now and in the future definitely will become a good engineer as well. But in Suganya's case he was wrong. He betrayed her trust because of his fickle mindedness. So, he was bound to suffer. But I didn't want him to be insulted by other people.

I just intended to help him to change his mind himself. I tried my best... but to no avail. He had gone the wrong way. In the

world there is neither a good person nor an evil person. Actually, in every person there is a mixture of good and evil things with a certain ratio. That's it.'

They all fell silent.

A minute later, 'Thampi, I'm sorry,' said Vasanthi softly, regretfully, breaking the silence.

'Akka, you needn't to say sorry. What he did is wrong, unforgivable. Suganya can't get on with him anymore. So, neither can I. Because she becomes my wife and my better part. What ever he justifies himself to what he did, it's an absolute betrayal. In retrospect, he'll realize that he was wrong. But there will be no recovery for it,' said Sanjayan. After a pause, he went on, 'I think, his guilty conscience may prick him now.'

Vasanthi's husband, who kept looking on as yet, slightly nodded his head approvingly.

Vasanthi looked at Suganya, said: 'Why are you keeping silent? Tell something about it'

'Akka, I have nothing to say. I believe that he'll take a right decision,' said Suganya, taking a look at Sanjayan.

Vasanthi looked at Sanjayan, and asked: 'Thampi, who do you extend the first invitation to?'

'The first invitation should be extended to a person of a kind heart. I think, Kamala Aunty is such a person,' said Sanjayan and then turned his head to look at Suganya.

'I'm deeply indebted to Kamala aunty. She is a well-wisher of mine', said Suganya with a kind of happiness mingled with regret.

Sanjayan said: 'Akka, and also I'd promised Satkunam sir that I'd extend the first invitation of my wedding to him. So, I want to keep my promise whatever happens.'

Vasanthi and her husband exchanged glances, and smiled at each other.

Suganya looked down, fidgetting with her handkerchief.

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She thought that she was indebted to Satkunam too. Tears started to well up in her eyes.

'Suganya,' called out Vasanthi.

Suganya raised her eyes to look at her, wiping her tears with her handkerchief.

'What happened?' asked Vasanthi, looking at Suganya, with concern.

'No, nothing,' said Suganya instantly, not steeling herself to tell what she thought.

'Thampi, when will your parents come to Vavuniya?' asked Vasanthi, looking at Sanjayan.

'Appa and Amma have intended to come to Vavuniya tomorrow to see Suganya. Thereafter they'll come again on the wedding day,' said Sanjayan.

'Where will they meet Suganya?'

'At her house.'

She turned to look at Suganya, and asked: 'who'll be there at your house to receive them?'

'Mami has come yesterday from Mulankavil,' said Suganya, with the suspicion of a smile, slightly embarrassed.

'Okay, Stay you both here and talk,' said Vasanthi's husband, rising to his feet, smiling, and went into the house. Vasanthi followed him into.

Sanjayan looked directly at Suganya's face, asked: 'where's Ahrani?'

'She's at home with her friend Viru. And Mami also.'

'You mention the name 'Viru' frequently. I want to see that Viru,' he said with an amused look on his face.

'After a week tomorrow, you'll get to know her,' she said, smiling.

'By the way, shall we extend our first invitation today?' he asked: 'that's because my Amma and Appa will come tomorrow.'

'No problem, we can go today' she said.

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'At four o'clock?' he asked, with a questioning look.

'Yes!'

'Suganya, I won't visit your home. I'll be there in front of the Vairavapuliyankulam Pillaiyar Kovil, waiting for you. Bring a tray with you, it's enough. We can buy the things necessary for us from the stall in front of the kovil.'

She nodded.

'Well, I'd told you before ... you know, the *Thali*, and *Koorai* have been procured, and kept here safely. Do you want to see them?' he asked, feeling a surge of excitement

[*Thali*- a turmeric smeared cord or a gold cord with a gold pendant (*thali*) tied by the groom around the neck of the bride at the wedding day. *Koorai*' a silk sari worn by the bride at the time of wedding when the groom ties the *thali* ]

She smiled at him, rounded her lips without parting. The wrinkles like round brackets appeared on either cheek around her mouth.

He had a puzzled look on his face.

She went on, 'Okay, no problem. I can be waiting for a week tomorrow to see them'.

He was rather disappointed at her response, and wondered why she was not interested in looking at them. He didn't like to bother her asking the same question once more.

She realized that he'd been confused about her reaction. 'I shouldn't see the *koorai* and *thali*,' she said, smiling.

'Shouldn't you?' he exclaimed.

He looked puzzled.

She went on, 'don't you know it yet? A bride should see her *koorai* and *thali* on the wedding day, which is a ritual.'

'Oops, I shouldn't have asked you,' he said awkwardly,

She smiled gently, and changed the subject.

'By the way, tomorrow... you will come with your parents?' she asked with a smile.

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'No, I won't,' he said, 'Only Amma and Appa?'

'What will they ask me about?' she said in a nervous voice, smiling shyly.

'Don't feel so embarrassed. No question will they ask you,' he said, laughing at her, 'it's like a courtesy visit. You had better see them before the wedding day. And Amma wants very much to see her *Ilaya Marumahal*.' [Ilaya Marumahal means the wife of younger son]

She giggled at the remark that he referred to her as 'Ilaya Marumahal.'

He smiled at her with a strange pleasure.



As the evening progressed, Sanjayan had arrived at the Vairavapuliyankulam Pillaiyar kovil, on Station Road at ten to four, just ten minutes ahead of the time they'd fixed.

He stood opposite the kovil. It being a Saturday evening, the road was not so busy. The golden rays emitted by the evening sun poured down on to the ground, and shone brightly on every surface. On the foliage of trees, on the buildings, on the tarmacked road.

He was standing in a pool of direct sunlight. His body began to be damp with perspiration, which made him feel sticky and uneasy. He crossed the road, and stood in the shade of the outer wall of the kovil, to avoid the glare of the sun.

At five to four, he saw Suganya, clad in a Sari in a paler shade of green, approaching him, smiling. He smiled back at her.

'Suganya, Call Kamala Aunty to make sure whether she is at home,' said Sanjayan.

She nodded and took her mobile.

'Suganya, sometimes Satkunam sir will be at the other end,' he said with a note of caution.

'I'm going to call her on the land line. I know for sure he doesn't pick up the receiver of the land phone,' she said, looking at



him.

She pressed the number:

'Hello', said Kamala.

Suganya nodded at him, smiling. After Speaking to Kamala for nearly two minutes, she turned off the line.

They both went up to the stall in front of the temple, from where they bought the things. A coconut, three betels, three arecanuts, flowers, turmeric and a bunch of banana. And placed them on the tray she'd brought.

'Let's go inside the kovil,' she said, looking at him.

'I'm in trousers now. I don't go into any temple without a white verti," he said with an apologetic smile for refusing her request.

'Okay, stay here. I go inside,' she said, removing her flip-flops beside him

She walked up to the small water tank adjoining to the outer wall of the kovil, turned the tap on, and washed her feet. She entered the kovil, carrying the tray in her arms.

A few minutes later she returned and rejoined him. They started walking towards Kamala's house.

Standing at the front yard, Kamala, who had been waiting for them, saw them appear at the gate. She stepped briskly up to the gate and opened it with a blissful smile.

'Come, come in, come inside,' she welcomed, exposing a set of teeth.

Suganya stepped on to the veranda, and tried to offer the tray to her. Not stretching her arms to get it, Kamala said: 'Pillai, it's an auspicious thing. And you've come here after a long... come inside the pooja room. She clutched Suganya's upper arm gently, and took her into the pooja room.

Kamala lit the five wicks of the standing oil lamp on the slab, in front of Hindu deities in the picture frames worshipped for a few minutes, and then got the tray from Suganya, and placed it on

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the slab.

Kamala took some holy ash, and smeared on Suganya's forehead. Then she took a betel on which she placed a piece of turmeric and one hundred and one rupees, and offered it to Suganya.

Kamala blessed her. Suganya bowed low before her.

They both came out to the veranda where Sanjayan was sitting in a chair alone. 'Pillai, sit down,' Kamala said, looking at Suganya, and then went into the room.

Satkunam, who had woken from his nap, lying on his back on the bed, saw Kamala enter the room. He looked at her with a questioning look.

'Suganya and Sanje are here, sitting in the chairs on the veranda. Please, come out...' she said in a soft and hurried voice.

He said nothing, just looking at her.

'Please, come out. She is like our daughter. He was your student. Those two children are going to marry next week. We ought to bless them wholeheartedly. Why do you behave like this? You must forgive her whatever mistakes she made...''

'Ok, Ok. I'll come out,' said Satkunam, interrupting her monologue.

'Then Ok,' she said with a smile of satisfaction, and went into the kitchen to get tea for them.

A few minutes later, she went up to the veranda, taking three cups of tea. She was disappointed to find that her husband was absent at the veranda.

Meanwhile, on seeing his wife go over to veranda, Satkunam rose from the bed, and stepped out onto the veranda.

As soon as Satkunam appeared there, Sanjayan sprang to his feet. Suganya stood up hesitantly, looking at Kamala.

'Sit down,' said Satkunam.

Sanjayan and Suganya sat down. Kamala smiled at her husband, standing at the door frame.

'When did you come from Mannar?' asked Satkunam a question of formality in a dry voice.

'Yesterday night,' said Sanjayan, smiling.

Kamala interrupted: 'Thampi, then where're you staying?'

'Staying at Ranjan's home,' said Sanjayan, in a lively voice.

Then he looked at Satkunam and said: 'We intend to have our wedding on coming Sunday. We invite you to the wedding. As I had told you already that I'd extend my first invitation to you, I do it now, sir.'

Satkunam nodded indifferently, and then asked: 'What about your work?'

When Sanjayan was answering the question, Satkunam cast a sidelong glance at Suganya. But she was looking down.

Kamala got close to Suganya, and whispered in her ear: 'Pillai, why are you too stubborn to speak to him? Invite him to your wedding.'

Suganya looked up at her with a bland smile.

'Pillai, I know he has a hot temper. Sometimes he must have hurt you. He is like your father. Why can't you give in to him? A woman shouldn't entertain a haughty attitude', she further said.

Suganya looked at her in mild surprise.

Kamala went on, 'Pillai, if you speak to him, he will definitely speak back to you. Please, resume your relationship with him from today on. What do you say?'

Suganya wished to say that 'if a snake once sloughs its skin, it'll never take it again with its body.' But nothing did she say but smiled at her as if for the sake of smile.

'Pillai, tell me your answer,' insisted Kamala.

'Sir, we're going to leave now,' said Sanjayan in a calm voice, rising to his feet.

At once, almost simultaneously, Suganya got up from the chair with a sense of relief.

Kamala held Suganya's hand gently. They both stepped

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onto the yard together. 'Pillai, go... go there ... go and asked him to come to your wedding.' insisted Kamala again

Suganya hesitated, wondering what to say. Kamala turned around to look at her husband. Satkunam was not there. He'd already slipped into the house.

Kamala was bitterly disappointed at the hopeless situation that she couldn't break the deadlock. She looked at Suganya, and said: 'I don't know why you both still harbour resentment against each other. I think, school children are better than you two'.

She laughed gently at Suganya's expressionless face. Suganya laughed back at her blandly,

Sanjayan walked slowly towards the gate. Kamala and Suganya followed him, holding hands.

At the gate Sanjayan and Suganya took leave of Kamala. Standing at the gate Kamala watched their receding figures, affectionately.

## Thirty-three

It was Sunday, the following day, at nine o'clock, Ahrani and Virushali were sitting on the couch and chatting away cheerfully. Indrani was in the kitchen.

Suganya wore a cotton sari, made herself presentable, and perched on the bed, waiting for Sanjayan's parents, with a kind of feeling, which was a strange feeling-happiness mingled with sadness and shyness.

Her mobile started ringing. Sanjayan's number was on the screen. With a sigh of relief, she pressed the 'Ok' button,

'Hello,' she said nervously.

'Suganya, that is, my Amma and Appa have arrived at Vavuniya, and now getting on a three wheeler. They'll be there within a few minutes,' he said hastily.

'Ok, I'm ready,' she said, smiling.

'So, I'll call you later,' he said, and turned off the phone.

She went into the kitchen, told Indrani about his calling, and returned to the room.

Indrani came up to Ahrani and Virushali and said: 'Pillaikal, they are just coming.' She sat on the couch beside them.

In a matter of minutes, the three wheeler halted in front of the gate.

'There comes the three wheeler,' exclaimed Virushali.

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They three got up from the couch. Indrani walked briskly towards the gate. Murugesu and Danalakshmi got off the three wheeler. They were in the national costume. He was wearing a white verti and shirt. She was dressed in a yellow silk sari with a gold embroidered border and a blouse in cream colour, was holding a tray of things- delicious food, fruits and some other auspicious items- covered with a clean silk cloth. He was carrying a bag.

Indrani opened the gate with a welcoming smile. 'Aiya come in, Amma come in,' she said in a soft voice with her face blossoming.

'You are... Indrani?' asked Danalakshmi, smiling. Her voice trailed off.

'Yes, Yes, it's me' said Indrani, exposing a set of gleaming teeth. She took them into the house. Danalakshmi offered the tray to her. Taking it, Indrani went into the Pooja room, placed it on the slab before the deities, and returned to the living room.

Murugesu and Danalakshmi sat in the couch next to each other. Ahrani and Virushali were standing by the wall of the kitchen side, next to each other. Murugesu and Danalakshmi were looking at them, smiling.

'Pillai, come here,' said Indrani, looking at Ahrani, with her sweeping hand.

Ahrani moved two steps forward so that she could be identified by them.

'This is our granddaughter,' said Indrani meaningfully.

Danalakshmi rose to her feet, walked towards Ahrani, smiling, calling out delightfully: 'Pillai...' Ahrani also stepped towards her, stooped down and touched Danalakshmi's feet.

Danalakshmi said the blessing, hugged her and kissed on her cheeks affectionately.

'Do you know who she is?' asked Indrani, looking at Danalakshmi, pointing at Virushali.

'yes, I know,' said Danalakshmi instantly, 'this is Virushali,

who is the best friend of our granddaughter.' She looked at Virushali, smiling.

'How did you know it?' asked Indrani with a look of surprise.

'Thampi told me everything,' said Danalakshmi, smiling. Then she turned around to look at her husband, and found him standing behind her. 'Oh, you're here!' she exclaimed.

Ahrani went up to him and got his blessing. With a feeling of pure delight, Virushali followed suit.

Indrani smiled at Danalakshmi, and said: 'Neither Virushali nor I have seen your son as yet. But he'd told you everything about us'.

Virushali wanted to see Sanjayan. 'After a week, I can see Sanje Uncle', she spoke to herself.

Danalakshmi held Ahrani's hand with her right hand as well as Virushali's with her left, and returned to the couch, flanked by them both. She took two bars of chocolate out of the bag and held them in her cupped hands. 'Take one, please,' she said, looking at them both.

Ahrani took one first and gave it to Virushali. Virushali took the other one and gave it to Ahrani.

'This is what I expected. I realize you're good friends,' said Danalakshmi, smiling at them. They both smiled at each other.

Murugesu, sitting on an armchair opposite the couch, was looking on. Indrani also kept looking on, smiling.

Inside the room was Suganya alone. Although the room door was shut, she could hear their voices and so could she distinguish each voice from the other ones but she couldn't make out what they were talking. She was still perched on the bed, just wanted to remain staying there until Indrani would come up to her and ask her to come out to the living room.

Danalakshmi meanwhile looked around the living room as if to look for somebody, and eventually looked at Indrani with a

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broad smile.

Indrani could interpret her broad smile. She nodded her head slightly with a smile, stepped up to the room door, knocked at it gently, and opened it. On seeing Indrani at the door, Suganya rose to her feet. '

'Pillai, come out,' said Indrani softly.

Suganya came out to the living room flanked by Indrani. Murugesu saw her first, at once got up from the chair as a mark of warm welcome. Danalakshmi followed his gaze, and saw her. She stood up, so did Ahrani and Virushali.

Suganya stood next to Indrani, in front of them. Danalakshmi was deeply moved by Suganya's widowed appearance - without wearing a pottu and flowers. For a few minutes she remained stunned, looking at Suganya with a feeling of pity. Her eyes brimmed with tears. She wiped her tears with the end of her sari.

Suganya had a glance at Murugesu. Then he was gazing at his wife, who kept staring at Suganya.

Suganya looked at Danalakshmi's face. Danalakshmi placed her hand on Ahrani's head, gently pressed it against her waist affectionately, and mouthed: 'Is it Okay?' She smiled at her.

Suganya nodded her head slowly, with a single oscillation, smiling back gently at her.

'Pillai, come and sit down,' said Danalakshmi, looking at her, pointing at a chair opposite her.

Suganya walked quietly up to the chair and sat down. Danalakshmi looked directly at her face. Suganya smiled to conceal the fact that she was embarrassed. But her wonderfully expressive eyes expressed her embarrassment.

For the first time Ahrani and Virushali saw Suganya being embarrassed. They exchanged glances, then giggled quietly behind their hands.

'Pillai, feel comfortable,' said softly Danalakshmi, looking



at Suganya.

'No, no, I feel comfortable,' said Suganya instantly. She did look at Ahrani and Virushali. But, she remained silent. Danalakshmi asked some formal questions to persuade her to talk freely with them. Suganya answered all the questions she'd asked. After answering every single question, she fell silent again. She didn't ask back her any question.

Suganya got up from the chair. Danalakshmi gave a questioning look. Suganya excused herself and walked into the kitchen to get tea for them.

When she boiled the kettle Virushali entered the kitchen.

'Where's your friend?' asked Suganya, smiling

Virushali laughed, then said: " She's been attached to her?

Suganya looked at her face and said : 'I've been surprised to see you sitting next to her, because you're too shy to meet any person unfamiliar to you. I wonder how you can be so attached to her within a few minutes.'

'She has been un familiar to me before half an hour. But I've eagerly awaited to see her because she is like my grandmother, you know why ? Ahrani's grandmother is my grandmother And also, she was warm and friendly.'

Suganya hugged her and kissed on her forehead affectionately, and said: ' May the bond of your friendship continue forever!'

'Aunty, do you know something ?'

Suganya looked at her face expectantly.

Virushali said, laughing: 'she brought two bars of chocolate with her. They were identical too. She's already heard about both of us.' She told her what happened.

Suganya cast a look with respect at Danalakshmi through the kitchen door ajar. Danalakshmi was chatting with Ahrani. Murugesu and Indrani kept looking on.

Ten minutes later, Suganya served them tea, and returned

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to the kitchen. Danalakshmi placed her tea cup on the tray on the stool, and stepped into the kitchen. 'Pillai, what's going on?' She asked from behind Suganya's back.

On hearing her voice, Suganya got a slight shock, and turned around to look at her, smiling.

'What're you doing here?' asked Danalakshmi again.

'I'm going to cook lunch for you all,' said Suganya.

'You need not cook lunch for us. We're going to leave in, half an hour?'

Suganya gave a questioning look.

Danalakshmi went on, 'it's enough for now that you've served us tea.'

'How can you travel to Point Pedro without having lunch?' asked Suganya. Her voice trailed off.

'Pillai, it's OK. Don't worry,' said Danalakshmi.

Suganya looked puzzled.

Danalakshmi went on, 'Pillai, after the wedding you can serve us lunch or dinner or whatever. And also, you'll have to serve me three time meals and look after me till the last years of my life, won't you?'

Suganya smiled at her, and looked down shyly,

'Pillai, then come out ?' said Danalakshmi.

'Ok' said Suganya.

'Pillai, call me 'Mami'. In your answers, the word 'Mami' is missing,' said Danalakshmi laughing.

Suganya didn't reply but smiled at her. She turned off the cooker. They both went to the living room.

## Thirty-four

The wedding day itself arrived.

The venue of the occasion was Suganya's home. The wedding invitation had been extended to only a select few. According to the almanac, the auspicious time for the day was from nine o five till ten thirty-five in the morning. 'Thali kaddu'- tying the thali was fixed for ten o'clock.

In the morning at eight o'clock Kamala had arrived there first. Five minutes later Virushali's parents and Virushali had come, and then Vasanthi and her mother came. They all were helpful for Indrani in making arrangement for the wedding.

Suganya had had a shower, wore a cotton sari, and perched on the bed with a feeling of timidity. As the auspicious time was nearing she felt more and more timid. Every now and again she took a glance at her wrist watch, fidgeting the end of her sari.

Then she heard the room door being knocked.

'Yes, come in,' she answered.

The door opened. Vasanthi walked in. On seeing her Suganya stood up.

'Sit down, sit down,' said Vasanthi, smiling, resting her hand on Suganya's shoulder. 'You felt sweaty, why?' She asked, surprised, 'are you excited?'

'I'm not feeling excited,' said Suganya casually.

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'Then what? Anxiety ? I'm not satisfied with the look on your face. Your sparkling eyes have turned dull,' said Vasanthi with a questioning look.

'Akka, I feel shy. I'm so timid that I cannot come out and look at others.'

Suddenly, surprisingly Vasanthi fell silent.

Suganya went on, 'Akka, it's my second marriage... in front of my daughter... in front of my former husband's mother. I'm writhing with embarrassment. That's the reason why I haven't invited anybody from my native place. Because they all had witnessed my first wedding and they all know about my first husband.' She swallowed hard.

'Thankachchi, I know the feeling,' said Vasanthi in a shaky voice, hugged her affectionately, and continued, 'there're some basic traditional rituals that have to be performed in a wedding, which cannot be omitted, however simple the wedding takes place. So, you must be prepared willy-nilly to accept the basic rituals.'

Suganya smiled at her, and said: 'Akka, who says I'm not prepared ? Everything takes place here with my consent,' then went on, after a pause, 'I express you my feeling beyond the rational thought. Now I wonder how I can pass this day. So, I'll grit my teeth and come out.'

'Did Sanje talk to you?' asked Vasanthi, changing the subject.

'Yes, he called me early in the morning. They'll come here at ten past nine.

'How does he feel?' asked Vasanthi, smiling.

'Akka! I'm really surprised at how cleverly he handles a matter, a person or a situation. I can't even imagine it,' said Suganya with a surprised look, 'Akka, actually I needn't express myself to him. Before I could express my feelings he's realized. I don't know how. He has an understanding of all matters.'

'After the marriage, you've no problems,' said Vasanthi, laughing.

'Yes, definitely,' said Suganya in a serious tone, and then went on, Akka, he said that our people generally wouldn't attend at any event right on time. They'd come later than the time fixed, sometimes even half an hour late. Likewise they'd start their events late. They don't care about punctuality. Probably our wedding would have been over before all invitees could come here.'

Vasanthi laughed, and said: 'what he said is absolutely right. We're not punctual. I don't still understand why. That's what happens always.'

'It's getting nine o'clock,' said Suganya glancing at her wrist watch.

'Ok, we'll get ready. Thankachchi, be cool. I go outside to see what's going on,' said Vasanthi, rising to go out.

By ten past nine, a van halted at the gate. Watching the gate through the kitchen window Indrani said: 'Here comes the van.' And then she said, looking at Kamala and Vasanthi's mother, 'please will you both go there to welcome them.'

They both walked towards the gate. Murugesu, Danalakshmi, Dananjayan, Sanjayan, Arul, and Devi. Dananjayan was carrying his daughter, Varshi. They were all welcomed.

Indrani also came to the living room. They all exchanged greetings. A few minutes later Vasanthi went into the room.

In a matter of seconds, Suganya stepped out of the room flanked by Vasanthi and saw Sanjayan standing next to his parents. Then, she looked down and walked up to him, slowly, quietly.

Danalakshmi toted a tray on which there were some auspicious things including the *Koorai*. Sanjayan got the tray from her, and offered it to Suganya. Having got it Suganya walked back to the room flanked by Vasanthi.

Dananjayan saw Suganya for the very first time. Varshi

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asked: 'Appa, who's she?'

'She's your *Sithi*,' he said.

'Sithi' means the wife of younger father.

'I want to talk to her,' she said, wriggling herself to disengage from her father.

'Pillai, don't get into mischief. You can talk with her later. She is changing dress now inside the room', said Dananjayan, not letting her down on the floor.

Danalakshmi got close to her husband and whispered : ' I want to help them. There may be plenty of work to be done at this moment?'

Murugesu nodded, and sat in a chair quietly in the living room. Dananjayan stood at the porch, talking to Virushali's father. Sanjayan and Arul sat on the couch, talking.

Danalakshmi stepped into the kitchen where Indrani was preparing tea.

'Can I help you?' asked Danalakshmi from behind Indrani's back.

Indrani turned around to look at her, smiling, and said: Not necessary. Just relax! You've come here just now, having travelled from Jaffna. And everything is almost finished.'

Then Virushali's mother and Kamala came to the kitchen. Indrani introduced them to Danalakshmi.

Virushali's mother walked towards the living room, carrying a tray of tea.

After a few minutes of being introduced Danalakshmi and Kamala were chatting away jovially. They shifted from the kitchen to the Pooja room to check the rituals.

Inside the room, Suganya wore the *koorai* and perched on a stool. Vasanthi was making her up slightly. Then Ahrani along with Virushali entered the room, saw her mother wearing a crimson coloured sari embroidered with gold thread, and giggled at her mother. She sprang onto the bed and sat on it cross-legged.

Virushali followed suit.

At five to ten, of those being invited to the wedding, less than half had arrived there. Sanjayan was taken into the pooja room. He was wearing a Hindu wedding suit Silk white verti with an embroidered stripe with gold thread on the border, a national shirt and a turban. Murugesu, Dananjayan and Arul had come with him.

Suganya was taken to the pooja room flanked by Vasanthi. Kamala, Virushali's mother and Vasanthi's mother followed them. No sooner had she entered the pooja room she wore the garland she was holding in her hand round his neck.

At ten o'clock sharp, in front of the deities in the picture frames, Sanjayan tied the *thali* around Suganya's neck. At the same time the bride and groom were showered with auspicious rice by those clustering around them. And then the groom put the tip of the middle finger of his right hand in the small bowl of *Kunkumam* - a vermilion powder, and placed it on the middle of her forehead to form a *pottu*. The bride and groom exchanged garlands. Dananjayan took photographs of the event.

Murugesu and Danalakshmi stood next to each other. The bride and groom stooped down in front of them and touched their feet to get the blessing. Then the bride and groom got the blessing from Indrani, and then from Kamala.

Ahrani and Virushali were watching from behind Indrani's back. Ahrani, for the first time in her life, saw her mother wearing the *thali*, *kunkumam* and flowers. She was thrilled at the appearance of her mother. Virushali whispered in her ear: 'Ahra! Aunty looks very beautiful now, doesn't she?'

Indrani held Ahrani's hand, and took her to Suganya. Ahrani looked at her mother's face, hugged her tightly, throwing her arms around her mother's waist; and started, sobbing. Suganya put her arms around her daughter's shoulders, looking down at her daughter with a strange feeling of sadness. Her body rocked with sobs.

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Tears sprang to all the eyes clustering around both of them. A couple of minutes later Indrani got close to Ahrani, and said softly: 'Pillai, leave Amma ... leave now.'

Ahrani stepped aside and looked at Indrani. 'Pillai, turn around to take a photo,' said Indrani, wiping Ahrani's face with the end of her sari.

Ahrani stood next to her mother. Dananjayan took a photo. Suganya called Virushali to come close. Virushali came and stood next to Sanjayan. Dananjayan took another photo.

At ten fifteen, the registrar of marriage arrived. As soon as the registrar sat at the table in the living room, the bride and groom were taken to the living room. The registrar looked at them, smiling and said: 'Sit down.'

Indrani was still standing in front of the deities in the picture frames.

'Oh God! Let the rest of her life be peaceful! I won't ask you anything more than this,' she intoned her prayer. Suddenly, overwhelmed by her past thoughts of her son, she started sobbing. Tears were trickling down her cheeks.

Then Ahrani entered the pooja room, looking for Indrani 'Appamma! Appam... ma?', She called out from behind Indrani's back.

Indrani wiped her tears with her hands, and then turned back and embraced her granddaughter, choking her sobs back, and emotionally kissing her on both cheeks.

Two minutes later, they both stepped out to the living room, where the registrar took the document partly prepared out of his brief case, and then filled up the blanks in the document, and placed it on the table in front of the bride and groom for signature. They read and signed the document. Vasanthi's husband and Arul signed the document as the witnesses.

The registrar rose to his feet and so did the bride and groom. The registrar read out the document to them for



acceptance. The bride and groom exchanged the rings in front of the registrar.

Within fifteen minutes, the registration of marriage was over. The registrar smiled at them and said: 'I really appreciate your punctuality. Thanks for not delaying me. Today I have another wedding. Our people don't respect the time. We still have a lot to learn...?'

Then Vasanthi walked up to the table, and placed a tray on the table, on which there were a cup of tea and some delicious short eats.

'Oh... no thanks. I'm sorry to say,' said the registrar, tipping the head backwards, disapprovingly.

'Akka, what're you doing now?' asked Sanjayan, looking at Vasanthi, wrinkling his face slightly. 'He's come here for the sake of profession. He is not our guest, no. Nothing should we offer him when he doesn't request us!'

'I'm sorry,' said Vasanthi, looking at the registrar, smiling apologetically.

He smiled at her back, then said: 'OK, I will have a cup of tea only for the sake of him'. He took the cup and started sipping. He looked at Suganya and said in a serious tone: 'He's mature!'

Suganya smiled at him as a mark of thanks.

After having the tea, the registrar took leave.

The next event was '*Soru koduthal*'- serving rice on a plate to the bride and groom- which should be the final part of the wedding.

The bride and groom were taken to the kitchen. They both sat on the floor cross-legged, next to each other. The top part of a banana leaf was laid in front of them, on which leaf Suganya put rice and seven curries, pappadams, fried chili, a spoonful of curd and tri fruits- mango, jak fruit and banana, which was a full course vegetarian meal for lunch.

Leaning against the wall, Ahrani was looking at her mother.

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Suganya had the oddest feeling that her daughter was present there. A look passed between Vasanthi and Suganya. Vasanthi nodded her head, went up to Ahrani, and asked quietly: 'Ahrani, I have some work to do. Can you help me?'

'Yes, Aunt, ' said Ahrani instantly. At once Virushali said: 'I'll come with you too.'

Vasanthi took them out of the kitchen. Indrani had already slipped out of there, not wanting to be present in front of Suganya.

'Are you OK now?' asked Sanjayan, smiling, looking at Suganya, having read her mind.

She nodded, with a hint of smile.

'I know the feeling,' he whispered near to her ear, 'it's an unavoidable ritual. Let's finish it quickly before she can return.'

'No photos, please. Tell your Anna not to snap,' she said quietly.

'No problem,' he said instantly, casually, 'I'll keep these photos safe and secret so that she cannot find them. A few years later we can show them to her. Then she'll get to understand?'

'Thampi! Pillai! What're you talking now about?' asked Danalakshmi, to attract their attention, standing in front of them.

They both looked up at her, smiling.

Suganya put her right hand in the leaf, took a portion of the rice, to which she added a small quantity of each curry and mixed all together so as to form a combination of six tastes, such as sweet, spicy, salty, sour, bitter and astringent tastes.

She took some mashed rice with her clawed hand and fed it to him. So did he in return. They finished the rice on the leaf.

The bride and groom were taken to the living room again, and made to sit on a two-seater sofa, adorned with maroon velvet drapes. Behind the sofa was the wall of living room on which a pictorial screen hung down.

All who'd been present stepped forward to offer their congratulations to the bride and groom. Some elderly people gave

their blessing. Only friends shook hands and congratulated.

Kamala, Vasanthi and her mother, and Virushali's mother were the moving spirits of the event. At the dining table, they were serving a hearty and wonderful lunch to all who had come to the wedding, not at one sitting but taking turns.

Arul stepped up to Sanjayan, gave him Sanjayan's mobile phone, and said: 'Rajini akka calling?'

Sanjayan got it and answered the call. 'Hello ! Thampi, switch on the video,' said Rajini.

'Ok, Anni,' he said, and then clicked the video icon on the screen, enthusiastically.

Rajini popped on the screen of his phone. She was sitting in a wicker chair with a band of holy ash as well as a big sandal and *kunkumam pottu* on her forehead, wearing sari.

'Thampi, she's invisible to me,' said Rajini, smiling.

Sanjayan looked at Suganya and said with a smile : Anni is talking now. Please get close so that we both can be visible to her.

Suganya edged a little closer to him and rested her shoulder on his. Their heads tilting sideways, towards each other. They were brushing against each other.

'Now I can see both of your faces,' said Rajini, laughing, and then gave her blessing to them.

They accepted with a deep sense of gratitude. 'Anni, we wish you were here with us at this moment,' he said, clicking his tongue in a slight disappointment.

'Don't worry about that. Even though not physically witnessing the wedding, I can see both of you in the cultural attire appropriate for a wedding. And also, my blessing to you forever,' said Rajini. After a pause, she went on, ' Well, you're busy now. I'll call you later.'

The conversation ended.

Then Varshi walked up to Sanjayan, and stood between his knees, looking at Suganya and then said: 'Sithi.'

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Suganya scooped her up in her arms, and sat her on her lap



By one o'clock the wedding guests started to leave in twos and threes. Sanjayan's friend Ranjan with his wife, Reka and daughter came up to the bride and groom, and said: 'Sanje, we're going to leave.' Shaking hands, he went on, 'everything was fine. But I regret that we couldn't participate in the thali kaddu.

'Why were you late?' asked Sanjayan.

'I thought it would be late.'

'I won't accept your lame excuse,' said Sanjayan, smiling at him. 'I had informed you that the thali kaddu would be at ten o'clock sharp.'

'I didn't expect that the wedding would be so punctual.'

'So, I didn't make a mistake, no?'

'Okay, Okay... it's my mistake. And how can we know that you're punctual like white people,' said Ranjan, laughing.

Sanjayan said: 'Machan, I'd expected that our people would come late but I didn't expect that you would be late. And also, punctuality is not applicable to only white people.'

Before he could finish talking, Ranjan interrupted: 'Machan, don't punish me... leave me.' He raised both hands up as if to surrender, in a kind of dramatic way, amusingly.

Suganya and Reka were looking on, laughing. Ranjan looked at Suganya, and said: 'He is honest. I can't be an honest man like him. But I'm proud of being his friend. No jokes, it's an absolute truth.'

Suganya smiled as a mark of acceptance.

Sanjayan said: 'Hey Machan, leave me. I feel uneasy and embarrassed that you praise me to my face.'

'For that, I can't come here another day, can I?' said Ranjan dramatically.

They all laughed.

'Annai, why didn't your Anni come here?' asked Reka,

looking at Sanjayan, with a questioning look.

'I'm sorry, I should have told you before', Said Sanjayan apologetically, that's because she's pregnant.'

'Oh, what a good thing,' exclaimed Reka.

After Ranjan's family took leave, Kamala came up to the bride and groom, exposing a set of teeth. 'Pillaikal, I'm going to leave too.'

Sanjayan and Suganya got up from the sofa. 'Sit down, sit down,' said Kamala, touching Suganya's shoulder.

'Aunty, all the people we invited have come, but Satkunam sir,' said Sanjayan, looking at Kamala.

'He told me yesterday that he wanted to see our daughter and granddaughter. But, at that time itself, I knew for sure that was a pretext for not participating in the wedding. I said nothing to him. So he went to Colombo', said Kamala briefly.

Suganya remained silent without any reaction to what she said. Kamala took notice of her emotionless reaction, and was disappointed. But she didn't want to talk anything unpleasant at that time. She talked to Sanjayan. Then Suganya looked at her worriedly.

Indrani then came up to Kamala, and held her hand, said: 'Amma! I'll never forget you and your husband. You both were helpful to my niece and granddaughter. I could be peaceful there at Mulankavil, leaving them because you both were with them for company as well as godparents for them. I'm deeply indebted to both of you for all your help and support. Thank you very much! I wish the engineer were here. Anyway, please convey my gratitude to him.'

Kamala's face blossomed. 'It's OK,' she said smiling, 'Suganya and Ahrani are good company for us. We exchange our affection mutually.' She laughed, with her eyes flicking from face to face, and then said: 'I'll come later, after four o'clock.' She pecked Suganya on the cheek, and left.

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Then after Vasanthi along with her family came up to the bride and groom. Sanjayan and Suganya sprang to their feet, and expressed their gratitude for her unwavering support. 'Akka...' called out Suganya affectionately in a shaky voice. Her voice trailed off. A few seconds later, she couldn't see Vasanthi's face clearly that tears blurred her eyes. She fluttered her eyelashes. A few beads of her tears rolled down her cheeks.

Vasanthi hugged her, kissed her on both cheeks and whispered in her ear: 'Don't worry. Only good has happened to you. You'll be happy.'

They made small talk, then Vasanthi's family took leave.

The guest, one after another, kept coming up to the bride and groom and thus taking leave of them. It was at about two o'clock when the last guest had left.

There remained only the household, with whom was Arul. They all sat on the chairs in a ring in the living room, chatting away. Suganya was silent, just gently smiling, but not continuously.

After an hour, Suganya rose to her feet, walked into the kitchen as the others kept chatting away. She boiled the water to prepare tea for them.

Fifteen minutes later she came to the living room toting a tray of tea.

'Here Pillai comes with tea!' said Danalakshmi in a tone of surprise, delightfully.

The rest of them looked at Suganya. She served tea to all of them.

Sipping his tea, Murugesu said, looking at his wife: 'Good mixture!'

'Yes, of course!' Danalakshmi seconded it. The others nodded approvingly.

At the moment Suganya couldn't fully understand the word 'good mixture.' she looked at Sanjayan puzzled.

Sanjayan looked at her, and said: 'that's, the taste of a tea

depends on the mixture of tea leaf, sugar and milk powder. Good mixture means that those three have been mixed together with proper ratios. In essence, the tea you made is absolutely wonderful.'

They all laughed. Suganya also did smile gently with a slight embarrassment. She returned to her chair beside Sanjayan's. Varshi, who was sitting on Sanjayan's lap, looked at her. Suganya stretched her arm, smiling. Immediately Varshi shifted from Sanjayan's lap to Suganya's.

The others laughed.

She said : 'Sithi, you and sithappa come with us to go home.'

Suganya brushed her cheek against hers, and said quietly: 'we'll come there, but not today.'

'Why not come today?' Varshi asked, looking up at her face.

Suganya felt difficult to answer the question. Before she could reply, Danalakshmi interrupted: 'Pillai, don't disturb Sithi, asking your questions. Let her drink her tea.'

'Sithi, drink your tea. I won't disturb you', Said Varshi looking up at Suganya.

Indrani commented, smiling. 'She was talking like a grown-up child.'

At once Murugesu said: 'Yes, not only she but also nowadays all children are very intelligent. I'm surprised at them.'

They all kept chatting away happily, sharing the light moment.

The time they had to take leave approached. They all got up from the chairs, and started exchanging their parting words,

Danalakshmi got close to Suganya, took her hands into hers, and with concern, in a tone of advice, said: 'Pillai! Thampi has a good opinion of you . He speaks highly of you. Now I realize that's true. And it's not so good that I speak proudly of my son myself. But at this moment I must say something about him. He's very under

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standing and cares about other people. He doesn't hurt others. He does whatever he thinks right, and doesn't yield to anything wrong.' After a pause she went on with a smile, 'he will have whatever you cook, without complaining, and he likes fish curry very much. Pillai, only thing I ask you is that you shouldn't induce him to earn more money than his salary. If you do so, you'll lose your honest husband. Pillai, I've handed Thampi over to you from today on. Look after him well. If you've had any dissatisfaction with him, have a heart-to-heart exchange with him. He'll get to realize. He will be a good husband.'

Suganya nodded her head slightly, humbly.

Danalakshmi hugged her and kissed on her cheeks affectionately. Then she stepped up to Ahrani, and kissed her, patting her back with kindness.

Meanwhile Murugesu gave some advice to Sanjayan. 'Thampi, I believe that you know your situation. You're on the razor's edge. Your life is a challenge. You shouldn't become a life's loser. Be strong! Face everything confidently. Shouldn't reopen old wounds. Shouldn't talk about her past. And you must keep it in your mind that her old wound still is raw, weeping under the scab.'

'I understand, Appa,' said Sanjayan humbly.

'Yes, I know that,' Murugesu said. 'You're mature enough to overcome all the obstacles. As your father, advising you is my obligation. That's why I had to tell you these things.'

The van that would take them home was waiting for them at the gate on Goodshed Road.

Suganya and Sanjayan stood at the porch, next to each other, watching the others walking towards the van. Indrani and Ahrani stood at the gate.

Danalakshmi pecked Ahrani on the cheek as she got on the van. The van began to move towards Station Road amid tears.



## Thirty-five

Just a week went by after the wedding. It was Sunday night, when Suganya was cooking dinner; Ahrani was studying at the table in the room and Sanjayan was sitting on the floor in front of the empty shelf placed by the wall of the living room.

In the early hours of the day Sanjayan had brought his belongings there from his quarters in Murunkan. After lunch Sanjayan and Suganya had been engaged in arranging the things in the house attractively.

Among his belongings brought from Murunkan, he considered the book shelf was the most important. So, he spared the leisure time to arrange it comfortably, in a relaxed mood.

All the books had been packed in two big cardboard boxes. He untied the boxes and took the books out and went on sorting them into fiction, non-fiction, technical ones, religious ones.

Then Suganya came there. 'You've got a lot of books!' she exclaimed, and sat on the floor cross-legged.

He looked at her with a faint smile, and said: 'Not a lot of books! You didn't see some other people's home libraries. That's why you're talking like this,'

'They are born to study, aren't they?' she said, laughing. 'You too,' she laughed, pointing her chin at him.

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'Then you ?' he asked with an amusing look on his face.

She smiled, saying nothing, and then asked: 'shall I browse?'

'Yes of course,' he said instantly. 'Don't ask me such question again.'

She took a book, opened it, and said: 'It's an English book, no.'

He turned to look at the book, and said: 'that is my field-related book, no. Look that side!' He pointed at a pile of Tamil books.

As he was dusting the shelf, she was looking at the books one by one.

Then his mobile on the table started ringing. 'Wait! I bring it,' she said and got up. She took the phone, and said: 'Anna calling!'

She gave it to him and walked into the kitchen.

Five minutes later, he called out to her. She came out. He was in a bright mood.

She looked at his face eagerly, expectantly.

'Suganya! Anni is blessed with a baby boy', he said cheerfully.

'Oh good!' she exclaimed. 'Are mother and baby fine?' she asked with concern.

'Yes, yes,' he said, 'by five o'clock she had got the labour pains. At once she was taken to hospital. At six fifteen she gave birth. It was an easy delivery.' His face was blooming.

'We must visit her, mustn't we?' She asked and looked at his face.

'Yes, we must!' he said, 'but we can't go to her home in our village, before we're formally invited there. So, we can go to the hospital to visit her.'

'Yes, I understand,' she said.

'She'll be discharged from the hospital after twenty-four hours after delivery. So, let's leave here to Point Pedro tomorrow

morning.'

She nodded.

'We'll have returned here before three o'clock, he said. 'And can Ahrani stay here at home alone?' he asked with concern.

'That's not a problem. Viru will stay here with her till we come back.'

'Then, ok.'

She went into the room to inform the matter to Ahrani. He was stacking the shelf with the books.

### Thirty-six

Murugesu and Danalakshmi came to the Amman kovil in the morning. When he was in a white verti, bare-chested, she was dressed in a sari. Their faces were blossoming. They both stood opposite each other in front of the kovil, and worshipped, looking at the sanctum through the threshold. They didn't enter the kovil because of the *thudakku*.

'Thudakku' means the days of taboo. When a child is born the thudakku lasts thirty days for the father's relations, on which days they cannot enter the temple.

Murugesu held a coconut with the crest concealing the tripores, and smashed it down on the stepping stone. The kernel was pure white, which was a good sign of the future. They felt happy.

Having worshipped they turned around. Arul was there standing in front of them. They exchanged greetings, and had small talk.

Then Kasilingam, a respectable person of the village, walking towards the temple, happened to see them talking. He approached them, smiling. 'Master, you've come to the kovil early in the morning,' he said, looking at Murugesu, and went on, 'I heard a good news that you have got a grandson.'

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'Yes, yes' Murugesu laughed delightfully. Danalakshmi said nothing, but was smiling happily.

After they talked about different things, Kasilingam asked: 'Master, why didn't you formally invite Sanje to your home on the fourth day since the wedding?'

'Thampi, we must invite them,' said Murugesu, 'to be frank with you, we have some practical problems. Anyhow, after the period of *thudakku*, we'll do it.'

'Good, good,' said Kasilingam happily. 'Master Sanje did a brave progressive deed. I appreciate him.'

Danalakshmi felt happy more than her husband did. Arul was looking on with satisfaction and happiness.

Murugesu and Danalakshmi took leave of them, and started walking home.

Kasilingam and Arul remained chatting.

'Thampi! Sanje didn't invite me to his wedding,' said Kasilingam with a slight regret.

'Don't misunderstand him. He'd invited a select few,' said Arul, trying to justify Sanjayan's decision.

'Am I not in the select few?' asked Kasilingam, giving a worried look.

'Aiya, I don't mean, that' said Arul, 'you have to realize his critical situation. He wanted to do it at the household level. I was an exception. Sanje and I have been intimate friends since our tender age.'

Then Selvan came out of the temple, and walked up to them, smiling broadly with trisripes of white holy ash and a big yellow pottu gleaming on his forehead.

'How are you? you have started chatting in front of the entrance of the temple in the morning itself?' he asked, beaming at them.

Before Selvan got close to them, they dropped the subject. Selvan asked, looking at Arul: 'Thampi, your best friend got

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married stealthily, I heard. Is it true?'

'No, it's not a stealthy marriage but an ordinary marriage,' said Arul instantly with a slight disappointment.

'You stand up for your friend. Why couldn't he have his wedding grandly? That was because the bride was a widow. Am I right?' Selvan laughed scornfully and once looked at Kasilingam's face.

Arul didn't say anything.

Selvan went on, 'Arul! I heard another thing. He has bought cow with its calf, hek... hek... hek.' He sniggered, revealing a line of teeth.

Arul got angry at his remark. But he managed to hold back his anger.

Selvan still continued, 'I won't say that seeking a woman is wrong. If you want to drink liquor, you need not buy a bar. A bottle of liquor is enough, more than enough. But Sanje purchased the bar. I know for sure, Sanje must have gone there and got trapped. Maybe she is pregnant. That's why the wedding has been finished secretly.'

Arul was so furious at what he said, that he couldn't control himself. 'You ... you... fool! How dare to say this ... about my friend... in front of me,' he stammered. As he got close to Selvan, Kasilingam quickly interposed himself between them in order to avoid a fight.

Kasilingam also got irritated at Selvan's comments, but he wanted to avoid a fight in front of the kovil. Looking at Selvan, he said: 'think before you talk. Sanje is a progressive. Marrying a widow is not a wrong thing. Sanje is our boy. We shouldn't insult him what so ever. Go... go away... don't stay here.'

Selvan started to walk away, not uttering a single word back. Arul was looking down so as to avoid to see Selvan, until his temper had cooled.

'Thampi, he's gone,' said Kasilingam, 'you know, he is a gossip. Get rid of what he said'

Arul looked up at him vacantly and said: 'now you've realized why Sanje didn't invite all to his wedding.'

Kasilingam nodded his head gently, approvingly.

## Thirty-Seven

The Examinations Department had released the results of the Grade five scholarship Examination last night on its website.

Ahrani had got through the exam with higher marks, obtaining the second place in the Vavuniya district whereas Virushali hadn't got enough marks to pass the exam. She was three marks short of the cut off.

Ahrani couldn't celebrate her success because Virushali was unsuccessful in passing the exam. She neither met Virushali nor called her since the morning. She kept tossing and turning on the bed all morning.

Suganya also didn't look so happy. The fact that Virushali was unsuccessful overshadowed Ahrani's success. She did her daily chores mechanically. Virushali's face had been in her mind, since the results were released last night.

However she managed to cook lunch, and went into the room where Ahrani was still lying on the bed.

'Pillai, come to have your lunch,' she said, patting her on the head.

'Amma, I don't feel hungry. I'll have it later,' said Ahrani, moaning.

'Pillai, come out will you?!'

'Amma, I'll have my lunch later,' sighed Ahrani.

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Then Sanjayan was sitting in a chair on the porch.

Suganya came up to him, and asked to come to have lunch.

He looked her full on her face, asked: 'Has Ahrani had her lunch?'

'She said she'd have later' said Suganya listlessly.

'Suganya, why are you so unhappy?' he asked. 'The Grade five scholarship exam is a competitive exam, no. All the candidates cannot pass it and this exam is not an end of the career or study. So, don't worry thinking too much. Let's go to Virushali's house in the evening. Tell Ahrani to have lunch, and get ready to go there.'

She nodded, and walked towards the room. He saw Ahrani stepping into the kitchen with Suganya.

Fifteen minutes later, Suganya came again up to him, and said: 'She's had her lunch. Please, come to have lunch now.'

'Ok, I'm coming,' he said, and got up to go into the kitchen.

Over lunch, he said: 'we have to buy some gifts for Ahrani and Virushali. So, by two o'clock, shall we go to the town to buy something?'

She agreed.



By four o'clock, Suganya and Sanjayan with Ahrani went to Virushali's home. Virushali's mother welcomed them. She congratulated Ahrani, and kissed her on both cheeks.

They all sat on the chairs in the living room. Virushali's father and grandmother appeared there. But Virushali hadn't been present as yet.

'Aunty, where's Viru?' asked Ahrani.

'She is inside the room.'

Ahrani walked into the room, and came out with Virushali.

Virushali looked tired and untidy, as though she'd cried her eyes out. Having seen her appearance Suganya felt sad, rose to her feet, stepped up to her, hugged her tightly, and kissed her on both cheeks. She returned to the chair, pressing Virushali against her



body, and then sat her on her lap. 'Don't worry! This exam is not an end of your study,' said Suganya, combing Virushali's hair with her fingers.

The others kept looking on silently.

Suganya gave a bag to Virushali and the other bag to Ahrani. Both of them opened their bags simultaneously, and looked inside eagerly. There were a salwar Kameez and a box of chocolate in each bag.

Suganya looked at Virushali, and said: 'what I gave you and what I gave Ahrani are almost identical. Both of you are my daughters. Well, have you had your lunch?'

Virushali didn't respond, but looked at her mother. Snganya followed her gaze.

Virushali's mother said: 'no, she hasn't still.'

'Why?' asked Suganya, looking directly at Virushali's face. 'Your friend also had been lying on the bed since the results were released last night because you didn't pass the exam.'

The rest of them looked at Ahrani, instantly, delightfully.

Suganya went on, 'Pillai, go and have a bath, and then have your meal. Let's go to the cinema tonight, Ok?'

Virushali looked at her mother again. Her mother nodded approvingly. Virushali lifted herself down from Suganya's lap, and walked towards the room.

Suganya looked at Virushali's mother, and said: 'Viru also was a consolation to me whenever I suffered.' She wiped the tears welling up in her eyes with her handkerchief.

'All is well,' said Virushali's mother.

Virushali's father looked at Sanjayan and Suganya, and said: 'Thanks?'

Sanjayan looked at him, and said: 'As far as students are concerned they are under tremendous pressure when they are unsuccessful in the exam. And also when we celebrate the winners, the losers feel that they're inferior to the winners. We never

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consider the child's world.'

'We should honour the winners, in order to encourage them, shouldn't we? And also they deserve the honours', said Virushali's father, don't they?.

'Of course, we should,' said Sanjayan, 'but we shouldn't disturb the losers. I've seen posters and banners of the students who have done well at the exam in schools. This will hurt a child who couldn't perform well at the exam. We must celebrate the winners, but it should be inside the school premises. The posters displayed outside the school, and the photos of the winners being published in the daily news papers are publicity for the school administration, and advertisement for the private tutorials. Consequently the parents want their children's photos to appear on the banners and in the newspapers. So they put pressure on their children, which is a major source of stress.'

The others kept looking at him silently, carefully listening.

He went on, 'You see, now Ahrani passed the exam where as Virushali failed. They both are our children. How can we say that Ahrani is better than Virushali? Neither Suganya nor I can consider that Virushali is inferior to Ahrani. That's the reason that makes everybody feel sad. I want to say something to you all that Suganya didn't enjoy Ahrani's success. She had been thinking of Viru all day while Ahrani didn't have her breakfast. The mood of our house was completely strange. They both hesitated even to see Virushali's face.

Then Virushali's grandmother stepped up to Ahrani with a quick step, hugged her and kissed.

The others looked at them.

## Thirty-eight

It was a Friday evening. Sanjayan returned home from work, feeling exhausted. He refreshed himself with a shower to get rid of his physical exhaustion, wore a sarong, and sat in a chair on the porch.

Suganya offered him a cup of tea. He smelt the vanilla essence of the tea and took a sip. 'Fantastic!' he said, continuing to sip his tea.

She took his empty cup, and walked into the kitchen. She came out again, and sat on the bench opposite his chair.

'Where is Ahrani?' he asked, looking around.

'She's gone to Viru's house.'

He nodded.

'I have something to talk to you,' she said.

He looked at her with a questioning look.

She went on, 'the house owner phoned me up last night and said that they were going to sell this house. If we wanted to buy it we could do it. Otherwise we would have to leave the house before three months. You know, December thirty-first is the deadline for vacating the house!'

Her face lined with worry. She looked at him with a sense of resignation.

'Don't worry!' he said instantly, and asked:

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'Do you want to buy this house?'

'Yes, but...' her voice trailed off.

'What about Ahrani?'

'She also wants this house very much.'

'Then Ok?' he said, 'we both are employees. So, don't worry.'

'We haven't got that much money on us,' she said.

'Yes, there'll be a shortfall in what we need,' he said, 'we can get money from Appa and Anna. We are going to buy an asset, no?'

He took his phone, and talked to Murugesu for a few minutes.

Suganya was looking at his face.

'Ok, it's done!' said Sanjayan, with a smile of satisfaction.

'What has Mama said?' asked Suganya, expectantly, with a look of surprise.

'In essence, 'both Ahrani and Varshi will inherit our family fortune from us. Don't hesitate to ask me Ahrani's share of the family fortune. How much money do you need? When will I have to deposit in your account?'' This is what Appa said,' he said, with his face wreathing in smiles.

She looked at him with tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

Then Ahrani opened the gate, and walked straight past into the house, dropping her eyes down.

Suganya looked at him. Her face looked worried.

'Don't worry. She'll get to realize soon,' he said airily.

'I couldn't comprehend why she avoids you, even eye contact with you. In the ordinary way she is a sportive and friendly girl. She is getting on with all people but you,' she said with a perplexed expression.

'Suganya, she is really a nice girl, no doubt,' he said instantly, 'you need not be confused about her behaviour towards

me. She is uncertain of the relationship between her and me. She doesn't want to call me uncle as she calls Viru's father, nor does she call me Appa. She is not still prepared to call me Appa. As far as she's concerned her relationship with me swings between Uncle and Appa. Poor girl, she's struggling with her inner self. I can sense her feelings.'

She nodded approvingly.

'Suganya, do you know something?' he said, smiling, 'before our marriage you called me 'Sanje Anna'. Now you have no word to call me. You feel shy to call me 'Athan.'

She, all of a sudden, giggled behind her hand.

Then Ahrani stood at the front door, inside the living room to be visible to Suganya, and mouthed, 'Amma ... please come here!'

'Just a minute, she's calling me,' said Suganya, looking at him.

She went up to Ahrani. They both went into the room. Sanjayan took the news paper and started reading the editorial.

Ten minutes later Suganya returned to the porch. Sanjayan lowered the news paper to look at her.

She cleared her throat and said: 'her friend's elder sister attained age. Their family is going to have a puberty ceremony tomorrow. Her friend has invited these two girls, both Pillai and Viru. So, Pillai asks me whether she will go there.'

'Yes, she must go,' he said firmly, 'because they have invited her. We shouldn't turn down any invitation, which is a great insult to those inviting us. So, let her go to the ceremony.'

'Who takes them there to the ceremony?' asked Suganya, and then went on, 'Viru's father has gone to Jaffna. you're to go to Colombo tonight.'

'Which is the venue for the ceremony?' he asked.

'At their house at Veppankulam.'

'That's not a problem. Veppankulam is very near, on

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Mannar Road, at one kilometre off the Kurumankadu junction. They can hire a three wheeler and go there,' he said, and then asked: 'Is there any three wheeler that is familiar to you?'

'Yes, I know a three wheeler,' she said. She told him about Anandan, who had once taken them to the hospital.

'I think, from what you said, he's a nice guy,' he said, "I'll go and talk to him about the hire.'

He got up, changed out of his sarong, and walked towards Station Road. There were two three wheelers on the other side of the road. He approached them, and asked: 'Can I meet Mr. Anandan, please?'

'Yes, it's me,' said a young man, coming forward.

'I want to hire your three wheeler. Not now, I want it tomorrow,' said Sanjayan.

'Oh sure,' he said, 'at what time? and where to?' He looked at Sanjayan's face.

'At nine o'clock in the morning. To Veppankulam,' said Sanjayan.

'Ok, my three wheeler will pull up in front of your gate at nine o'clock sharp,' said Anandan, smiling.

'And also, you'll have to fetch them after the ceremony from there.'

'Ok, at what time will they return?'

'I'm not sure,' said Sanjayan, 'I won't come. Our two girls will come.'

'Yes, I know them,' said Anandan, 'Annai, So, I need not wait there. They can call me when they want to return. I'll go there and pick them up, Okay?'

'Yes, that's right.'

Sanjayan got his mobile number and saved it in his name list.

'Thampi, do you know our whereabouts?' he asked.

'Yes, I know,' said Anandan, smiling, 'Ahrani house.'

Sanjayan looked puzzled.

'Annai, I know about Ahrani. She got through the Scholarship exam, obtaining the second rank in our district. I'd seen in the news paper,' said Anandan, smiling gently.

They made small talk.

Sanjayan stepped into the house.

'Everything fine. He'll come here at nine o'clock sharp,' he said, looking at Suganya, taking off his shirt. 'He's a nice guy as you told me. He knows all about us.' He told her everything that they talked.

She felt happy, and then said: 'Sātkunam sir once had told me, the people like Anandan are zeros. They think themselves they're heroes. But really they're zeros.'

Sanjayan laughed, shaking his head.

'What's meant by the zero? All the drivers are considered zeros?' asked Suganya with an innocent look.

'Not that he meant that the drivers were zeros,' he said, 'mmm... you have a lot of things to learn.' He went up to the book shelf, and opened it. He fished out a book out of the top row of it.

He gave the book to her, and said: 'read it.'

She read out its title '*Poochchiyam poochchiyamalla*' - The zero is not zero, written by Theniyaan.

'This is his autobiography. If you read it you'll find the meaning of the zero,' he said.

'I'm going to start reading it from today on,' she said, with the interest kindled by him.

He walked into the room to make travel arrangements for the mail train that he'd have to catch.



The following day in the morning at nine o'clock Anandan's three wheeler halted at the gate. Suganya gave her mobile phone to Ahrani, and said: 'in case of need, call me! And you should call me when you've reached their house; and when you leave there.'

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Understand?'

Ahrani nodded.

Suganya looked at Virushali.

'We'll do it as you say,' said Virushali.

Both Ahrani and Virushali got on the three wheeler. Standing at the gate, Suganya waved bye to them.

Suganya walked back into the house. There being some pittu and curry left over from the breakfast, she thought that she didn't need to cook lunch for only her, and could manage the leftover for her lunch. So, she reclined on the couch, waiting for their call.

A few minutes later Ahrani called her and told that they had reached their friend's house.

Suganya felt relaxed, and resumed reading the book. After three and a half hours uninterrupted reading, she had her lunch. And then she continued reading until Ahrani called her again by two o'clock.

'Amma! We're about to leave here?'

'Is the threewheeler waiting outside?' asked Surganya in a tone of surprise.

'Yes, Anandan Uncle is waiting outside. We're going to get on the three wheeler.'

'Then. Ok.'

Suganya cut the line. There remained only one page in the book. But she couldn't still fully understand the title of the book. Then last paragraph revealed the secret, which read as followed...

*'I'm a Srilankan writer who, as the voice of the oppressed people, has been writing their problems continuously until now. These oppressed caste people had been viewed by the caste-ridden society as being of little value, valueless zeros. I, one of them, have made it realized that they're not zeros by relating the tracks of my life and my literary memoirs.'*

- Sahithya ratna K. Theniyaan -



## Siva. Ahrooran

She grasped now the meaning of the word Zero. As soon as she closed the book with a sigh, the three wheeler stopped at the gate. Ahrani got out of it.

'Thanks Uncle,' said Ahrani.

Suganya stepped up to the gate, and asked: 'Where is Viru?'

'Akka! I've dropped her at the gate of her home first,' said Anandan with a smile.

She paid the fare. With a nod, he drove off. She weighed him up in her mind.

### Thirty-nine

In the morning by eight o'clock, Murugesu sat in a chair on the veranda, reading the daily news paper. No sooner had he heard the sound of the gate opening than he looked up from the news paper and cast his look in the direction of the gate. Having seen three of highly respectable people in their village entered the front yard through the gate, he wondered why they'd come together in the morning itself. With a shade surprise, he rose to his feet, walked a few steps towards them, and welcomed them.

'Please, come in ... come in,' he said, smiling.

They three smiled back at him, and stepped up onto the veranda,

'Please, sit down!' said Murugesu, pointing at the chairs.

They three sat in the chairs, across each other, opposite whom he himself sat down, and then asked: 'May I know why you've come here in the morning? Anything important matter?' His eyes flicked from face to face.

'Master, it's an important matter but I don't know how to start it,' said Kasilingam, one of them, and then looked at the other two faces.

'Don't worry, tell me whatever it may be' said Murugesu.

'The RDS as well as the trustees of our Kovil have suggested that Sanje with his family be formally invited to our village. But we

wondered if it's a right thing to invite them to our village before you formally invite them to your home. That's why we've come here to converse with you,' said Kasilingam.

'RDS' Stands for Rural Development Society.

Murugesu looked into Kasilingam's eyes.

Kasilingam went on, 'Sir, Sanje is an asset to our village. It's a good and progressive thing that he married a widow, which we must appreciate. And also, Sanje has stopped coming here after the marriage. I won't tell that what he does is wrong. You told me in front of the Kovil that you were to invite them to your home after the *thudakku* is over.'

Murugesu remained silent with his eyes wide open, with a feeling of happiness. He cleared his throat, and said: 'we're prepared to invite them home, and are waiting for his consent.'

'Why? Doesn't he want to come here?' asked Kasilingam in a tone of surprise. And the other two looked at each other confused.

Murugesu said: 'not that I mean like that. Actually he wants to come here. I think, he is not in a position to come here. There may be some problems to him. He'll definitely solve the problems and come here with his wife and child as soon as possible.'

'We don't want to bother you with our prying questions. We'll try to understand what you mean. We can be waiting for them until they want to come here together,' said Kasilingam and then looked at the other two.

They also nodded.

'Thanks,' said Murugesu, 'anyway, I'll speak to Thampi about this matter. But the final decision will be up to him.'

Then Danalakshmi stepped down onto the veranda, carrying a tray, and served them tea. She placed the tray on the small stool in front of them, and went into the house.

They dropped the subject they'd been talking about, and started chatting about different things. About their families, the

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monsoon, the onion cultivation, the present political climate, on and on.

One and a half hours later they left. Danalakshmi came out to the veranda and enquired as to why they'd come there. Murugesu told everything to her.

She felt happy, and said: 'let's ask Thampi to come here.'

'It's up to Thampi,' he said.

'Our villagers themselves want to invite him to our village. Then what? Everything fine,' she said.

'Ok,' he said, 'take the phone.'

She stepped briskly into the house like a hyperactive child. He laughed quietly behind her back. She came back with the phone.

He talked on the phone with Sanjayan for ten minutes, and then gave the phone to her.

'What does he say?' she asked enthusiastically and expectantly.

'He's in the field in Mannar. He told me that after returning home in the evening and talking about this matter with them, he would say.'

'Ok,' she said.



In the evening by seven o'clock, Sanjayan returned home, refreshed himself with a shower, and then sat on the couch. Suganya offered him a cup of tea.

Sipping his tea, he said: 'why're you standing up? sit down.'

She sat in the arm chair opposite the couch.

'Appa called me in the morning...' he told her all that they'd talked on the phone with his father.

She looked at the pooja room door. Inside the room Ahrani kept worshipping.

Reading her thoughts he said: 'we both cannot go there alone without Ahrani. She's a part of us. Neglecting her, we

shouldn't take any decision. Until she consents wholeheartedly to go there, we must wait. We have no alternative.'

She nodded.

He went on, 'go and speak to her about this matter. Just listen to what she says. Don't try to convince her. If you do so, she'll feel as if to be marginalized by us. So, inform her what I said, let her speak.'

'Yes, I understood.'

Then Ahrani came out of the pooja room, and sat at the table.

Sanjayan shifted to the porch. Suganya walked up to the table and sat in a chair across Ahrani's.

Ahrani looked sideways at Suganya, asked: 'Amma, have you got any office work to do?'

'No work,' said Suganya, 'but there's an important thing that I want to talk to you.'

'Please tell me,' said Ahrani instantly, with an intent gaze.

Suganya began to tell the matter. Ahrani listened carefully to her, and then asked: 'Amma, must I come too with you two?'

'How can we go there without you?' asked Suganya, looking into her eyes.

Ahrani wrinkled her face, and said: 'if I come there, all their people will look at me as if looking at an exhibit, and enquire as to me. Amma, I won't come there. I feel embarrassed to be seen by those people.'

Suganya pursed her lips and nodded, looking down.

Ahrani glanced worriedly at her mother. Suganya got up from the chair with a feeling of helplessness.

'Amma,' called out Ahrani softly.

Suganya placed her hand on her daughter's shoulder, and said: 'Pillai, sit here and continue your study.' She walked towards the porch.

Ahrani watched her mother going away from behind her back, feeling a deep sadness.

When Suganya approached the porch, Sanjayan asked:

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'What did she say?'

'She's not prepared to come there with us, said Suganya, and then told the reason why Ahrani couldn't come there.

Nodding approvingly his head, he said: 'what she said is true. When she comes there at the first time, she'll be the centre of attention, but not at the next time. Our people will be so keen to see her and enquire as to her as a matter of interest. And they'll be so curious to see you too.

That's because they've never seen both of you before. Once they see you, their curiosity will have receded. Anyway, you both must come there, after a week or after a month or even an year. You must encounter our relatives and villagers whenever you come there.'

'You're right. Can I try to convince her?'

'Not necessary.'

She looked puzzled.

He went on, 'We can't ask her why she's embarrassed. As time goes by she'll recover from this kind of trouble, until then which we must wait. A fruit should ripen by itself, we shouldn't make it ripe by hitting with a stick. There's no hurry - she can take her own time to recover from it.'

'Then what are you going to say to those people?'

'Appa will realize. Don't worry,' he said casually.

She nodded with satisfaction, and then rose to go into the kitchen.

'I also come with you to help you cook dinner,' he said, laughing.

'Is it so?' she said smiling, 'it's not a difficult task to cook dinner for three people.'

'It's ok. I want to share the burden,' he said, and rose to his feet.

She giggled.

They both walked into the kitchen.

## Forty

It was Sunday. At about seven o'clock in the morning Sanjayan was still in bed, because he had stayed up late last night until one o'clock- he'd been working on the computer.

The bedroom door then opened slightly. Suganya squeezed herself into the room and closed the door behind her quietly. The dusky light was inside the room. She neither switched on the light nor drew back the curtain in order to keep the room dark for his comfortable sleep. She tiptoed across the room up to the wardrobe so as not to disturb his sleep.

But the sound of the door opening roused him from his sleep. He cocked one eyebrow and watched her come in. She had wrapped a towel around herself, after having a bath. When she took her clothes out of the wardrobe and tried to change into them, 'Excuse me! I'm staying awake,' said Sanjayan. He roared and burst into peals of laughter.

With a jolt she turned around to look at him. 'No problem' she jerked out, giggled.

'Switch on the light. Pull back the curtain to let the sunlight in,' he said with a guttural moan.

She did what he said. Morning light streamed into the room. Then the room was very bright.

'Should I go out?' he asked in a serious tone but amusingly.

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'Not necessary,' she said instantly, looking away.

Lying on the bed, he gazed at her face in order to gauge her mood. She seemed happy. 'Where's Ahrani?' he asked.

'She's just gone to the tuition class.'

After making sure that Ahrani wasn't in the house he wanted to play with her.

'Baby! You look more beautiful in this dress than any other one you wear. This dress is like a tube top.'

'Tube top? What's it like?' She asked, standing next to the window.

'I must tell you,' he laughed. 'it's a women's dress that is made of cloth that stretches and covers the chest.'

She felt so embarrassed at his remark.

'Don't feel so embarrassed. I'm just going out. You can change out of your towel. Out of your tube top,' he said and tried to pretend as if to get up from the bed, smiling.

'No, you need not go out. Stay here.' Even though she said so, she was not prepared to change.

'Baby! Love! Don't feel shy. I'm your husband, eh. You can change into your gown ... in front of me,' he said in a deep romantic voice, getting pleasure from her shyness.

She hugged her spare gown against her chest, and said: 'I know you're my husband, which is true. But now, at this moment, you're not my partner, nor my man. You're not a partner but a witness, am I right?'

'Then, you mean I'm a peeping Tom?' he asked as if seriously.

'Not that I mean,' she squawked, shaking her head in negation.

'Ok, you need not change,' he said without his lips parting. 'Your hair is still wet and plastered to your head. No matter whether you change or not, but dry your hair. After catching a cold, nothing can you do...expect sneezing all day, for four days.'



She giggled at him, and then asked: 'how can I dry my hair without the towel?'

'No problem. Take your towel off and dry your hair off,' he said, not smiling.

'Oh yeah,' she said instantly, and then asked: Can you help me, please?'

'Must I come up to you to help?'

'I haven't meant that help,' she smiled.

'Ok, then you can go to Ahrani's room and change, right?'

She was still standing by the wardrobe shyly.

'Baby, what do you want now? You neither allow me to go out of the room, nor are you yourself prepared to go to the next room. So, I don't know what to do.'

She wanted to tell him that she didn't want to disturb his romantic mood. She remained silent, smiling, exposing a set of gleaming white teeth.

'Ok, let's compromise. I won't see you until you change into the gown and say Ok', he said and turned himself into a prone position, not waiting for her reply, and then pressed his face against the pillow.

She giggled, turned around and changed into her gown. 'Ok, you may turn yourself into supine position,' she laughed, drying her hair with the towel.

He rolled onto his back. She'd stood at the bedside. Her eyes were bright and excited. Her face was as fresh as a lotus flower that bloomed in the morning. The natural freshness of her face, sans the talcum powder, with her hair loose and still not being combed.

He gazed at her silently. A pleasant smile spread slowly across her face. 'Sit down,' he said, smiling, lying on the bed.

She perched on the edge of the bed. He looked into her eyes, and she did look back into his. A silent look lasted a few minutes. She felt embarrassed and looked away at the door. But the

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silence continued. He ran his eyes over her. Over the right side of her body. Her temple, ear, cheek, neck, on and on. Finally he locked his eyes on her slightly wet locks flowing down over the nape of her neck, and her back like a dark water fall.

A few minutes later he stretched out his right hand to touch her right hand rested on the bed with the fingers splayed. When he put his hand on hers, she felt as if electrocuted. Her hand suddenly clawed at the sheet. She was excited, but still kept looking away.

'Baby, my love! Look at me,' he said as if begging.

She turned to look at him, smiling, not parting her lips.

'Show me your teeth by which I'm always mesmerized. Why're you so stingy in exposing your white teeth like gems,' he breathed.

She had a fit of the giggles with her mouth behind her hand.

He smiled at her, and went on, 'your face without a smile is like a tea sans sugar. I really like your smile the most in you. Please, remove your hand from your mouth to let me watch it, please... please... my baby please.' Wrinkling his face, he said in a soft voice, with a gesture as if begging her to show her mouth.

She shook her head in negation, but on the contrary she took her hand off her mouth, smiling brightly.

'Wow! Your face looks so beautiful now as if the full moon came out of a nimbus. And also, your teeth gleam white like a sickle moon; your lips curve like a crescent moon; your eyebrows bend like a half moon. All the moons exist on your single moon like face. The wholeness appears on your face itself.'

'Not all the moons?,' she laughed, '*Amavasai nilavu* is missing somewhere, right' '*Amavasai nilavu*' means the new moon.

'Not missing it anywhere,' he said, 'your pupils look like new moons. Am I right?'

'Wow! What a poetry!' she exclaimed, and asked: 'Can you

write a poem?'

'No,' he said, 'God hasn't given me that boon?'

'But you speak poetically,' she said in a serious tone. Her eyes dilated with surprise.

'Is it so? Sometimes I've become a poet after I married you,' he said, smiling.

'Be it so!' she said, not smiling, as if to get angry playfully.

'Well, tell me a poem about love,' she asked, with a hint of a smile.

'Love? what love do you mean about? Whether about a real love or a fantastic love?' he asked, putting his left arm behind the back of his head.

'About real love.'

'Baby, fantasy is more attractive and impressive than reality. What do you say?'

'I want the real love,' she insisted.

'Then ok...

*I couldn't have my breakfast because of you;*

*I couldn't have my lunch because of you;*

*I couldn't have my dinner because of you;*

*I couldn't have my sleep because of hunger!'*

She chuckled at his poem. 'because of hunger but not the darling,' she said repeatedly. Her shoulders heaved with laughter

'That's the reality,' he said.

'Then what about lust?' she asked. 'I want to know your view. You'll say something differently.'

'What do you think about lust?' he asked, at once, looking at her.

'It's an evil thing that should be overcome but cannot be overcome by people'.

He said nothing, but pursed his lips, shaking his head in disapproval.

'What I said is wrong?' she asked.

'Then what do you think about love?' he asked another

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question.

'Love is pure and divine. A man and a woman are attracted to each other because of an absolute love.'

'So, what's the difference between love and lust?'

'No idea,' she said, 'nothing do I know except for what I told you.' She looked into his eyes, expectantly.

'Lust is not a taboo thing. Not an evil thing. It's a beautiful phenomenon. Love and Lust are the two sides of the same coin, and cannot be separated from each other. Those two things make the wholeness of love. So-called pure love is partial, not whole. The wholeness of love comes complete with conjugal love. Sex appeal is the beginning and the most important reason for being in love. If a man and a woman are not sexually attracted to each other, they won't begin a romantic relationship,' he said.

After a brief pause, he went on, 'my darling, you know something? Actually I love lust. That's because the lust makes us intimate. Lust is the motivation for copulation. If you hate lust, you'll hate the love itself. We won't touch each other without lust; am I right?'

Suddenly she came over all shy, and then looked down, nodding approvingly.

'Hi baby, look at me,' he said in a deep warm voice.

She didn't turn to look at him.

Suddenly he leaned forward, grabbed her arm pushed against the bed to support herself and yanked her towards him. She leaned against him. Her flank was against his rib. Her hand was against his chest. Her locks were trailing across his torso. A sparkle of excitement was in her eyes. Her lips were twitching with amusement.

He burst out laughing throatily. She tried to push her hands on the bed to lift herself up, and then managed to rise to her feet.

'Ok, I'm forgetting myself. I haven't offered you the bed coffee,' she said, smiling, and swept back her hair with both hands

and tucked it into a hairslide behind the nape of her neck.

'No, I don't want a coffee,' he said, 'it's time for breakfast.'

She gave him a questioning look.

He went on, 'I'm going to have a bath.' He got up from the bed, and walked into the bathroom.

A few minutes later, he returned to the room. Then she remained staying inside the room. She was standing in front of the window, holding the grille gently, her back to him, looking out.

'Hi baby?' he called out cheerfully.

She looked round for a moment, and then looked out through the window again. He stepped up to her back, and saw her wiping the tears with her hand.

'What's wrong with you?' he asked with kindness.

She didn't reply.

He edged closer to her back. His arms encircled her waist with his interlacing fingers, and his trunk touching her back. He rested his chin on her shoulder, brushing her ear with his. She smelt the scent of his love.

'Hi baby, what's wrong with you?' he whispered.

'I want to ask a question', she murmured.

'Sure, asked me.'

They both were talking, not looking at each other, with their faces across each other.

'Do you want a child?' She asked softly.

'Yes, of course,' he said, 'I want a child. you can believe it without a shadow of a doubt.'

'I know for sure that every man wants to see his first child, and waits for it eagerly. The first child is his dream. When I put myself in your position I feel guilty. So, I want to be prepared to fulfil your dream.'

'Don't feel guilty,' he said, 'Ahrani must get over herself first. Then after we three shall go together to Point Pedro, to my native place, and meet my parents and relatives. After that I'll

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request you to bear me a child. But that child should be not my first child but the second.'

All of a sudden she turned herself around within the circle of his arms to look at his face. 'I'm sorry,' she said, put her arms around him and hugged him tightly. He tightened his hug.

A couple of minutes later, he whispered in her ear: 'Are you okay?'

'Mm, okay!' She breathed.

They gently detached themselves from each other. 'Let's have breakfast,' she said, and then looked at herself in the mirror, and checked her face and her dress.

She readjusted the neckline of her gown to conceal the shoulder strap of her bra that peeked out on her shoulder and then turned to look at him.

He was smiling at her.

'Why're you smiling at me?' he asked with a smile.

'No particular reason, just smiling for the sake of smiling?'

'Ok, how am I in this dress that you bought for me?'

'It fits well. You look very nice. You're like a nellicrush bottle or like a green parrot,' he laughed. 'But that tube top you've worn earlier in the morning fitted you better than this gown.'

She squinted at him as if looking at a thousand - watt bulb. Her mouth tightened into a thin line. In a second a smile lifted the corner of her mouth, then beamed a broad smile. 'Okay, what to do now? Shall I change out of this gown into that towel as you expect?' she asked, wrinkling her eyes.

'No, I don't want to bother you,' he said, getting onto the bed, looking at her.

'No problem, I'm going to change,' she said, took the towel in a dramatic way and held it spreading ahead of her like a screen. She tried to hold back her laughter. But her mouth quivered in a hint of a smile.

'Okay, darling, then how can you conceal the shoulder

straps of your bra that peek out?' he asked.

She giggled and looked at him.

He went on, 'before you want to wear an off-the-shoulder dress or bare shoulder dress you have to wear a strapless bra.'

'Strapless? How do you know these things?' she asked, staring at him with wide eyes.

'No, no, don't suspect me. Don't stare at me like that.'

'Then what do you know?'

'I read in the papers and magazines. Otherwise I'm innocent.'

'I trust you,' she beamed, 'and I have some doubt about ladies' wear.'

'Come, come here. I'll clarify your doubt,' he said, taking his mobile phone.

She got onto the bed, sat cross-legged next to him enthusiastically like a schoolgirl.

'Ask your doubts, one by one, OK.' he said, looking at his phone.

'But one condition.'

'What's it?'

'Please explain in Tamil.'

'Ok.'

She asked; he told. She listened to him, giggling.

'Ok, that's it,' he said, putting his mobile down on the bed. 'The special design of the lingerie is in order to boost the sex appeal, and to alter the physical appearances?' he laughed and then went on, "Darling, you wear a sari, salwar kameez, gown or skirt and blouse. You're never going to wear a clinging dress, a top with a plunging neckline or other dresses that show off your figure. Your figure is camouflaged by the loose clothes you wear. So this kind of stuff is useless to you, right? If you want to wear the sexier clothes beyond your comfortable zone, you can do inside the room and feel happy, looking at yourself in front of the mirror. Anyhow

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it's useless for you who doesn't wear even a Tee shirt. You're not an actress, nor model, nor even an ultra modern woman. Then what?'

She fell silent, resting her head in her cupped hands.

'Hi baby, any problem?' he asked, giving a tap on her shoulder.

'Nothing,' she said, still looking down.

He cupped her recede in his right hand and raised her face. Her eyes brimmed with tears. 'What happened to you,' he asked with shock.

She didn't respond.

'I've been loving the way that embarrassed you. I'm really in love now. It's not my intention to taunt you. My lady, have you been offended? I castigate myself for having teased you,' he said apologetically.

'I've cast my mind back to my past day.' She looked at him.

He was silent

She went on 'Satkunam Uncle once tried to buy a push-up bra- for maximum cleavage for me. On that day I didn't know these things. But now I've realized his intention. I'd trusted him, and considered him as my father. But he behaved differently towards me. He'd wanted me to look sexier.'

Tears were dribbling down her cheeks.

He threw his arm around her shoulders, pulled her against his shoulder and said: 'I'm sorry. I've rekindled your past. I'm so sorry, control yourself please'

He wiped her tears with his hand.

A couple of minutes later, he wanted to make her mood change. So, he cajoled her into returning to her normal stage. But she didn't recover.

As a last resort, he clutched his stomach, and screeched: 'Ah... Amma...'

'What? What's it?' she asked with a shock, looking at his face.



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'I didn't have my bed coffee, nor had I breakfast. Can you serve me atleast brunch?' he asked, and then laughed.

'Even brunch?' she laughed, 'Ok, come, I'll serve you.' She got out of the bed, checked herself in the mirror, stepped up to the door, twisted her head around to look at him, smiling, and said: 'Please, wipe the smudge of *kunkumam* on your bare chest and shoulder, and come out of the room.'

'Ok, Ok, I know,' he said, laughing.

She giggled, and went out.

He took his damp towel to wipe the smudge of vermilion.

### Forty-one

When Sanjayan returned home from Murunkan by seven o'clock in the evening, Suganya was in the kitchen, preparing coconut sambol. Ahrani, who was in the living room reading her text book, looked up at him and again dropped her eyes to go on reading, not speaking to him.

He stepped up to the kitchen door. Sunganya saw him standing at the door, and asked: 'you came just now?' It was a formal question.

'By six o'clock I came to the town. I met Ranjan and have been chatting with him.'

'Will you have a cup of tea?' she asked.

'I feel sweaty. I want to refresh myself now with a shower and then have a cup of tea,' he said, and moved towards the room.

After ten minutes, she got tea for him, and poked her head out of the kitchen door to check where he was. She saw the bathroom door closed. She thought he was still inside it, and came back to the hearth, leaving the door wide open.

She placed a small wok on the hearth, poured some coconut oil carefully into it, and then put the finely chopped onions in the hot oil, which, started sizzling.

Then Ahrani walked into the kitchen, stood next to her, watching the wok. Suganya added a fistful of curry leaves, a little

cumin seeds and a pinch of mustard seeds, and was stir-frying them with a spoon. Then she saw him sit on the couch. She at once looked at Ahrani, and said: 'Pillai, watch the wok until I give him the tea and come back in a second'

'No, I cant. I'll burn the mixture,' said Ahrani instantly.

'Pillai, I can't move away, leaving this. And the tea is getting cold. He wants a hot tea very much'

Ahrani didn't reply, but took the cup of tea, went up to him, and stood in front of him, not calling him. He looked at her.

'Please, take it. Amma is busy with her cooking,' she said.

Meanwhile Suganya looked at him through the door, from behind Ahrani's back, exposing a set of teeth, delightfully. It was the first time Ahrani had served him tea since he'd come here. When Ahrani turned to walk into the kitchen, her back to him, he smiled at Suganya back

Ahrani stood by Suganya, peering at the wok. At the moment the mixture in the wok browned, Suganya put all the coconut sambol in the wok. There was a strong sizzle again. She kept tossing the sambol in the onion gravy, and then poured the dilute tamarind juice over the sambol and tossed it well again with a spoon until it turned paste. She performed this process called as *Thalithal*.

The tantalizing delicious smell from the kitchen wafted towards Sanjayan. The smell reminded him of his mother's cooking.

Suganya was ready to make ghee thosai for dinner. Early in the morning, before she went to work, she'd made a paste by mixing wheat flour; black grains and fenugreek seeds that'd been soaked overnight, and then ground into a pulp; some baking soda and plenty of water together.

She stirred the mixture well and checked if it had fermented. She felt satisfied. The more it turned sour, the softer the thosai would be.

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She took the '*thosai kallu*' - baking plate - a thick and round aluminum plate with a handle, like a small gong, and placed it on the hearth, and then left it for a couple of minutes to turn hot.

She took a small ball of cloth, dipped it partially in gingelly oil, and then smeared the surface of the baking plate with coconut oil using the ball. She took out a spoonful of the mixture from the pot after stirring well and then poured it over the baking plate, placed the outer surface of the bowl of the spoon on the mixture on the baking plate, and moved it round and round in concentric circles until it became a pancake like a full moon.

A thosai appeared on the baking plate. The surface of the thosai rose, and became light, on which a lot of small holes appeared. She took a tea spoonful of the ghee- melted, drizzled it over the thosai and spread evenly with the bowl of the spoon.

She then took another spoon, at the end of which spoon there was not a bowl but a round, flat and thin plate. She inserted the spoon under the thosai and moved around to strip it from the baking plate, not tearing it, and then turned it over.

She baked the first crisp ghee thosai, and put it down on a tray. Ahrani leaned forward, inhaled deeply, and said: 'mmm... the thosai smells good and looks very tempting. I can have it with this smell, without even that sambol. The ghee smell makes my mouth water.'

'Pillai, take and have it,' said Suganya, turning the next thosai over.

'Amma, I'll have later,' said Ahrani, shifting her gaze from the thosai to her mother's face.

'Why? Take it now as it is hot and crisp,' said Suganya with an approving look.

Ahrani twisted her head to glance at him. He sat still on the couch, reading a book. Then she turned her head to look at her mother. 'Amma, he looks exhausted. And also he was at Murunkan for the past four days. He couldn't have tasted this home cooking.

So we serve him first and then let's have dinner together,' she said quietly, wrinkling her face, with a feeling of pity.

Hearing what Ahrani said, Suganya was surprised. But she managed to check her surprise. Not turning to look at her daughter, she felt happy and appreciated her attitude.

Ahrani went on, 'Amma, when the ghee smell drifts from here and reaches his nose, it'll make his mouth water.' She giggled, went up to the plate rack and drew a plate out of it.

She washed the plate and dried it up.

'Amma, the thosai is now hot and crisp. Please, serve him before it turns cold and soft. You know, a hot and crisp *thosai* is tastier than a cold and soft one,' she said, shifting the thosai from the tray to the plate.

Suganya smiled, not parting her lips, and asked: 'Pillai, can you watch this baking?'

'Yes, I can,' said Ahrani, 'I can turn a thosai over but can't pour the mixture for the next one.'

Suganya went up to him and asked him to have dinner. He said: 'What's the hurry? Let's have dinner together after you've finished your cooking. I'm no longer hungry - I had tea, no.'

'Pillai wants you to have some hot and crisp. thosai,' she said, smiling.

'Is it so?' he asked with an exclamation of surprise.

She told him what Ahrani said, briefly and happily.

'Bring them. I want to have them now,' he said, rose to wash his hands.

She served him dinner.

'I have this dinner for her sake - for Ahrani's sake,' he said delightfully, 'Fantastic! What a tasty sambol. What a smell of the ghee thosai!'

When she returned to the kitchen, Ahrani asked: 'Amma, what does he say about the dinner?'

'He said fantastic!' said Suganya, smiling.

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Sanjayan had his dinner, stepped out onto the porch and sat in a chair, relaxing himself with his thought.

Half an hour later Suganya came up to him, and said: 'before I forget, my aunty had called me from Mulankavil in the evening, and invited us to her daughter's wedding on next Saturday. She looked at his face, expecting him to speak.

'Suganya, we ought to respect those who respect us. It's not only a common courtesy but a moral obligation as well. Your aunty has respected by inviting us to the wedding, so we ought to respect in return by participating in the wedding. If Ahrani says yes, we three can go together to Mulankavil and take part in the wedding.'

'But one thing ...' Her voice trailed off.

'Tell me what.'

'I wish we three should go together to Mulankavil, but first of all we ought to go together to your home, to Point Pedro. I feel our wedding is still incomplete and will end with our visit to your home,' she said in a calm voice.

'So do I feel,' he said, 'don't worry, we'll go to Point Pedro soon. Yes! definitely we can. well, what have you intended to handle this matter?'

'Pillai and I can go there. What do you say?' she asked, looking at him.

'That's right,' he said affirmatively,

'I haven't still talked to Pillai about this matter,' she said, and then excused herself and walked up to the table Ahrani was sitting at.

Suganya told her the matter. Ahrani has listened to her, and said: 'Amma, there's a problem - the term test is due to commence since Monday on.'

'The test starts on Monday, eh. We'll have returned here on Sunday,' said Suganya.

'Amma! Viru and I are planning to have a combined study

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all day long on Saturday, and Sunday as well. Those two days will be study leave.'

Suganya said nothing, and looked at her.

Ahrani went on, 'Will he come with you?'

'No, he won't.'

'Then he's going to stay at home alone?' said Ahrani in a questioning tone, then went on, 'Okay, Amma, please go to Mulankavil alone.'

'I'm going to stay at home.'

Suganya came out to the porch, and perched on the bench in front of him. She told him what Ahrani said.

He thought for a moment, then said: 'You've been acting an intermediary between her and me. Now she is prepared to stay here together with me for two days while you're out. Actually it's a sign of improvement in her behavior. No problem, go to Mulankavil and participate happily in the wedding. I'll be here until you come back. I'm going to take a leave on next Friday'

She felt happy and relieved.

### Forty-two

It was the following Friday. Suganya took leave from work to go to Mulankavil for the wedding. Sanjayan also was on leave. He'd arrived home the previous day.

As usual he got out of bed early in the morning by five o'clock, and swept the front yard and then the small backyard. When he went over to the bathroom, he saw Ahrani sitting at the table in the living room and Suganya heating the kettle in the kitchen.

Having had a bath, he went into the kitchen. Suganya offered him a cup of hot tea with froth on top. Taking it, he asked: 'Has Ahrani had her tea?'

'I've already given,' she said.

He nodded, sat on the floor cross-legged, and started sipping his tea.

She took a coconut and broke it in two.

'Can I help you cook breakfast?' he asked.

'I've cooked breakfast,' she smiled, 'I'm going to cook lunch now.'

'Lunch ? you need not cook lunch now. I'll do it later,' he said in a confident way, with a concern for her.

'No problem, usually I cook both breakfast and lunch in the



morning before going to work.'

'As you wish,' he said in a disapproving tone.

She smiled at him, and said: 'I don't want to annoy you. And also there's ample time to leave home.'

He nodded slightly. His mouth quivered in the suspicion of a smile.

He stepped down onto the porch and sat in a chair. It was a bright morning. Fluffy white clouds in various shapes were drifting continuously across the blue sky from the north-east towards the south-west. A light breeze was blowing. Although the sun was shining in the east the climate was pleasant. The entire atmosphere was cool. There was a cuckoo calling, hiding itself in the dense green foliage of the portia tree, whereas there was a crow perching on the fence, not hiding itself, cawing incessantly.

A few Jasmine vines with flowers that overhung the trellis were gently swaying in the breeze. The jasmine flowers appeared in the luxuriant green vines as if stars were twinkling in the night sky,

He rose from the chair, walked into the house, and came out again with a stool and a small basket. He put the stool down on the ground under the canopy of the vines, hitched himself onto it to reach the vines. He picked flowers as much as necessary to make a streamer of jasmine, and filled the basket.

He returned to the chair on the porch and started making a jasmine streamer.

Standing in front of him, Virushali called out: 'Uncle!'

He raised his eyes from the thread that bound the jasmine streamer, greeted her with a smile, and stopped his work. They made small talk.

Five minutes later Ahrani stepped out, and said: 'Viru, let's go.'

'Where's Aunty?' asked Virushali, glancing behind Ahrani.

'Amma is having a bath now,' said Ahrani.

'Then let's go,' Said Virushali, and then looked at him, said:

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'Uncle, bye !'

'Ok bye! Take care,' he said.

Ahrani stepped down onto the yard, not saying a bye to him. But she had qualms about passing him without saying bye. She suddenly halted, then turned around to look at him, and mouthed a word 'bye' at him.

He nodded his head, looking at her with a suggestion of a smile, and watched them until they passed the gate.

He resumed his work. After ten minutes he made the jasmine streamer of four feet long and hid it in a box so as to be invisible to Suganya.

They both had breakfast together in the kitchen. Then she went into the room to get ready for the journey. He sat in a chair in the living room, and waited for her, gazing at the room door.

Twenty minutes later the room door opened. Out she stepped. Fascinated by her look, he immediately rose to his feet as if forgetting himself, and watched her walking towards him. As she stood in front of him, he ran his eyes over her, up and down, thrice. His eyes came to rest on her face.

'You're so beautiful,' he breathed, 'you look so immaculate that I can't touch you without washing my hand'

'Is it so.?' she smiled, 'but you can.'

'I have a surprise for you.'

'Surprise!' she exclaimed.

'Oh yes, turn your back to me.'

She turned around and let him look at her back.

'I'm going to adorn your hair,' he said, took the jasmine streamer, coiled it into a loop so as to reduce its length and increase its thickness, and then tied it to her raven hair. The black hair and the white jasmine provided an amazing contrast.

She turned again to look at him with a smile and then asked: 'when did you make it?'

'When you were in the kitchen and in the bathroom,' he

said, smiling.

She placed her hands on the jasmine streamer to feel how nice and smooth it was.

'Your hair smells of jasmine. You have a fragrant hair now,' he said, laughing.

'But, how long will this smell last in my hair?' she asked playfully and giggled at him.

'Your fragrant hair lasts as long as the streamer is on your hair without withering'

'So, until I get on the bus.'

'Why?' he asked, looking at her with wide eyes.

'This jasmine streamer will be sandwiched between the back rest of a seat on the bus and my back. These fresh flowers would have crumpled and withered. The white colour of the flower will turn brown,' she said, laughing; and looked at him expecting his amusing response.

He stood mute and looked into her wide luminous eyes. She stopped laughing and looked back into his eyes. Moments later she looked down.

'Why? Why are you looking down?' she cooed, 'Darling, look up...?'

'You've stared me out,' she said in a small voice.

He smiled, and asked : 'Shall I accompany you up to the bus stand?'

'Why not?' she said, looking up at him with a smile.

'But, one thing,' he said, 'I won't hire a three wheeler, nor will I give you a lift on the bike. You must say yes to be strolling along the road up to the bus stand - I want to spend some more happy moments with you,' he said with a dramatic gesture.

She nodded with a smile, delightfully.

'You're wearing a beige colour sari with a blouse in brown colour. So, I want to wear a black trousers and a beige shirt. That'll match.' he said, looking at her sari. 'Give me five minutes to get

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ready,' he said, and walked into the room with a quick step.

From behind his back she was watching him, smiling, with a kind of happiness.



In the evening at thirty past five Sanjayan had sat in a chair on the porch reading a book. Hearing the sound of gate opening he lifted his eyes from the book. Virushali and Ahrani walked in. He put the bookmark between the pages, closed the book and rose to his feet, casting a welcoming smile in their direction.

They both perched on the bench across each other. When he tried to move from there, Virushali asked: 'Uncle, where're you going?'

'I'm going to get tea for you,' he said, twisting his head to her.

'Tea! Can you make tea?' she asked in an exclamatory tone.

'Suganya aunty told me to give you tea. So, I must offer you tea. That's it,' he said, laughing and went into the kitchen.

They both kept chatting away. A few minutes later he came with two cups of tea, and served them to Virushali first, then to Ahrani.

Then he went into the kitchen, came back with his tea, and sat in a chair opposite their bench.

'Uncle, a wonderful tea!' said Virushali smiling, 'Uncle, my Appa doesn't know how to make tea.'

He nodded his head, smiling, not failing to take a glance at Ahrani. She kept sipping her tea, looking at Virushali. Whenever he looked at her she turned her head to Virushali. When he shifted his look from her to Virushali, she looked at him. He realized that she wanted to avoid eye contact. So, he stopped looking at her, and spoke to Virushali.

'Viru, do you watch Indian tele dramas?' he asked.

'No, I don't!' she said, 'Amma and Amamma watch those dramas. But, Appa doesn't like.'

'Good,' he said. 'Do you like to read story books?'

'Yes, Uncle'

'You should read something. Only reading will enlarge your vocabulary. The more you read, the more you can build up your vocabulary - the better you can write and speak. So, you should fill your spare time reading something story books for children or any news papers,' he said, 'And also this is the age for you to learn. You've heard a Tamil proverb, '*Ilamayil kalvi; silaiyil ezhuthu*' that means, what you learn in your younger days is in your memory lifelong as the letter inscribed on a stone. I hope you understand.' He gave some more advice.

By six o'clock Virushali left. Ahrani collected the empty tea cups, and went into the kitchen. He sat in the chair contemplating what he'd have to do next week in the field.

An hour later, he got up, padlocked the gate, walked into the house and shut the door behind him. He poked his head into the pooja room door and saw the standing lamp on the slab burning with a tiny steady flame.

Ahrani had sat at the table in the living room. He went up to her. She turned her head towards him. 'I'm going to steam some string hoppers for dinner,' he said. She nodded to agree to it. He walked into the kitchen to cook dinner.

Having finished cooking, he went into the bathroom to have a quick wash. Then she went into the kitchen to have dinner.

He had dinner, and then sat on the couch, resumed reading the book that he'd read earlier. Ahrani kept studying, sitting at the table. There was the sound of the wall clock ticking continuously with the rustle of paper as they turned the pages. Otherwise the house was silent.

Half an hour later the telephone started to ring piercing the silence of the house. She picked up the receiver. 'Hello! Amma... I'm fine,' she answered cheerfully.

After a minute she said: 'Amma, please, cut the line. I will

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call you back right now - calling from here is cheaper, no.'

In the middle of her conversation, she looked at him, and then her voice dropped to a whisper. Having realized that she felt uncomfortable that he was present, he went into the room and shut the door behind him so as not to overhear her speaking to her mother.

She felt relieved, and became more talkative. At the end of the conversation, she asked: 'Amma, shall I hand the receiver to him?'

'Not necessary. I'm going to call him on his mobile,' said Suganya, 'I'll call you tomorrow.'

Ahrani put down the receiver and returned to the table.

Sanjayan's mobile started vibrating. 'Hello, how? What're you doing now?' he asked hurriedly

'Slow down, slow down,' she said, laughing.

'I heard you're an excellent tea maker.'

He laughed.

She went on, 'Pillai told me everything that happens there. She feels happy...'

## Forty-three

The following day was Saturday. In the morning by eight o'clock Virushali had come to have a combined study. Both Ahrani and Virushali sat at the table in the living room studying for their term test.

Sanjayan had been doing all the household chores himself since morning. It was one of his traits that he would take pleasure in whatever work he did. After watering the plants he stepped into the house. Surprisingly the house was silent. Momentarily he felt as if he'd entered a church or library. It surprised him that those two talkative girls had fallen silent, and remained studying.

He went into the kitchen and did the dishes carefully, not raising a rattle of pots and pans, because he didn't want to disturb them in any way. Every now and again he heard them conversing about their subject.

He had a bath, had his breakfast, sat in a chair on the porch, and was deeply engrossed in the article about the Upper Kotmale project in a weekly news paper until he was interrupted by the high sound of a train horn tooting long from the station. He took a glance at the wall clock. It was quarter past ten. He saw them studying with interest. He walked into the kitchen to prepare tea.

He went up to the table, excused himself and offered them tea.

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'Viru, how about your lunch' he asked.

'Uncle, I'll go home for lunch, and then come back.'

'Why not have lunch with your friend?'

'No problem, uncle. I will,' she said instantly, delightfully, then looked at Ahrani, smiling.

Ahrani nodded, and said: 'We can have lunch together.'

'What do you prefer? Chicken or sea food ? ' he asked, looking at Virushali.

'I prefer sea food,' said Virushali. Ahrani nodded to tell him yes.

'Then which one do you prefer fish, cuttle fish, crab or prawn?' he asked.

Ahrani and Virushali whispered, and then Virushali looked at him and said: 'prawn.'

'Viru, first you should inform your mother that you won't come home for lunch. Otherwise your mother will cook your lunch, and also will be waiting for you,' he said.

'Ok, uncle,' said Virushali, getting up to phone her mother.

'Uncle? Amma said ok.'

'Then Ok,' he said, 'I have to go to the market now.' He walked into the room.



At eleven o' clock his cooking was in progress. There was a pot of boiled rice, streaming. He was engaged in cooking curries.

He stir-fried the finely chopped onions in a pan until they softened, and then added a level tablespoon of fenugreek seeds, curry leaves and cumin seeds. Then he put the small prawns that he had nipped the head and tail off and removed the shell as well, and washed thoroughly. Adding salt, tamarind, and chilli powder he stir-fried until they mixed well, and then poured coconut milk in the pan and closed it. As the curry kept boiling, as it turned red, he opened the lid of the pan, and left the curry to simmer for a few minutes and consequently the curry turned tastier.



He was ready to make the second curry that was a non-spicy brinjal curry, which was a good combination with the prawn curry.

He took a pan into which he put a few brinjals cubed, an ash plantain diced in order not to be mushy, some onions chopped, some green chilli slit instead of chili powder, salt, coconut milk, and some other condiments - turmeric powder, garlic, curry leaf, cumin seeds and mustard seeds. And then he boiled the pan closed with a lid to make a tasty brinjal curry. Finally, when the curry had cooked well he added some lime juice to it and lifted the pan down from the hearth.

At half past twelve he was ready to serve a delicious lunch. Both Ahrani and Virushali went to wash their hands. He brought the dishes to the table. There were rice in a pan with a big spoon and the two curries in two separate bowls with a spoon in each bowl, as well as two plates for the two girls.

As they came to the table he put rice on the plates and served curries over the rice.

'Hmm, the prawn curry smells good,' said Virushali, and then pinched a prawn in the curry on her plate and put it in her mouth to try it. 'Mmm... Uncle, fantastic!' she exclaimed, widening her eyes.

'The prawn has its own flavour and the fenugreek seeds gave extra flavour to the curry. The stir-fried onions made the curry tastier,' he said, then looked at Ahrani.

Ahrani also tried the prawn curry but she said nothing being busy with her meal looking down at her plate. He realized that she was overhearing carefully what Virushali and himself were talking.

He stood at the end of the table, keeping a sharp eye on their plates. He didn't know how much rice they could eat. When their plates were low on rice and curry, he served immediately, scooping them up himself, until they said enough.

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At a point, Virushali looked at him, smiling, and said: 'Uncle, enough, more than enough!'

'Ok,' he said, and then as he inched the curry bowls across the table towards Ahrani, she held her left hand over the plate as if to cover it, glanced at his face and said: 'Enough!' She lowered her eyes on the plate again.

When she glanced at him, he didn't fail to observe a smile flit across her face. She finished the remains on the plate off.

Virushali looked at him, smiled, and said: 'Uncle, you've served us a wonderful meal.'

He smiled at her, and then looked at Ahrani. She was drinking water, looking down.

He started to collect the dishes. When Virushali tried to help him, he said: 'You needn't help me. Just wash your hands and continue studying. I'll clear the tables.'



It was seven thirty in the night. After cooking dinner Sanjayan sat on the couch doing his office work on his laptop. Ahrani went into the kitchen, had dinner, and returned to the table to continue studying for the test.

Half an hour later the phone started ringing. She picked up the receiver.

'Hello, Amma! How are you?'

He shut down his laptop, took his mobile, stepped down onto the porch, leaving the door on the latch, and sat on a chair.

The porch was not so dark. The moonlight reflected from the surfaces cast a paler light on the porch. There was a waxing moon floating in the sky, from which yellowish white metallic light was pouring down on every surface, but had absorbed the natural hues of the surface, and looked silvery black. Only the jasmine flowers on the vine looked white. Many a *silvandu*- a type of beetle-were in the foliage of the portia tree, humming. An owl had perched on the fence silently. The station was still busy. Roaring

and honking locomotive accompanied by the loud speaker disturbed the silence of the night.

His mobile vibrated. Suganya's name popped on the screen. He accepted her call.

'Hello, how are you?' he greeted cheerfully.

'Fine, Fine...' she said with a chuckle of delight.

They both were in buoyant mood. She told him briefly about the wedding. 'Well, you've served a wonderful lunch for the two girls, and also cooked a delicious prawn curry. Pillai told me that she had never tasted a prawn curry like this before,' she laughed quietly.

'I should be grateful to Amma. This curry is one of the several items in my mother's recipe book,' he said, smiling. 'And I'm to cook the other dish tomorrow for the girls. That's a crab curry. Once you taste the gravy of the curry you won't forget it and will ask me to cook it over and over again,' he said, laughing.

'How could you learn to cook these items?' she asked in a tone of surprise.

'When Amma cooked, I used to peer over her shoulder at the hearth,' he said instantly, laughing. 'Our hands flawlessly do that which our eyes watch. Am I right?'

'Absolutely !

They both laughed quietly.

'Ok, when will you come to Vavuniya?' he asked.

'I'll be there tomorrow by ten o'clock', she said, 'Please, cook the crab curry for me.' She giggled.

'Yes of course,' he laughed, 'come, come here, my love. I'm waiting here to welcome you. Without you, this house stands empty, I too feel empty. I miss you terribly:' he breathed.

'Me too,' she said softly, 'I'll come there catching the first bus tomorrow morning'

They fell silent, hearing each other's breath.

She broke the silence. 'It's well past nine o'clock. You

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haven't still had your dinner. Please, go and have it. Pillai told me everything. Ok, bye!

'Bye, good night !' he said.

They ended the conversation. He topped up her mobile phone by transferring money from his, went into the house and locked the front door. Ahrani wasn't there in the living room. He watched a sliver of light show under her room door. He went into the kitchen to have his dinner.

## Forty-four

The next day dawned. Early in the early morning Sanjayan prepared tea and came out to the living room with two cups of tea in either hand, placed a cup on the stool in front of the couch and stepped up to the room door. He knocked gently at the door. Ahrani opened it and took the cup of tea from him, with her eyes on the cup, and returned to the room, leaving the door on the latch.

Then Suganya called him and told that she'd got on the bus bound for Mannar. She had to catch two buses - Mulankavil to Mannar, and thence to Vavuniya.

He sat on the couch, sipping his tea. He was very keen to see his wife and felt happy visualizing her arrival, her entering through the gate with a smile unique to her. He smiled to himself.

All of a sudden the sound of retching inside the room interrupted his train of thought. He got a shock momentarily and then placed his tea cup on the stool. He heard her retching once again. He scurried up to the door. 'Ahrani, what's wrong with you? Any problem?' he asked in a hurried voice, knocking at the door.

'Oh...mmm...'-yes- her voice sounded as if she was moaning in pain.

At once he opened the door and stepped in. He found her lying on her back in the bed with her legs draping over the edge of the bed. She had vomited her tea up on the floor at her feet as

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though the entire tea had spilled out onto the floor. The vomit was spreading slowly across the floor; unable to seep through the cement floor. And also there were a number of spots of her vomit that splattered across the floor, by the wall, under the bed, like islets.

Standing at the bedside, he called out her in a soft voice: 'Amma... Ahrani Amma... What's wrong with you?'

She pushed her elbows against the bed to lift her back from the bed, and managed to perch on the edge of the bed. She looked up at him and said: 'last night by two o'clock I had a high fever as well as headache. I popped a pair of panadols and drank a glass of water, which had reduced the fever. Then early in the morning I felt slightly feverish with headache. As soon as I'd had my tea I threw the whole cup of tea up.'

'Amma, then why didn't you tell me this? Had you told me it before I wouldn't have given you this tea. You know, the milk tea has made you vomit,' he said, looking at her worriedly, 'don't take panadols. We had better see a doctor now.'

She nodded.

He went out, and came back with two plastic buckets - one was half full of water, the other one was empty. He took a rag, blotted the vomit with it. And then he took water out of the bucket with his cupped hand, poured over the place where the vomit had spread and mopped the floor. And again adding water he mopped the floor and wiped thoroughly until it was clean - not sticky, not smelling bad.

She was watching him cleaning the floor. He looked at her and said: 'Please go to the bathroom, wash your face and get ready to see a doctor.'

She got up from the bed and stepped up to the door. She staggered to her feet.

'What happened?' he asked with a jerk, suddenly stretching his arms across her as if to support her preventing her

from falling down on the floor.

She managed to grasp the door handle, stood still, looking down, and said: 'I feel dizzy'

'Then sit down,' he said.

'Not necessary, I'm just recovering from the dizziness,' she said. After a minute, 'I'm okay now,' she said, took her spare clothes and walked slowly towards the bathroom. He followed closely behind up to the bathroom door. Before she entered the bathroom he asked softly: 'Amma, can you have a secure foothold on the wet floor?'

She looked at his face and nodded.

He noticed that her vomit had splattered across the front of her gown itself. 'Please, close the door, don't lock it.'

she nodded again, saying nothing walked into the bathroom, keeping the door closed, unlocked behind her.

He sat in a chair in the living room from where he was watching the bathroom door. Five minutes later he went up to the bathroom door and asked gently: 'Amma, are you all right?'

'Yes,' she said instantly.

'Amma, come out quickly. You needn't wash your clothes, put them into a bucket and come out. Amma is coming here, no. So, don't worry,' he said against the door.

'Ok,' she said.

He heard the sound of her wet clothes falling splat into the bucket. He couldn't remain calm and started pacing up and down across the living room. At that juncture he wished his wife had been there with him. It bothered him that Ahrani fell ill while Suganya was away.

Then he saw Ahrani going over to her room. A few minutes later she got ready to go to hospital, walked slowly towards the living room, slightly shivering, and sat on the couch.

He gave a small plastic bucket to her, and said: 'Amma, if you feel you're sick, please, vomit into this bucket, holding it close

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to your mouth, so your vomit not splattering across your dress.' And he gave a lime, and said: 'keep smelling this lime. The smell of a lime doesn't make you vomit. Well, please stay here, not moving. i'll come in a minute.' He walked quickly into the bathroom.

She then found that half the tea in his cup on the stool had turned cold. She realized that as soon as he had heard the sound of her vomiting he'd stopped drinking his tea and come to her room. She twisted her head, and craned her neck over the back of the couch in order to see him. He was then inside the room. A minute later, when he stepped out from the room she took a glance at him.

'I'm ready. Don't worry,' he said, wearing his wrist watch.

He made a call to Anandan to come there, then took his tea cup and gulped down the rest of his tea.

'I want to talk to Amma,' she said in a shaky voice.

He thought for a moment, then said in a soothing voice, looking at her sympathetically: 'Amma is travelling now. If you tell this matter she'll worry about you and feel sad that she's happened to be out when you're ill. Then she will have to spend the rest of her travelling with a deep sadness. So, we'd better not tell her about this matter. However she'll have come here before ten o'clock, don't worry.'

She shook her head affirmatively.

Then Anandan stopped his three wheeler at the gate.

She got into the three wheeler and sat in the center of the seat. Sanjayan sat on the left. Even though he was talking to Anandan, he kept a watchful eye on her, and kept looking sideways at her frequently. She took notice of it.

The three wheeler reached the Vavuniya General Hospital. Sanjayan got out of the three wheeler first, and stood at the near side of it. She then carefully stepped off it.

'Annai, call me if necessary. I'll be around the town,' said Anandan.

Sanjayan waved his hand, and said: 'Ok, Thambi'



Anandan drove off with a smile, with a nod. Both Sanjayan and Ahrani walked into the hospital, seated themselves on a bench next to each other. There was half an hour for the OPD: Out-Patient Department to be open. He turned his head to look at her and asked: 'Amma, can you bear the fever and headache?'

'Yes, I can,' she said with a nod.

After that they were silent until they waited for their turn and see the doctor.

'Good morning, doctor' greeted Sanjayan, smiling gently.

'Good morning, come in, sit down,' said the doctor.

Sanjayan looked at Ahrani, and said: 'Amma, sit down.'

She sat in the seat next to the doctor's right side. 'What's wrong with you?' asked the doctor.

She told the symptoms. He checked the temperature and said: 'I give you some pills. Take a dose every six hours.'

'Excuse me, doctor', said Sanjayan.

'Yes!' the doctor looked at him.

'Doctor, She's got the third term test. It starts tomorrow on?'

'Is it so,' he said, 'take a dose after she has a light breakfast. we'll test her for dengue.'

'Thanks doctor,' said Sanjayan.

Both Sanjayan and Ahrani came out of the doctor's room, and went up to the dispensary. There was a queue. He told her to sit down on the bench by the wall and joined the queue to get the medicine.

He returned to her and said: 'Have a dose now, before which you have to have a light breakfast, even two string hoppers because you shouldn't take these pills in empty stomach.'

They went to the canteen. He bought string hoppers and coconut Sambol, and offered them to her. They sat at a table across each other. She could have only three string hoppers.

'Why? you feel vomiting?' he asked with a questioning look.

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'No, but it's enough!'

He gave a dose to her. She took it. He had the remains of her breakfast. They went up to the blood testing room, sat on the bench, waiting for their turn. When her name was called, they rose to step into the room.

She sat on a stool next to the chair the nurse was seated on. He stood beside her. The nurse took a polythene packet and cut it open with a pair of scissors. Then she took a syringe and needle out. Ahrani watched her coupling the needle to the syringe. All of a sudden she felt a cold shiver of fear run through her.

'Stretch your arm,' said the nurse, looking at Ahrani.

Ahrani didn't want to stretch her arm, but on the contrary she turned her head towards Sanjayan with a scared look.

Realizing the fact, the nurse said: 'as I prick your arm with this needle, you'll feel as if an ant would bite you. So, don't get excited.'

But Ahrani hadn't still stretched her arm. Looking at her, Sanjayan said: 'I know you're a strong girl. Be strong! It's a simple thing, don't worry.' And then looked at the nurse and said: 'It's the first time. That's why.'

'I thought so"', said the nurse, smiling.

Sanjayan bent forward to whisper in Ahrani's ear. 'Amma, please don't imagine what it'll be like to prick your arm. You should be strong to face reality. Then only you can get to realize the fact that imagination is pointless. Imagination always frightens us and is a barrier to face reality. So, don't worry - stretch your arm bravely.'

She stretched her arm over the table. The nurse wrapped the tourniquet around her upper arm and pinned the forearm against the table, and said: 'don't look here.'

Ahrani turned to look at Sanjayan with a nervous glance. He moved too close to her, signalled her to keep calm and mouthed: 'Not to worry.'

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Suddenly she grabbed his forearm, screeching: 'Aiyo... Amma... She grimaced at him as the needle went in.

The nurse pulled the plunger gently back to get a syringe-full of blood, and then drew the needle out of her arm muscle.

'That's all!' said Sanjayan, looking at Ahrani.

The nurse covered the needle hole with a cotton wool to absorb the blood oozing out of it, and bent the arm at the elbow.

Ahrani rose to her feet.

'Say thanks,' whispered Sanjayan in her ear. She turned to look at the nurse, smiled at her, and said: 'Thank you, sister.'

'Good, good, you're welcome,' said the nurse, smiling, 'keep it up!'

They both went out and sat on the bench by the wall of the room. His mobile started vibrating. He dipped into his trouser pocket and took his mobile out.

'Amma calling,' he said, looking at her.

'Hello, where're you?' he asked.

'The bus is approaching Vavuniya,' said Suganya cheerfully.

'Then get down in front of the hospital' he said casually,

'Where're you? Any problem?' she asked anxiously.

'No, nothing,' he said, and then told her everything briefly,

Ahrani suddenly became aware of herself holding his arms tightly. At once she relaxed her grip on his arm, and removed gently her hand from his arm. She cast a sidelong glance at his face to see if he'd been aware of her doing. Though he managed to notice all that she'd done, he pretended not to notice, smiling to himself, and kept talking on the phone

He cut the line and turned his head to her side and said: 'Amma is going to get off the bus. She'll be here within five minutes. Now are you happy, eh?'

She nodded. A smile touched the corner of her mouth.

'You feel better now?' he asked with concern.

'Yes, I feel better. No fever, no headache after popping a

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dose,' she said instantly, touching her neck with the back of her hands.

'Have you still got a pain where the needle pricked?' he asked, smiling.

'No, the pain has faded away. Almost no pain.'

'You know, imagination is more dangerous than reality. Our imagination prevents us from facing the reality. You should be prepared to face the reality in the world, then only you can learn to stand up for yourself - for your rights - for other people. Your mother doesn't want you to become an ordinary woman, nor do I.'

She listened to him, looking directly at his face.

Suganya entered the hospital, and walked slowly along the corridor of a wing, looking for them, twisting her head left and right with a kind of excitement.

It surprised her to find that they were talking to each other casually. She couldn't believe her eyes. Momentarily she stood transfixed with a gaping mouth by the wall of the corridor. Her heart lifted at the sight of them sitting on the bench next to each other, so close as if her shoulder gently touched his elbow. She headed for them.

'Here Amma comes !' exclaimed Ahrani.

Sanjayan looked at Suganya with a smile.

Meanwhile, an orderly poked his head out of the door and signalled Sanjayan to come in. He rose to his feet. Then Suganya approached them. He tapped her gently by the hand, and said: 'nothing to worry. Stay here with her. I think they've called me to issue the report.' He entered the room.

Suganya placed her bag on the bench and got close to her daughter. Ahrani, sitting on the bench with her arms encircling her mother's waist, burrowed her face into her mother's flank, and started weeping uncontrollably with her shoulders heaving. Suganya patted her on the head and back, saying: 'Pillai! Control yourself. Amma has come, eh. Don't worry ... Pillai don't worry.'

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A woman who had sat on the bench next to Ahrani moved a bit to make a space, and looked at Suganya, said: 'Pillai, sit down.'

Suganya smiled her thanks to the woman, and sat on the bench between the woman and Ahrani, wiping her daughter's eyes and face with her handkerchief.

The woman looked at Ahrani sympathetically.

'My Amma,' said Ahrani to her with happiness.

'Then who's he that went inside?' asked the woman, looking at Suganya.

Before Suganya could reply, Ahrani said instantly: 'He's my Appa!'

Suganya hugged her daughter tightly, affectionately and kissed her on both cheeks and the forehead.

Then Sanjayan came out with a smile, and returned to the place he had sat on the bench. Suganya and Ahrani looked at him simultaneously. He said: 'Nothing to worry. It's not dengue fever. So we can go home now'

'Appa!' called out Ahrani, looking at him casually.

He looked at her in rapture.

She went on, 'Appa when will we go to Point Pedro?'

'Pillai, finish your term test first, thereafter I want to celebrate your birthday which falls on the Sixth of December. Eventually we all can go to Point Pedro,' he said, placing his right hand on her head, and ruffled her hair affectionately.

Suganya was just looking on. Her emotions spilled over. Her tears streamed down her face. She rested her chin on her daughter's shoulder, looking at his face.

He looked back at her face delightfully with tears trembling unshed from the corners of his eyes.

Ahrani slipped her right hand into her father's left, as well as her left into her mother's right. The three got up from the bench to return home!

**The end**

## The Innocent Victims



Innocent victims is unbelievably, Siva Ahrooran's first novel in English. The protagonist Suganya is a war-widow who has a ten year old daughter. Fortunately, she is a working woman. That gives her the stamina and fortitude to withstand the onslaught made by the Society at different stages of her life.

The Society is represented by the many characters who criss-cross her life. Satkunam, elderly, influential and respectable man whose sinister design is bared by and by dominates the first part of the novel.

Sanjayan, the bold, idealist who stands by Suganya, gives her the strength to face a hostile conservative society. Selfless, simple and compassionate, he is the opposite of Satkunam.

Sanjayan's father Murugesu is a liberal, who is ahead of his times. Dananjayan elder brother is opposed to his bachelor – brother marrying a widow. It calls for a lot of cajoling on the part of his wife Rajini to make him come around.

The female characters of the novel are flexible and rounded. Even Suganya's mother in – law is very supportive. She persuades Suganya to re-marry and convinces Ahrani to accept it. Vasanthi, Suganya's office – mate is a tower of strength for her.

The most important strand of the novel is the maturation of Ahrani. She has apprehensions about the man who is to marry her mother. She shies away from him at the start. But when her mother leaves her for two days in Sanjayan's charge – and she experiences first hand his love and concern for her – she becomes a transformed girl.

Written in simple, lucid English, Innocent Victims is really an enjoyable novel.

-S.Pathmanathan (Sopa)

