

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS LOST

Chapter one

A prison mattress is not as comfortable as an analyst's couch. It is hard and lumpy and dirty. With the sweat of its previous users still pervading it. One cannot easily go to sleep on it, particularly in the beginning, or even forget oneself. The environment is also not very congenial. But it has its own advantages for one who wants to recollect his past in his own way. There is no psychiatrist to ask probing questions, make dry, penetrating comments, or direct one's attention to particular aspects of one's life. There is no limit to the time one has at one's disposal and no fee to be paid at the end of an hour and no fixing of the next appointment. One is free to delve into one's past for as long as one likes, to dream, even to make up stories and incidents that never happened but one would like to think they happened. That would certainly not be right for one who wants to tell the truth, would it? For I want to tell the truth, or at least try to find out what has tell the truth, or at least try to find out what has really happened, why I am where I am.

So let me start by telling the plain, unvarnished truth. Why am I here, in a prison cell? It is because I raped a young woman.

I was not a sex-starved youth unable to control his passions in a moment of weakness. It was not a thoughtless action performed in haste and repented afterwards. I was fifty six years old at the time and have had more women than I care to remember. I am not dull – witted or illiterate and ought to have been aware of the consequences of my actions. The deed itself was planned with great care, the subject chosen after careful deliberation and the act executed with some skill. It was almost like a clinical experiment. Only a combination of unfortunate circumstances enabled the police to trace me and ultimately got me convicted.

But I feel no repentance; no guilt. Sometimes I feel I would like to, but I can't. Pity, yes. Pity for the poor girl who no doubt suffered as a result, and pity for myself for getting caught. But guilt? No. I am beginning to realise that guilt for the soul is like pain in the human body. If you feel pain or discomfort, you know that there is something wrong and can go to doctor immediately. If you feel guilt, it is because you feel you have done something wrong. But if you do not feel guilt, there is no cure for the soul. You go on doing wrong until the soul is dead.

And yet, I have been greatly disturbed, particularly in the last month or two. Since the 'incident', the edifice of my past has suddenly collapsed. I stand amidst the ruins of my life and face a bleak and blank future, with nothing to look forward to but a life of broken and distorted memories. I still have more than a year to go before my release is due. But as they day of freedom draws near, the mental agitation only increases.

It is this feeling of restlessness that has started me on my quest of introspection. And a prison is a very good place for such an exercise, because you are on your own, undisturbed, for twelve hours a

day. The darkness and the silence sets your mind free, helps you to concentrate and to look inside yourself, as I said before, to find out why I am what I am. I suppose in a way, it is my autobiography though perhaps, that is too grandiose a title for my efforts.

A politician writes his life story because he wants to justify his actions and policies, if not before the electorate, at least before the bar of history; a writer, because it boosts his ego and he wants to reserve a place in the literary world; a film star or a sportsman because of the glamour as well as the publicity. I am none of these things. My sins – if sins they were – were quite ordinary that happen thousands of times every year. It did not even have the merit or rape followed by murder, in which case it would have received more space in the newspapers, during the trial. Then why do I recollect my past? It is because I want to understand myself; I wish to explore the inner workings of my soul and hope that it will give some peace and emotional satisfactions.

Every life – however common or ordinary – is unique in its own way. No two lives are alike. Each has its own contribution to make to our understanding of the human psyche in all its subtlety and complexity. There is perhaps a spark of greatness in each and every one of us, however low, humble, or even wicked. Are we not all part of the great divinity, sparks of the eternal flame? Yes, god has invested each one of us with greatness that is latent. All that is necessary is to rekindle it.

The past is essentially legend; mystery, memory and imagination. It is what one thinks, often yearns to remember and to recapture. The rest is lost in the mists of time and forgetfulness. Even what is retained – incidents, opinions, people, emotions, feelings associated with events – are often softened by time, modified by one's subconscious needs. A few things become exaggerated not so much by their intrinsic importance but because of subsequent events which have added colour to them. So I ask myself, 'Am I attaching too much importance to one incident out of all proportion just because it was responsible for sending me to gaol?' I wonder.

The past is the sum total of what one is what one feels, what one remembers. It is the essence of being. It is the sum total of all our yesterdays. But there is one thing about it. There is no undoing it. A rape once committed can never be uncommitted. The past is also lost, irrevocably lost. The past is dead.

And yet, the music of the past haunts my brain ceaselessly, persistently. It knocks on memory's door; it is a ghost without shape or form, surviving the passage of time, yet dead to the present, but unwilling to rest. It haunts me in my wakefulness, even in my sleep. But I cannot recapture the tune; I cannot sing. No instrument can play that elusive tune; no voice can sing the half-forgotten words. Sometime, jumbled notes and voices rise to the surface, clamoring noises of far off days, echoing in the hidden depths of what has gone before. There is no tune to the music of my heart. The ear can only listen, but cannot reproduce; the eyes can only see a blur and the heart can only feel. But they cannot unheard, unseen or unfelt. Nor can one undo what has happened in the past.

Mind is but a broken mirror reflecting the past, each piece producing its own image in its own angle, reflecting truly but producing only a heap of broken images. It is not an aid to remember or to forget, only to register what is past, only to record and to learn. But I am sure of one thing. What has

been seen or heard or felt will never be forgotten. While the mind is haunted by the music of the past, what has been once will never cease to be. There is no death to what is past.

I suppose I am particularly prone to this weakness. As far as I am concerned, the past is not dead, though it may be lost in the physical sense. It is still alive vividly in one's sub-conscious. I look back on things with great nostalgia. I suppose it is the joy of being sad about past events, invests ordinary events of no significance with sentiment..... But can you call rape merely sentiment? I tend to look back on even insignificant events with affection and emotion. Sometimes, I feel that forgetfulness is perhaps one of the most callous of human failings.

Yes, I can still remember the names of most of my school teacher and the names of the landladies as well as the presents they gave me. One of them gave me a metal mirror to be kept in the left-hand breast pocket of my jacket so that it would stop a bullet, in case one was ever fired at me. These were made during the Second World War and girls presented them to their soldier friends when they left for the front. But the war was over and my land lady must have got it very cheap. It was a pointless gift as far as I was concerned and the chances of a bullet hitting me were about the same as my winning the Irish sweep stake. But the mirror has survived, tarnished and useless in one of my desk drawers. But whenever I came across it, there was a yearning in my heart, perhaps for the bullet that failed to make the mirror meaningful. Years later, when I returned to England, I used to go to all the addresses I had stayed in just to look at the rooms where I had spent my time. Most of the time, I could only gaze at the windows since my landladies were long since dead and there were new owners. But once a man was washing his car outside the house and as he stood and gazed at the upstairs window, he asked, "Are you looking for someone?"

"No, but I used to live here many years ago."

"That must have been in Mrs. Barrow's time. She told us she used to take lodgers, usually Indians."

"Yes, I was with her for two years. Can you tell me what has happened to her?"

"She went to stay with her niece in Black pool. But we heard that died last year."

"I am sorry to hear that. I would have liked to have seen her."

"Well, there it is," he said and went on cleaning his car.

But I still stood there gazing at the window. After a couple of minutes, the man turned to me, "Would you like to see your old room?" he asked.

"I would like to very much."

"I will have to ask the wife," he said and went in. After a couple of minutes, he came back. "Come on in," he invited.

I went up with him and saw the room where I had spent two years of my life, some twenty five years ago, the wall paper had been changed and the furniture was new and I felt like a stranger there.

“In fact, this is our bed room,” said the man. “We like it because it is nice and sunny and has a good out look.”

“Yes, I too was happy here,” I said.

But I couldn't bear to think that in this room, between these four walls where I had had some of my most intimate moments, others had slept and made love, revealed their secret thoughts to each other. If only walls had ears! I quickly got out of the place after a hurried goodbye.

But there are times when I cannot understand this craze for nostalgia, this desire to relive a dead past, It is almost like embracing a corpse. Once it is past, it is dead and best forgotten. Excessive preoccupation with the past hinders planning and thinking about the future or enjoying the present. It is like looking backwards when you are moving forward. Most likely, you will have an accident.

How can one expend one's emotions on inanimate objects which cannot possibly respond to or reciprocate one's feelings? What is the use of hoarding in one's mind a whole lot of useless information and then brooding over it? Is there any point in gazing at brick walls and glass windows inside which one lived in a different age, at a different time, under totally different circumstances? Does it add anything to our understanding of the present world, or even the past? To think for example, that other people are making love in the same room where I had slept with Mabel Barrow! To feel that those walls are keeping your secrets as well as a score of others! You get the feeling that the purity, the sanctity of your own emotions has been lost and the whole thing has been commercialized; prostituted. Your most sacred feelings have been violated.

Memory is like antique. The older it is, the more precious, more fragile and rarer it becomes. We try to hold on to it, but it becomes vague, blurred, and finally disappears in spite of all our efforts. Faces lose their identity like paint peeling off an old building and merge with other faces and in the end, all that is left is a vague feeling of disappointment. Even Photographs have a habit of fading just like a memory. We begin to wonder whether it is the picture that has changed or whether it is our own mind that has lost the feelings it once had in spite of our efforts to hold on to them. Frankly, I don't know. A photograph or a fleeting vision of the past is like a moment fixed in eternity for all time.

But that last important act of mine, how can I forget it? When I think of her pleading eyes, everything becomes vivid, clear, but not understandable. I cannot look back without a feeling of excitement, pride, sympathy and bewilderment. During the few hours she spent with me, I got to know her very well. Not only her body, but even her mind and soul were fully exposed to my gaze so that I knew her as well as I knew myself. Her hopes and aspirations – so pathetic I thought -her fears and her superstitions and inhibitions, were all narrated to me with sincerity and truth.

I saw her for the first time on the beach. She and her husband got off a cycle rickshaw and walked towards the sands. He had a very pronounced limp which was very noticeable when once he

begun to walk. He moved like one of the waves on the ocean. Otherwise I would not have noticed them at all. He looked at her with adoring eyes and a happy smile, but she averted her eyes with true modesty. Obviously, they were newly married, for most couples soon lose that kind of a look after some time and the women are not so shy. 'Poor bitch! How did you manage to marry a bastard like that? You are not bad looking yourself. I suppose your father couldn't afford the dowry for a normal man.' I said to myself. I was sitting there smoking, with nothing better to do than watch people come and go, especially the young ones. I was wondering what to do with myself for the evening.

I would have forgotten the whole incident if it wasn't for the fact that they were there again the next day. Creatures of habit, I thought. When I saw them for the third time, it became a sort of game with me, to try and predict when they would come, what they would do and when they would leave. I found that they never came on Fridays – did she go to a temple of some sort on Friday evenings? – But always on Saturdays and Sundays. During the rest of the week, they came at least on two days, usually Tuesdays and Thursdays. They always got off the rickshaw in the same spot, walked down to the edge of the water, left their sandals and walked into the rolling surf, she with her sari raised up to her knees so as not to get it wet, and he rolling up his trousers. It made his twisted leg seem grotesque. If it had been me, I would not have exposed it at any cost. But I suppose he thought nobody was looking, for it was a lonely corner of the beach. Once he slipped and fell as a particularly strong wave hit them, and she had to help him up. As she bent down solicitously, I could see her thighs fleetingly exposed. Lucky blighter; I told myself.

One day, as they were returning from the water's edge, they had to pass a fishing boat on the sand. It was getting dark and the husband thought that no one was watching. Suddenly, he grabbed her, embraced her and pressed his body against her.

She pulled herself away. "Don't do that!" she hissed. "It is so public and I feel shy."

I like it in the open air, he said. "And there is no one here," and grabbed her again. He did not know I was on the other side of the boat. As he tried to push on to the sand, she resisted and ran away. He could not catch her because of the limp and they walked back in stony silence.

I wondered for a moment if they were not married. If they were, why should he molest her on the public beach? He could have done anything he wanted in the privacy and comfort of his home. Then I remembered my own experience. Sex is the one activity that is most subject to moods, time and place. To do it the open air, under the stars with the cool breeze from the sea wafting over the young bodies is certainly more romantic than a stuffy bed and your parents snoring in the next room. To perform a very private act in public is a kind of challenge to society, a way of self assertion. Yes, I could understand the feelings of the poor chap as well as his disappointment.

Just to find out if they were married or not, I followed their rickshaw in my car. They were living in a small house in a crowded middle class area with a narrow open yard in front of the house. He was probably a clerk in a government office or a junior employee in a private firm. They both went in. It was clear they were married. Otherwise, he would have dropped her somewhere before going home. I noted the name of the street and left.

Up till now, it had been an idle game, a mere pastime for me because I had nothing better to do. But now, my interest quickened a little. Even then, rape was the furthest thing from my mind.

From then on, I took to following their movements, and listening to their conversation when possible. It was surprising how much information you could collect by merely following them about. Once I followed him to his place of work in the morning, out of sheer curiosity. I knew where she did her shopping and who looked after the house when she was away. It was an elderly lady, obviously her mother-in-law. I knew they were vegetarians – for she never bought meat, fish, or even eggs – always got the same magazines and the occasional novel. I had obviously missed my vocation; I should have been a private detective, for they were completely oblivious of my surveillance, either absorbed in each other, or in their problems of living. They were not the kind of people in whom strangers were likely to take an interest; they were very ordinary, very common-place, except for her good looks, I was sure even his boss would not been interested in him when once he saw his back at 5 O'clock in the evening.

One Sunday, they arrived very late at the beach. I was almost ready to leave, disappointed at not having seen them. But just as I was starting my car, they arrived. There was a big crowd at the beach that evening because it was the day of the lunar eclipse. Then, I knew she was going to have a dip in the sea. It was considered very auspicious by orthodox Hindus. So, I got out and followed them, sat on a catamaran by the water's edge and watched her as she waded into the water. She did not go far, for the sea was deep and the waves were treacherous. Obviously, she could not swim. The husband was only a few paces away from me, holding on to a bag in which they had brought a spare sari for her after the dip. He did not go into the water, either because he was not religious, or because he did not want to take a risk with his twisted leg.

She soon came out of the water and shook herself. The eclipse had not started yet and there was bright moon light. Her sari clung to her like a second skin and revealed her figure, like one of those statues that one sees in Hindu temples. I could see every curve and contour of her body and what I could not see, I could imagine. She had no bra and probably no petticoat either. She took the bag from her husband and went behind one of the boats to change, while the husband stood guard. It is surprising how modestly this task of changing sari in public is performed by Indian women, without exposing any part of their more delicate anatomy. She went round the boat more out of delicacy than because any part of her was likely to be exposed.

Without thinking what I was doing, I went round to the other side of the boat and waited. She came round with the wet sari inside the bag bumped into me. May be she though it was her husband, upto his usual tricks on the beach; may be, she did not see me at all. She looked up and realised it could not be her husband. I was much taller and had two good legs.

“Get out of my way!” she shouted.

Meanwhile, the husband had come round. “Ay, what are you doing here, spying on women changing their clothes? Get out!”

He was about to push me and I was getting ready for a fight, but she realised her husband would be no match for me. She probably did not want a commotion and a crowd gathering to watch the fun. It would achieve nothing except spoil her reputation. So, she held his hand and dragged him away quickly. “Don’t quarrel with an uncivilized brute! It is beneath our dignity!” And they moved away rapidly to where a lot of people were standing about.

I stood there perspiring, even on that cool night, wondering what I had done. My heart beat a little faster. I was filled with bewilderment, shame and humiliation. At the same time, there was an accompanying excitement. My hand had touched her breasts under the loose, flowing sari and I liked the feeling it left behind. There was softness, firmness and delicacy in that momentary contact. At the same time, I hated her for the words she had used. So, I was an ‘uncivilized brute’, was I? There was so much contempt and pride in her words. How was I going to humble her pride, destroy her dignity and make her eat her words? At the same time, I liked the touch and the feel. To have under my control, to make her do what I wanted would be one of the greatest satisfactions of my life.

Did I deliberately and consciously go there and stand in her path? Or was it accidental? I have thought over this a thousand times and I still honestly do not know the answer. Certainly, I did not know what I expected to do when she came; nothing was planned or premeditated. All I know is that my legs took me there and placed me in a position where she had to bump into me. If that had not happened, things would not have developed as they did. There would have been no opportunity for physical contact or abuse. I might have got tired of merely watching and gone away after some time. It is surprising how small coincidences – such as an eclipse – change the entire course of one’s life. From then on, I thought of nothing but hatred, lust and revenge. If I could have gone away somewhere, or found some other interest, I might have forgotten it all. But nothing turned up and I was left with the contemplation of my revenge. Time is supposed to heal many wounds and I tried to forget the whole thing; but her words – and her touch – were like a poisonous seed planted in my heart. It grew and grew. Slowly, gradually, it took on the complexity of an obsession, a compulsion. Days stretched into weeks and months and I still did not know what to do. But after that incident, I did not come directly into contact with them and was careful not to be seen by them. Even if I had, I didn’t think she would have recognized me. But nevertheless I kept them under surveillance. Gradually, almost unconsciously, the word ‘RAPE’ took shape in my mind.

But one thing I did do. I waited outside their house one day when the postman came to deliver some letters. As he was entering the wicket gate, I said, “Don’t bother to go in. I am going to see them. I shall give them the post.” He handed over the letters to me and walked on. As I walked in to drop the letters, I looked at the name. Her name was Sushila and her husband’s name was Narayan. I also knew she was a school teacher because one of the letters was marked ‘Mrs. Sushila Narayan, B.Ed. that is, bachelor of Education. As I dropped the letters and came out, Sushila was returning from her morning shopping. But she gave no sign of having recognized me from our beach encounter. I don’t think she even realised that I was coming out of their gate.

Now I had an identity for her, a label. I need not talk about ‘her’ in future. From now on, she will be Sushila.

I was not aware of the passing of time. It might all have happened in a previous birth, for all I knew. How long ago it all seems now!

Yes, Time is a peculiar thing, particularly in relation to the recollection of events. We are told it moves forward relentlessly at the rate of sixty minutes per hour, twenty four hour per day three hundred and sixty five days in the year, and so on. In spite of various theories with regard to time, it can never be reversed; Time once lost is never regained, we are born, grow, decay and die all in relation to Time. That is why the past is lost for ever, dead beyond resurrection. Perhaps ,that is why it is so much more rewarding to recollect – even rape which has landed me on goal. In any case, I don't seem able to forget it. To recollect, To relive the past in one's imagination is better than the contemplation of the future which may depend on hope, planning and effort, and often tainted with the possibility of failure. In any case, what kind of future do I have, now that I am a jailbird? But the past can never fail; the worst is over. Recollection can never be more cruel than reality. Perhaps, that is why I indulge in the pastime of past times.

If you were writing a book and half way through the second chapter, a new and exciting idea struck you, you can not only incorporate it in the book, but go back to the first chapter and modify it in order to fit in which the new idea. You can do it as times as you like before the book is published. But life once lived is over and done with and there is no way of modifying it. Time does not give you a second chance.

It is usually said that one can make amends for the past by 'turning over a new leaf' as it is often called. If you were a catholic, you could confess and get absolution. But can the past be erased or obliterated? Even when everyone else – including oneself – has forgotten it, it still lives in the sub – conscious and influences one's life and one's actions. A rape can never be 'unraped'.

But to return to time as an independent entity, is not nostalgia itself an attempt at reversal of time? And do we not live a thousand hours in a single moment? At other times it seems to hang heavily over us, stagnant as a muddy pool. It is obvious that Time – not in its physical dimension but in its human, emotional sense – is related to our moods, feelings and actions. Yes, in one hour, I might have written an immortal short story. The most sublime thoughts might have occurred to me. Or I might have committed rape. One minute is enough to suffer a heart attack that ends one's life for ever; or an earthquake that destroys a city. But Time can never be obliterated. It is inexorable. Sometime, eternity is squeezed into a single moment; at others, a moment seems like eternity.....

Let us look at it another way. When I was Five years old, a year seemed like an age. I wondered if it would ever come to an end. It represented one fifth of my entire life span, and less than half of my conscious life span. On the other hand, when I am Fifty years old, time goes much faster. Calendars and diaries succeed each other with increasing rapidity, because a year represents only one fiftieth of my life so far. Time certainly seems to accelerate as we grow older.

But why am I so preoccupied with rape? After all it was only one incident. Is it so important, except for the fact that it landed me in gaol what is so special about it? I have already said I have no feelings of guilt about the incident. But as I think about it, I realise that it is not the act, the events that is

important in itself. I am not like the avid readers of thrillers to whom the successions of events of dramatic importance is the only thing that matters. What happens next is why people read a book. To me, it is the motives, the causes that led up to the event that are important. The complex needs and desires, the inner promptings are the things that matter. And the consequences that followed the incident. Many events do not even leave a ripple behind them; others, seemingly unimportant at the time they place cause revolutions in the minds of men and it society. Yes, it is not the act itself but the consequences, the results of the act that are relevant.

There seems to be noise outside. I can hear hurried footsteps. I stop thinking and listen. There is a knock on my cell door. 'Are you there?' asks the sentry. I answer 'yes'. He lifts the flap cell door and shines his torch. My eyes are blinded by the bright light.

"What do you want?" I ask annoyed at being disturbed in my reveries.

"Alright, go to sleep," he walks away.

The incident has disturbed me. I have lost the thread of my thoughts. They come back to me slowly, reluctantly, for I am also sleepy I suppose. I started thinking about my past, about the events in my life that up to the incident that brought me to gaol. And then, I went off at a tangent about recollections in general, about time, memory, nostalgia, and so on. I suppose it is the result of an untrained mind, not having an analyst to direct your thoughts to the relevant facts and incidents. I must try again.

It is surprising how fast news travels in a prison. During exercise and at breakfast, there were animated whispers about an attempted escape. All the details were given as if they were eye witnesses to the whole thing. The warders were grim, more alert. During work – I had the job of cutting out paper and making envelopes – one of the guards came to me. "I suppose you know what happened?" he asked.

"I am sorry, I know nothing. " I had found that the best policy as a prison inmate was to see nothing, hear nothing and speak nothing. As a person of some wealth outside, I had managed to get quite a few concessions in various ways. I was put in a separate cell, given light work as well as a few luxuries to supplement my diet. The least I could do in return was to be well behaved, be a model prisoner and get out as soon as I could. Fortunately, the other prisoners also left me alone, except occasionally to wink and ask, "Was it worth it?"

But the curious thing was, even the guards were very interested in my experience as a rapist. 'Did you do it only once or more than once?' 'Do they put up a fight or give in easily?' 'How many women did you rape before the law caught up with you?' were the sort of questions I was asked. None of them – prisoners or warders – had had any experience in that direction. They wanted to experience the thrills and the excitement at least second hand. It meant that many of them would have liked to have done it, but cowardice or lack of opportunity had robbed them of that thrill. But I was careful never to say anything definite and they left me with disappointment.

Nor do want to deal with that rather morbid subject at the moment. There is time enough for it later. What I wish to do is to go back over my life and try to understand myself, my motives ,desires, my philosophy and come to that incident as a logical consequence of everything that had gone before.

It is surprising how many things come back to one's consciousness when one begins to concentrate, events one thought one had forgotten, or did not even know that one was aware. For example, I remember sitting on my grand mother's lap and she was crying. There was a body in front of her covered with a red shawl. It must have been my uncle who died when I was about two half years old, the first death in the family after I was born. Could I have remembered it at such a tender age? My mother assured me later that while I might have sat on my grand mother's lap on that occasion, my uncle's body was not covered with a red shawl. Was I confusing it with some other, later occasion? I also remember a journey in a bullock cart, the bells round the necks of the bullocks jingling and the animals trotting. But where did we go and to what purpose? It has completely escaped me.

How can I forget my grand mother's death? I must have been about six years old, just old enough to remember things, but no old enough to understand them. She was laid out in the front hall of our house, with a lamp burning near her head and a lot of people coming and going; a few of them were crying. There were drums in the front yard and the untouchables were dancing to their beat. There was also a pot in the front and a log of fire burning in it. Later it would be carried by my father to light the funeral pyre. When people went and condoled with my grand father who was past eighty, his reply was, "It is no use depending on the old women any more."

If she was here, she would not have let you get away with that remark," replied one of his cronies. "She would have retorted, "yes, I am an old women, and I suppose he is a youth of sixteen!"

I was merely bewildered by all this. They told me my grand mother had gone to heaven. I accepted it just as I accepted the fact that my father went to the city when he had some business and my grand father went to the market when he had to buy or sell something. "Will she bring me some sweets when she returns?" I enquired. But there was no answer. The next day, when I was alone in the room, she came to me. At least, I could have sworn she was there in flesh and blood, though she had been cremated the day before. She smiled at me and beckoned me to come to her. When I was within a few feet of her, she melted into thin air, I realise now that it must have been a hallucination. But what was a boy of six to think about it?

Why did my grand mother come to me? What was its significance? Do all boys of six who lose their grand mothers see them after they are cremated? Why was I so blessed? Or cursed?

I remember a stone in the front of our house in the village on which my grand father used to sit in the mornings and in the evenings. It was a huge stone; at least, I thought so at that time. It was the sheet anchor around which my thoughts revolved and my grand father was the presiding deity. I could not imagine life without that stone. Perhaps, in my sub – conscious mind it represented something permanent, something that could not be destroyed. It did not matter where I went or what I did, that stone still be there as a reminder of everything I loved in my childhood. Other things might change; houses might collapse; people might die; but that stone would not be affected. A stone is not a

biological organism; it is not born as a result of copulation and conception, except in a very vague sense of its formation in the bowels of mother earth. It would not grow, decay or die. It did not need any nourishment for its sustenance; nor did it contribute sustenance to its environment. It had no birth and consequently, no death. It was eternal. Storms or floods or fire could not destroy it. To me, after I grew older, it became a symbol of eternity and a mythical repository of all my sentiments.

Evidently, it was brought there more than a hundred years before I was born; one in the village the exact date. An idol was to be chiseled out of it, to be installed in the new temple that was being constructed. But the sculptor had rejected it has a flaw, in preference to another stone which ultimately became the central deity. It still presided in the sanctum of the temple when I was a boy. And this poor stone, unchiselled and unsung, lay in front of our house like a discarded mistress. It was too heavy to be moved and so, it was pushed to one side of the street so that it would not cause any obstructions. In later years, it became a seat for my grand father. The other villagers would sit on the front verandah of our house while they discussed the affairs of everyone in the village. By tradition and convention, no one other than my grand father dared to sit on that stone. It acquired the status symbol as a reserved parking lot for the chairman's car in a large company. I do not know whether his father had also sat there, but the stone had worn smooth with constant over many years with my grand father's behind, just as it's more sacred and successful rival has also worn smooth with constant oblations of oil by succeeding generations of priests. So, there it was; one stone became a God, another seat for the village elder; one serving a diving purpose, the other a social one. When I heard all this as a small boy from one of our servants and listened to my grand father pontificating from his perch, I was fascinated, but did not know what to make of it all, except to feel an affinity to my beloved stone.

A few years ago, when I went back to the village for a visit, the stone was not there, Even stones had become very much more expensive in the last hundred and fifty years and one enterprising neighbour had broken it up to build a compound wall for his house. So, one stone continued to receive the homage of its devotees while the other merged into a compound wall with mortar cement, still serving a social purpose even in its disintegrated form. It had lost its individuality after nearly two centuries of independent existence.

But that is not the end of the story. Constant oblations of oil – often adulterated with some acids – had eroded the strength and stability of the divine statue and it was recently replaced by a ready-made one from the local handicrafts society. It is not known what became of the old idol. No one remembers it. People in India do not seem to have any sense of history. Had it been thrown away to be buried in a tank or a field, to be unearthed by some curious villager a century latter as a rare find? Had it found its way to a museum or to a private collection? Or had it been sold to an unsuspecting American tourist as something belonging to one hundred A.D.?

To my way of thinking, both stones have gone the same way. The beautiful, serene form of an idol and the hard seat of a village elder are both dead, one through stone cancer and the other through vivisection. But the strange aspect from my point of view is, the village people have forgotten the existence of both the stones that were so much a part of their life for so many years.

Why have I remembered this story now? In what way is it connected with my problems of the present? Does the disintegration of my grand father's seat represent the disintegration of my life? Does the disappearance of the idol represent my own incarceration in goal? I do not know why, ever since I came here, this story has been coming back to mind frequently.

The man who told me the factual details of the stones was my grand father's young cart driver Kuppan. He also worked as a cook in the house sometimes. It was also he who initiated me into the mysteries of sex, conceptions and the birth of babies. But it was somewhat allegorical in nature. He described the act of sex as putting the black God in the temple and procreation as the result. For an illiterate, this was perhaps a very sophisticated way of putting things. Much later, I learnt that throughout history, there has always been a close relationship between religion and sex. I have often wondered why. Is it because they both evoke deep emotions? Is it because creation which is the act of God and procreation which is the act of man are closely linked? In many primitive faiths, religious orgies often culminate in sexual ones. However that may be, in my mind the two were closely linked from the very earliest memories.

Perhaps, one other incident during my boyhood illustrates my attitude of mind more than anything else. When I was twelve, I failed in important examinations that was to gain an entry for me into the high school. I was frightened because I knew my father would be furious. After considerable deliberation, I thought of a way of outwitting them. I went into a dark room in our house one afternoon with a piece of rope, tied it round the beam, made a noose at the other end and placed it round my neck. I stood on a stool and waited for some one to come into the room. The idea was that I should jump off the stool the moment some one entered so that person could rescue me from committing suicide! After about half an hour of waiting, my mother herself walked in and she caught me as I jumped off the stool. Of course, the noose was not really tight and I did not hurt myself in any way.

"Oh, my child! My child! why are you doing such a terrible thing?" cried my mother. "What have you lacked in this house? What horrible sorrow has driven you to such a step?"

There were tears in my eyes as I shouted, "Let me go! I don't want to live any more!"

"But why?" asked my mother in desperation as she removed the rope round my neck and threw it away.

After considerable persuasion, I confessed. "What is the use of living when I have brought such a shame on you all by failing in my examination?"

"Is that all?" said my mother with relief. "In future, you need not go to school at all. You need not study. We have enough to live on without your having to study and get a job. Don't worry my darling. But you must promise never to do such a terrible thing again."

Meanwhile, my father had come into the room and he watched my performance with curious eyes. "Alright, get up," he shouted at me and to my mother he said, "leave to me and go into the kitchen."

My mother obediently went away, wiping her eyes with the end of her sari. But she was standing the doorway, watching the proceedings.

“You wanted to kill yourself because you failed in your examination, did you?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“It is not a bad idea; here, go ahead,” he handed me the rope. “But this time, make sure the noose is tight.”

He walked away. I sat there and wept, not knowing what to do. I could hear the whispered pleadings of my mother and my father’s indifferent, “Don’t worry; he won’t do anything.”

After fifteen minutes, he came in. “I see you don’t have the courage of your convictions. But the next time you fail in your examination, I shall hang you myself; do you understand?”

“Yes father.”

“Now get out and don’t let me catch you in any mischief to gain sympathy!”

I had no other option but to go back to school.

Now, I wonder; can I attribute all my later actions – including the last – to my relationship with my father? To the Oedipus complex syndrome? Let me be clear. I am not trying to evade responsibilities for my actions by blaming it on such factors. Now – a – days, even if you slip on a banana skin and break your leg, it is considered to be psychosomatic. I am merely trying to understand.

No life as simple as it is portrayed in an autobiography. This is not to say that most of them are untrue. A book – particularly a book about oneself – is expected to be logical, coherent and meaningful. It is a justification of one’s life, however indirectly. It is a recreation of external events, some intimate thoughts thrown into support and sustains these happenings. To produce an interesting, colourful and socially meaningful personality means a considerable degree of compromise and condensation. In such a case, writing is no the free expression of one’s emotions; It is not passion flowing out of one’s and flooding the entire being. It becomes a ritual, a ceremony to be performed according to prescribed rules and procedures, an incantation that is pre – ordained..... But in attempting to portray myself truthfully, it is much better perhaps to paint a picture with contradictory angles. Conflicting emotions and clashing colours, like a surrealist painting, rather than a well preserved classical portrait.

Often, there is an inner conflict, for there is a diversity of needs in each one of us. There is the diabolical as well as the sublime temperament, present in each one of us; a desire for sacrifice as well as a desire to covet. Even while doing good there is a regret that the other way might have been better. There is a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in each one of us, not succeeding each other as in the story, but existing and often acting simultaneously. In fact there are many Jekyll and many Hydes with different shades of diabolical, sublime or merely frivolous temperaments. Each one of there is fighting for mastery, to subdue the others and to prevail. Any given action is the result of a resolution of

forces between these conflicting temperaments as well as our needs, desire and motives. The contradictory behavior of an individual at different times or under different circumstances – often even in the same situations – can be attributed to this phenomenon.

Many souls, many personalities, many temperaments exist, all sharing the same body, the brain, the same alimentary canal, liver and spleen; one wanting to go on a diet, the other on the booze; one wanting to obey the law, uphold traditions, accept social responsibilities, the other, selfish, while, uncontrollable..... But when more than one consciousness exists side by side in the same body, sharing it, trying to dominate it and dominate each other, and more than all, accepting the consequences of each other's folly, it is one must admit, a somewhat unusual situation, perhaps, all people are like that, only they don't like to admit it even to themselves. Anyhow, the diabolical temperament may send you to goal, but the sub line temperament is also locked up along with it.

In any case it is a continuous, eternal strain on one's mental, physical and even more, psychological resources. It is a war that never ends. There is no peace; only an occasional respite between one battle and the next. And it takes place, not on the external plane but within the ambit of one's mind and soul. It is extremely difficult to live with; it must be exposed to the gaze. To the scrutiny of the external world whether it interests that world or not. It must be thrust into the notice of other people, not so much in their interest but for my sake. Therefore, whether it sees the light of day or not, whether any publisher publishes it or not, it has to be recorded, has to be written in all its confusion, sublimity and tragedy. It has to be out of my mind, or should, I say, our mind.

But who is sublime and who is diabolical? It is difficult to tell. Is one who committed rape diabolical? But he has pity in his heart, loves animals and children, sheds tears over other people's tragedies, laughs and cries with the rest of humanity. The man who is sublime is often grim and stern, enforcing morality with a vengeance with no pity for the weak and the unfortunate, demanding the highest standards of ethics and behavior. But can humps beings ever be godlike? Is it not too much to expect of frail, weak men and women? With all their desire and needs? Sometimes, both temperaments seem to be present in different proportions. But often, we have long conversations with each other, in a quiet and constructive manner, like two civilized human beings. We exchange ideas, remind each other that we cannot afford to hurt or injure one another, for if one is hurt, the other cannot escape it. That is when we progress; new ideas take shape, new interests are created and we as one and the individual identities are lost. We really enjoy them. The pity of it is that such occasions are rare and they usually lead to a violent confrontation immediately afterwards. We are like Siamese twins, organically attached to each other, but with souls and ideals of our own.

So, we are condemned till death to share the same body, the same physical needs, the ailments, the desires; and often, the same women, to the ecstasy of one and the mortification of the other. Love and hate; hate and love. Our actions necessarily have to be the same, but the motives are different. A surgeon wears gloves before an operation in order not to leave his finger prints behind. The same action, different motives. One commits rape and the other sits in judgement over the deed. One is venturesome, even fool-hardy and the other is nervous and diffident. One is carried away by ideals, a sense of justice and fair play; the other is covetous, selfish and cunning and does not hesitate to use

those ideals for his own purposes. One hesitates, the other plunges headlong without any fear of the consequences. Each takes credit when things go right, and blame each other for the failure and disasters Yes, the phrase 'till death do us part' has never been applied more appropriately than to us.

Let me not be mistaken. I am not suffering from a split personality or psychological maladjustment. In fact, my lawyer wanted to use that argument in my defence to get my sentence reduced or even completely squashed on appeal. Then, I would have had to spend my time in a mental hospital or with a head shrinker. Needless to say, I refused. I am not a case for the analyst or even the priest. I know exactly what I am doing every moment of my conscious life; or rather, all the personalities residing within my body know and argue with each other about the pros and cons of any action. They are present all the time, tampering, arguing and balancing each other. It is in a way perpetual war that knows no end, because there is no defect or victory. So it goes on and on. Consequently, I have enthusiasm and lethargy, talent and stupidity, foolishness and wisdom, all at the same time, The result is confusion and clarity certainly does not begin at home in my case.

When did I first become conscious of this multi – personal existence? I suppose almost as far back as memory could reach, from the time of my first awareness. But it was quite unconscious at first. It was described as 'moods' by my mother who was very sensitive where children were concerned. I would be playing happily with some wooden toys, or with my top, and suddenly I would become disgusted with them, throw them away and start crying. When my mother asked what the matter was, or did I hurt myself, I had no answer, except that I yelled louder. My mother's attention seemed to aggravate rather than soothe my temper. If they gave me a picture book, I tore it up. Once I cut the palm of my hand with the sharp point of the top I was given to play with.

"Raju is such a funny child, "She used to explain to her friends. "He is so friendly and cheerful and plays with his toys and amuses himself for hours. Then, for absolutely no reason at all, he suddenly turns violent, breaks his toys and yells blue murder."

"May be he was hungry, "My aunt would reply. "Or may be, he has suddenly got indigestion."

"No, it is almost as if he were two different people."

They thought I was too young for their conversation, or perhaps, I was not listening, but I could follow and understand them. That was when I knew that we were two people imprisoned in the same body.

But my aunt went off at a tangent of her own choosing. " If there was less indigestion in the world, there would certainly be less violence and fewer number of revolutions. Did you know that Gandhi and Nehru were both suffering from acute indigestion?"

I did not know what she meant at that time, but the statement registered itself in my mind, and later, when I became more aware of my dilemma, I realised that if everyone had a unified and integrated personality, it would be easier to classify all human beings into sheep and goats. As it is,

human nature is one of the few things in the world that defies classification or identification and pigeonholing. It is totally unpredictable. I suppose it is what makes men and women eternally fascinating and frustrating at the same time.

Sometime, I wonder, have we only one existence or many? I do not mean reincarnation and all that rubbish. I mean, in this existence, in the present time scale, do we not live at different levels? Do we not appear different to different people? Are there not different levels of consciousness? Where one level is in torment, the other may be in ecstasy? While the body is suffering from cancer, the mind is blessed by unshakeable faith? The trouble is it is the wise men who are in doubt; the fools are sure of themselves, as some one has said. But I suppose, it is worth being born and worth dying just to experience the misery as well as the ecstasy. There is no escape from birth and death. So, we might as well make the best of the brief interval in between.

Yes, my soul longs for immortality; it desires to break away from the bondage of birth and death. It yearns to wander in the realm of eternity, in space and time. It aspires for the freedom of an unbounded, expanding universe, not to be tied down to mortal earth. But it is imprisoned in a frail, weak body which has its own needs, demands and compulsions – including rape I suppose – for its gratification. My spirit wants to break loose from it all, but I know only death can release it. But then, death is the end of everything is it not?

Life is like a train journey. You don't know when or where it started, only where you got in. People get in and out at every station. With some you are friendly; with others you are not. But you are not sure where it is going and when you yourself are going to be thrown out.

Life in the village was dominated by belief in the supernatural, in the power of the unknown forces above and below us. A whole world of mythology, of ghosts and monsters and spirits wandering in the outer world, outside our reach and beyond our control had created a sense of awe and wonder in our lives. I myself had first hand evidence in the form of my grand mother who appeared before me a full twenty four hours after she was cremated. Belief in the supernatural is closely related to the fear of the unknown. To me, the gods and devas of mythology were not mere symbolic abstractions of ideas, but real beings who peopled this universe and wandered about it in an eternity of time. Heaven and hell were real places somewhere above or below the earth, among the stars or in the nether regions. Gods and demons emerged from these abodes to establish their sway over earthly mortals. Similarly, the spirits of people who were dead were also free to roam about, particularly those who had failed to reach heaven, which meant evil spirits. I thought of this world, not as an exclusive preserve of human beings and animals, but essentially as an area in which supernatural and super human beings wandered at will and mankind was largely at their mercy. I thought of these creatures as being able to pass through closed doors, to see in the dark and to harm without themselves being harmed. One could not predict their behavior and it seemed to me that I was entirely at their mercy and the support of mere human beings was no help in such a situation.

This struck terror into my heart but it was an unspoken, unadmitted and even unrecognized terror. The rationalization is a subsequent phenomenon. Its very vagueness made it more powerful, and

me, more helpless. I dreamed of these creatures in my sleep and woke up crying in the middle of the night. When my mother asked me what the matter was, I was unable to explain it except to say that I had dreaming. But the contents of the dream were too confusing, too indefinite for me to understand. Sometimes, I lay awake at night, clutching at my bed –clothes and thinking that at away. Proximity to my mother was no help, for they could come without warning and act instantaneously. Not only the darkness, but even more the silence of the night made it more fearful. Somehow, I felt that if I could make a noise, it would drive way the spirits. So I would go on talking to mother about nothing in particular. 'Go to sleep', she would say and turn over and I lay in bed thinking what was going to happen, until tiredness and sheer exhaustion overtook me and I feel into a deep if disturbed sleep. During the day, things did not bother me and I would wonder sometimes how I could be so frightened. In the light of the day, it all seemed so unreal, but in the dark, the unreal became the real. I was afraid to go out into the backyard at night which I has to do before retiring since we did not have a bath room in the house, So, I waited and watched until someone went and I followed him. On those rare occasions when I was forced to go on my own. I would sing to myself or pray aloud in the hope that the spirits would hear the noise and keep away from me.

Sometimes, I tried to pray in the hope that the spirits would leave me a lone. But prayer seemed to have no effect at all and I myself was not convinced of the efficacy of prayer in this particular case since I felt that the spirits – good and bad – might conspire together to terrorize me.

Perhaps, something had happened when I was very young – perhaps even when I was in my mother's womb- to give me this fear of spirits in the dark. It might have stayed in the subconscious and was the cause of all my terrors. I have also wondered whether my early, childish religious fervor was party a defence against this fear. It was also strange that I was afraid of not only evil spirits, for I did not think that the benign ones would protest me. It was just that I was afraid of all spirits. It was the fear of the unknown, and perhaps of death.

A possible explanation for this could be my attendance at the festival of Natrayan, a minor local god, worshipped mainly by the masons, potters and other lower caste people. There was no temple for this god, but his idol was perched precariously on a small platform under the shade of a margosa tree on the outskirts of the village. Once a year, he came into his own was the ruling deity of the village for a period of forty eight hours.

Two major events marked the celebration of this festival. One was the sacrifice of a large number of goats. There was a feeling against animal sacrifice even in those days, but very few low caste people took any notice of it. Even a few people of my own community participated, particularly if they had made a vow to that god and it had been fulfilled. I looked upon this particular festival with some horror. One could smell blood and incense in the open space near the temple for days later and normally, I would have avoided it. But there was another aspect of the festival that drew me to it like a magnet.

Again it was my grand father's cart driver Kuppan who was instrumental in giving me courage to go there in the first place and in taking me there. A mass exorcism of evil spirits was practiced there in

addition to sacrifice. In those days, there were many women in the villages who were said to be possessed by the spirit of a dead individual. At certain times, under some emotional stress, these women would lose their consciousness and the spirit would take over. Their entire personalities would change. A shy, timid girl would laugh and shout, use language not recognize her friends and relations and be rude and uncouth. Or, a quiet, laughing, good natured woman would shed over imaginary illnesses and death. Sometimes, they became violent, used language of which they would have been ashamed in normal times, and were often uncontrollable. Their hair disheveled, eyes staring they would shout or laugh or cry, sometimes pour sand their bodies, or throw it at those who surrounded them. They totally lost their inhibitions and were no longer subject to the social and cultural norms of the community. Their relatives waited anxiously while the other congregated merely to watch the fun.

All such women, not only from my village but also from the neighbouring villages, came to this festival to be exorcised by the Pujari, the head priest, who was well known for it. The priest himself was well lubricated with arrack, incense, blood and an atmosphere of religious fervor and was only too ready to drive away the devils out of the neighbourhood for ever. Each woman sat in the centre of a small knot of people usually friends, relations and sight – seers – and behaved as the spirit moved her. The priest would come out with his whip and ask questions. The answers themselves did not matter.

“Who are you?”

“Where do you come from?”

“Why are you haunting this woman?”

Suddenly the priest would shout, ‘you think you are cunning. But I am cleverer than you. Here, take this!’ and he would deliver a few lashes with his whip. The women cry out in pain, and at the same time, shout back challenges at the priest. She would get a few more lashes of the whip and the priest would move on to another woman, muttering he would soon be back, by which time the ‘devil’ should be ready to depart.

And so it went on. The priest moved from one woman to the next, left the ‘easier’ ones to his assistant and tackled the more difficult ones himself. Sometimes, a woman hit him, made rude gestures at him by lifting her sari, or threw sand into his face, in which case she got a few mote lashes of the whip. As the hot afternoon were on, the smells and sounds of the festival mounted and people got more tired as well as intoxicated. A few became god men temporarily, danced and sang and sometimes lashed themselves in self – mortification. Some told fortunes to those who cared to listen; there was the insistent drum beat of the untouchables and arrack flowed. But the possessed women went on and on until the priest came again and talked to the spirit.

“Look at me! Look into my eyes!”

He would hold the women’s face in both his hands make her look at him. If she out – stared him, he would pull her hair until it hurt or use a few more lashes of the whip. On the other hand, if she averted her eyes, she was whipped just the same for good measure.

“Are you willing to leave this body?” yelled the priest and slapped her at the same time until the woman shouted back, “Yes!”

“Now, I want you to get into this hair,” said the priest as he got hold of the longest piece of hair on the woman’s head. “Will you do it?”

“Yes, yes,” wailed the woman.

“Are you in this strand of hair, or are you hiding elsewhere?”

“I am in the strand.”

“Alright, come with me.”

The priest took the woman by that single strand of hair to the tree under which the god Natrayan reposed. On reaching it, the assistant drove a nail into the tree and the priest tied the hair to the nail.

“You are nailed to the tree of Natrayan. You can never escape; you can never again molest a woman. Do you understand?”

By now, the woman was tried and whimpering. She was almost inaudible. “I understand, “ she whispered.

Then with a quick flip of the whip, the priest cut the strand of hair and the woman, apparently cured of whatever it was that assailed her, walked away rather sheepishly, looking and I suppose feeling ashamed. But she did not seem to be aware of the punishment she has undergone.

I was overcome by a multitude of emotions by this visit. Fascination, horror, disgust, nausea, and more than anything else, fear. I was revolted by the vulgar public exhibition of those woman as well as the cruelties of the priest; nauseated by the sight and smell of blood and hundreds of goats’ heads rolling in the dust. And fascinated by the miracle wrought by the priest in driving away the evil spirits. Looking back on it all at this distance of time how is one to explain this phenomenon? Were they really evil spirits? Was there some serious psychological maladjustment in those poor women? If so, how did the priest get rid of it? There were all sorts of rumours and gossip in the village that during those periods of hallucination those women spoke foreign languages because the spirit was foreign, exhibited enormous strength because a strong man was haunting her, and recited verses from the Ramayana, because the spirit was a great poet. How was one not to disbelieve these things at the age of ten, for I had seen with my own eyes, the miracle cure?

But when all over emotions had died, the feeling dread remained. This visit had proved to me beyond the shadow of a doubt, that supernatural spirits existed that they haunted this world as well as individuals. What if they should decide to haunt me? How was I to escape from this calamity? From then on, I too was haunted.

As we are returning from the visit Kuppan said to me, “you know what? If all those women had the black god put into the temple sufficiently often, they wouldn’t be in the state they were. It is their husbands who should have been nailed to the tree!”

I did not understand his statement at the time and merely argued with him about the existence of spirits. But looking back on it, I have often wondered about what he said. Does sexual frustration lead to a kind of hallucination or even religious ecstasy? Why is it that religion and sex seem to have such a close and intimate relationship?

Something happened soon after the Natrayan festival that made me experience the greatest fear of my childhood. I was playing with some children in the back yard to my neighbour’s house when a woman came out. She was a distant relation and being a neighbour, I knew her well. Having quarreled with her husband she was now living with her parents. She told us to run away and we moved off as she walked towards the well nearby. Some instinct made me turn round and I saw her standing on the parapet wall of the well, ready to jump. I screamed. She turned round, started at me with those dark piercing eyes for a second, and then jumped, was it fears, grief, desolation I saw in those eyes? They haunted me for a long time afterwards.

There was a splash. The other boys too turned round, but they did not know what had happened. I was the only one who saw the incident. Instinctively, we ran to the well and peeped over the parapet. We could only see the dark red of the sari floating like a tent on the water. We all started crying at once, for we did not know what to do. Fortunately, one of the ladies of the house heard our cries and came running. Help was summoned. A crowd of people had gathered quickly, talking in whispers, asking each other what had happened, who it was and so on. I was the centre of attention for a little while when everyone questioned me, and then I was forgotten. People told me to go home, but I stood rooted to the spot, unable to move. There seemed to be a horrible, fascinating need for me to see the woman once more, the terror and the torment on her face.

Half a dozen men went down and brought out the inert body. Four of them carried her, two holding her by the legs, and two were holding her from her pits. Water dripped from her red sari and I wondered if it was blood. Her head hung back, water dripping from her long, black hair which almost touched the ground. Her mouth was open, her eyes staring. Her dark form seemed to me the personification of a Rakshasi about whom I had learnt from the Ramayana. She could not be Thadaka, for Thadaka was old and toothless and this one was young. She must be surpanaka. From then on, I thought of her only as surpanaka who was cruel and vicious, for a streak of cruelty is necessary even for self – destruction.

It was then I remembered the child. As she walked towards the well, I remembered her carrying her child in her arms. She must have the little girl with her when she jumped. With my incoherence and fear, it took me some time to explain to people that the child was also in the well. People were busy and would not listen and kept telling me to go home. At last, when I was able to get myself heard, the men went down the well again and after a search, brought up the body of the little girl.

The police had to be sent for and an enquiry held. The police station was six miles away and it all took time. Meanwhile, the body on a couple of benches hastily put together outside the house, covered by a sheet. The lifeless form of the little girl was next to her mother. Women wailed and the men stood about and waited and the police enquiry went on interminably. I was considered too young to be able to give a coherent account of what happened and the woman who came first and raised the alarm and the men who brought the bodies up were considered sufficient. I was taken home and told to stay in until it was all over.

It was not uncommon for women in villages to commit suicide by jumping into a well. To be discarded by her husband and to have to come back to her parents was the greatest humiliation for a woman. In addition to that, if she had quarreled with her mother also – as had happened in this case – there was nowhere a woman could go. It was also natural for her to take child away with her to wherever she was going.

When I went to bed that night and all the lights were put out, my terror began. I had a vivid imagination and I could see this Rakshasi pleading her case before god and calling me as a witness in her defence. I could see her staring eyes and open mouth as she was brought out of the well and her tormented eyes as she jumped into the well. Suddenly, I screamed and my mother came to me. I told her I was frightened. This time she knew the cause of my fear and she spoke to me soothingly, moved her bed next to mine and told me there was no need to be frightened. After this, my mother slept next to me every night for about a month until I got over the worst of my fears.

The morning after all this happened, a sudden thought struck me. I had felt at that time there was something wrong about that woman walking towards the well, and now I knew what it was. Usually a woman going to fetch water would have a pot on her head or on her hip. No one went to well without a pot. She did not carry a pot, but had a child on her hip instead. Should I not have suspected something? If I had thought of it when I saw her, Perhaps, I could have prevented her jumping into the well. Remorse was now added to the fear I already felt. I mentioned it to my mother. Evidently, no one had thought of the pot, not even the police who were interested in finding out if it was suicide or if there was any foul play.

My fear of the unknown continued even after I ceased to believe in god and religion. While I abandoned religion on the basis of a crude and elementary rationality, subconscious anxieties and fears could not be got rid of by logical reasoning. I was able to get over them only gradually, as a result of growing up and changes in my environment.

A few years before the 'incident', I went back to my village. My mother had died.

Once upon a time – was it less than fifty years ago? – That village was my entire world; the village tank, my ocean and the village fair was like a paradise on earth. The school master was a fountain of knowledge and the temple priest, a reservoir of wisdom. Every door was open to me and I

could walk in freely, hugged by the women and patted affectionately by the men. Every child was my playmate. All my gods and demons were confined within the outskirts of the village.

But now, I was a stranger there.

They sent me to the city so that I might learn new things and be a pride to the village. I learnt not only the things I was supposed to learn but many other besides that alienated them to me. I also learnt new things they wanted me to learn, strange truths made me unhappy. I read unusual books. They shattered the peace of mind that I had in the village and created a restlessness that had no end. The outside world was a cruel governess. She threw invisible things at me – called ideas. They came in avalanche in which happiness was drowned and contentment replaced by an uneasy restlessness. Questioning and doubt floated on the surface of my mind. The outside world had taught me wisdom without joy.

I met strange people. They were different from me. Gradually, I became one of them. But my sentimental heart was still longing for my village home.

Now, I was back.

But the only thing that I could embrace here was my memory. My father and mother were dead. Our old house was in a sad state of disrepair. I showered all my love on the past – on what was lost – for it greeted me at every turn. It was my only friend. The white-washed temple stood in all its dignity – as it did fifty years ago – but god seemed to have changed his abode. I did not feel his presence. Even the Natrayan temple had disappeared, the new government having banned animal sacrifice and introduced prohibition. They were now done in secret, I was told. And there were no longer any woman to be exorcised. The children playing in the yard looked at me with a suspicious eye before going back to their games. I stopped the conversation of the elders sitting under the banyan tree as they made polite and indifferent enquiries about me, when I came to the village, and when I was going back.

The village is serene, calm and peaceful. But a storm rages in my troubled mind. Bricks of knowledge had been dropped into the unknown depths of my heart. They have disturbed its stillness and set vibrating waves of thought in motion. My soul has been caught in a whirlpool of restlessness that sends it spinning with increasing fury, breaking the bonds of hope and pillars of faith, for hope seems futile, and faith blind. On my side is wind and rain, the raging storm and the open sea, the battle ground of conflicting thought, the crosscurrents of emotion, and unending confusion. Looking back on the village whose placid waters are still undisturbed, I can only gaze and gaze again.

But distance in time or space in time or space does not alter the vividness of my memory. Dreams are pleasant and, memory beautiful when the reality one has known ceases to exist. Or, when one has created a new reality around oneself – the reality of rape.

Chapter Two

This morning, the superintendent of the prison sent for me. This is most unusual. I have been for more than a year and the number of times any prisoner had been ordered to see him can be counted on one's finger tips. The only time a convict is summoned is when has been violent or when he has lost his next of kin in the outside world. To those of us behind bars, the head of the gaol is next to god. But his powers are far greater than those of god since his displeasure is immediately made known and severe action taken against those responsible. So, it was with a certain degree of anxiety that I went to his room.

When the warder led me in, he told the guard to wait outside. Then, he turned to me. He appeared rather stern, but his words were polite enough. "Sit down, Raju," he said.

I hesitated. I did not know whether it was a prelude to some unusual request, such as spying on the more unruly prisoners.

"It is all right, you can sit." He said with a smile. I took it as an order and sat on edge of a wooden chair that was nearby.

"I hope they are looking after you. Is everything all right?"

I was rather surprised. This was like the manager of a five star hotel enquiring after the comfort of one of his more important guests. "I have nothing to complain about sir," I replied.

"Someone high up has been enquiring about you. I have been asked to send a note on how you are getting on. Purely unofficial of course. So I thought I had better see for myself how you are before I sent the information."

"Thank you sir; as you can see, I m perfectly all right."

"What work have they given you?"

"I am making envelopes in the stationery department sir."

"Is that O.K? Or would you prefer some clerical work? You realise of course that we can't give you work suited to your abilities, he smiled at me.

I wondered what he thought my abilities were. Who could have taken so much interest in me after more than a year of incarceration? I had so few friends in the outside world and none of them – except one – bothered to see me when once the matter of rape became public.

"Thank you sir, I am happy where I am. The work suits me and the atmosphere is pleasant."

"That's all right then."

I hesitated. Was it the right time for making a request? "There is one thing sir," I said. " Would it be possible to provide me with some paper and pencils, that is, if they are within the prison rules?"

“Do you want to write letters?”

“No sir; I just want to scribble something about my personal life. It may help me to clarify my ideas, particularly when I get out.”

“That reminds me, said the superintendent as if he had just thought of something. “ You received a letter yesterday. As you know, all letters to the prisoners are censored in the office before being handed over. I am sorry to say that this was also opened in a routine way,” And he handed me a letter.

I did not recognize the hand – writing. It was short and to the point and I didn’t have to wonder who had written it when once I had read it. “I hope you are suffering the same torments inside the gaol that I am suffering in the outside world, Sushila.”

I stood there shaking. The letter dropped from my hand. I wanted to say something, perhaps thank the officers for handing it over to me; I opened my mouth, but I could not speak. I wiped my face with the handkerchief I carried inside my prison uniform.

The superintendent picked up the letter and handed it to me a second time. “I am sorry my dear chap, “he said. “I wondered whether I should give it to you or not. But my duties would not permit me to withhold it.”

He gave me a glass of water. I gulped it down and felt slightly better. I put the letter in my pocket. “Thank you sir; May I leave now?” I asked.

“Yes, and the paper and pencils you asked for will be provided.” He rang the bell for the warder to take me away.

That letter has upset me greatly. I did not realise that she would be suffering ‘torments’. Even if she did, should she have written to me about it? Is that not vindictive? I certainly was not suffering ‘torments’ in prison. It is true I suffered remorse in the beginning, but now I had reached a new equilibrium inside the gaol, trying to acquire some serenity. Particularly after I started thinking about my past, trying to understand myself, I was well on the way to recovery. What am I talking about? I have not been ill, so the question of recovery does not arise. Is it a Fraudian slip, I wonder? I realised that it was not prison life that was the torment. It was the letter that was the torment and evidently it was intended as such.

How did she get my correct prison number? I suppose it is easy to get anything one wants to. She might have gone to her lawyer; or even to my lawyer with some sob- stuff story and got it out of him. It showed that she had some spirit. She could take initiative, for the first time I thought of her, not as a body to be embraced and enjoyed, but a person with a will and determination and courage. It was a new revelation to me. I would have gone and picked such a girl for my ‘experiment’ wouldn’t I? She was a woman with a mind of her own. Human mind – men or woman’s is the most dangerous weapon there is in the whole world. It is more powerful than a hydrogen bomb; more potent than poison gas, for it is the only weapon that can destroy body soul without making so much as a pinprick. Has not Sushila destroyed my peace of mind with only a few words from her mind? If that is so, should not the opposite

also be true? We are told that most modern developments can be used either for the good of Mankind or its total annihilation. Why should the mind – created by god – be an exception? Should it also not have an equal power of doing good to oneself and to other? Should we not – both of us – turn our minds in such a direction?

What torment can she possibly suffer? She was not in goal. Even in the newspaper publicity that was given to the case, her name was mentioned only or twice. When once the trial started, the judge warned the press not to mention her name, 'in order to spare her feelings and those of her family,' he said. She was always referred to as the 'victim'. On the other hand, the newspapers went to town as far as I was concerned. One newspaper referred to me as the 'gay bachelor' and another as the 'grey bachelor' referring to my grey hair I suppose. A third newspaper corrected them both by pointing out that I had been married and widowed and referred to me as the 'merry widower'. My past was dragged out for public gaze and scrutiny. The only case in which I had been involved before – a blackmail case in which I was the 'victim' – was referred to in detail. But the fact I was the victim and not the blackmailer was not disclosed. Some gave my life sketch, as if it was my obituary. Yes, I was the one who was newsworthy. I was the one who was subjected to humiliation by friends and strangers alike. And that pompous judge read me a silly lesson on respect for womanhood in Indian tradition and on ethics and morality. She was the one who received public sympathy. I received nothing but contempt and condemnation. And yet....

She says she is suffering torment. Is she? Or is she merely saying it in order to make my suffering worse? Is she trying to squeeze a little pleasure out of my suffering? Perhaps, her husband had thrown her out. But then surely, her parents would not have let her down! So, what has she to grumble about? She was a school teacher before she got married. Her husband made her give it up. When most modern young men want their wives to work in order to supplement the family income. He thought it was beneath his dignity to let his wife go out to work! But his dignity did not prevent him from accepting a fat dowry from her father in spite of his twisted leg! So you see, she could easily have taken a job as school teacher.

Why am I getting so excited about it all? Have I a sneaking feeling of guilt at this late hour of my life? If not, what is this new feeling that I have? Should I sympathize with her? Feel sorry? I realise that so far, I have not thought about her plight, only about my own. But then, I have always been known to be selfish. But after this letter, I am beginning to think about her, her feelings, her sufferings. It is perhaps a sign of weakness in me. But I don't seem to be able to help it. The letter has come at a wrong time, when I want to analyse my mind, to understand myself, when I want to salvage what is left of my miserable life. It is like a stone dropped into the stillness of my mind. The ripples go on and on..... seemingly never ending

I wondered if I should reply to her letter. But what can I say? Apologise for my behavior? Say that we should both direct our minds towards doing good to each other? Anything I could say would be woefully inadequate. How is a letter going to release her from her torment? Give her money? She would treat it with contempt and loathing. I had never thought of women as persons, except in one or two cases and that was a long time ago. I realised with a shock that Sushila was very much a person.

As I was returning to my cell, we passed a number of prisoners. While my warder was talking to someone, one of them, whispered to me, "I believe you have received a love letter from your girl friend?" Nothing was secret in prison life, nothing confidential. Everything was exposed to public gaze. This was the only occasion when I lost my temper in prison and was about to hit him, but fortunately for me, another prisoner stopped me. "Don't forget your good conduct remission," He whispered. "You don't want to spoil your clean record."

This evening, two large notebooks and some ballpoint pencils have been delivered to me. But every time I put pencils to paper, Sushila's face intrudes itself between the two.

After ten days of soul searching, I have decided to get on with my original intention of trying to understand myself. I have now come to the conclusion that Sushila's letter may be helpful in doing so.

At the age of fourteen, I was sent to a high school in the city. I had managed to pass the necessary examination in the second attempt and finally gain entry. I would have to spend three years in high school and at seventeen, I would go to college. There was no suitable hostel where school boys of my age could stay. Therefore, a small house was rented and Kuppan was sent to look after me as a cook and house-keeper. My grand father had died and Kuppan was doing nothing. It would also mean that when my father came to the city on business, he could stay there instead of going to a hotel.

It is surprising how often the fate of one individual is tied to the fate of another. In my case, it was Kuppan. He had been my friend, philosopher and guide in the village and now, he was playing the same role in the city. I had spent more of my time in the village with him and had absorbed any of his ideas and values. Now, we were alone in the city together. In the evenings, after I had finished home work, we used to chat until we went to bed. His major preoccupation seemed to be women. He was interested in their shape, size, degree of ripeness, availability. He liked to talk about them interminably. But as far as I was concerned, after my initial curiosity about sex as a young boy, my interest waned and I could not understand the pre-occupation of grown men with that subject. Kuppan was the only person who had discussed it with me and I assumed all men were off on his own. When I asked him the next morning where he had been, he would usually wink and say, 'you are not old enough yet,' and left it at that.

One important thing happened to me at this time. I became interested in knowledge for its own sake. My curiosity about my environment was roused. I was eager to know how things happened and why things happened. A teacher had been engaged to coach me in the village so that I would not fail in my examinations again. He was able to kindle the intellectual curiosity that was dormant in me. So, from then on, instead of thinking of education as a boring duty, undertaken for the sole purpose of passing examinations and then mercifully forgotten, I began to ask questions and clarifications. That teacher also created in me, a love of poetry. I had also picked up the habit of reading novels. All this meant that my horizons were expanding beyond the confines of my villages even before I left it. When once I got to the high school, my thirst for knowledge increased and my father was surprised to see how well I had done in my first terminal examination.

Perhaps, one incident added more than anything else to create this thirst for knowledge. In my first year in the high school, one of the first lessons we had was in physics. The teacher started with a statement that 'heat expands bodies'. In my limited experience of village life, 'heat' meant the open fire in the kitchen and 'bodies' meant human bodies made of flesh and blood. The whole thing was complicated by the fact that the lesson was in English. I not only could not understand the statement but considered it cruel to subject human bodies to heat. Though the experiment with a metal rod inside a brass tube through which hot water was passed alleviated my fears as far as 'bodies' were concerned, I learnt physics in the same way as a parrot learns to speak, until I went back to the village for holidays.

Our bathroom arrangements in the village were very old fashioned. Water was boiled in a large cylindrical vessel, it was made so that it would just go through the doorway of the bathroom, with hardly a millimeter to spare. It had been brought out for some reason and left in the hot sun. When the servants tried to take it inside the bathroom again. It would not go in! The doorway was too small. They were arguing and my father was shouting at them when I suddenly remembered, "heat expands bodies.' I suggested that the drum should be filled with cold water and left in the shade for some time before being taken in. Neither my father nor the servants had any faith in my school boy wisdom, but since they could not think of any alternative, they did what I suggested. And when the drum did go into the bathroom later, it was a great revelation to me. I had all the pride and elation of a Nobel Prize winner. My interest in science can be traced to that one single incident, because I had learnt to relate theoretical knowledge to the problems of everyday life.

This incident gave me confidence and I felt that I too could invent things. My early ideas included fitting a pair of bellows in the heels of one's shoes so that they could pump air up one's trouser legs as one walked if the weather was hot. Another was miniature windscreen wipers for those who wore glasses so that they will not get misty in rain. The only invention of mine that did work was a small weight tied to a string the other end of which was tied to the electric switch. The weight was balanced on the door so that when you opened the door, the weight dropped and the switch was turned on automatically. Unfortunately, my budding scientific interest did not last very long as I got interested and involved in other things.

Later, in my college days, when I wrote essays in English examination, if I wrote a particularly nice sentence, I used to put it in inverted commas making the examiner think it was a quotation. But he would not know where it came from and I hoped I would get the credit for having read books that the examiner hadn't. This habit persisted on later years also and whenever I made a clever remark, people would exclaim, "How clever of you to think of that one!" I would reply, "I didn't think of it: I read it somewhere."

"Ah! That accounts for it," People would say with satisfaction and be convinced of my mediocrity.

Later still, I used to attribute my remarks to famous writers, taking care that the company present would not know the writer concerned particularly well. Once, in the course of a discussion, I remarked, 'Science is knowledge without wisdom and philosophy is wisdom without knowledge.'

“Did you take it from Oscar Wilde?” some one asked.

“No; it was actually by Bernard Shaw, “I replied.

“I knew I had read it somewhere,“ said the other person smugly.

On another occasion. I shouted at a friend in anger, “You have all the assurance of a second – rate mind! “

“Where did you pinch that one from? “ Asked that friend in amazement.

I am afraid that this blossoming of my intellect was some what short lived. O course, I have always had an interest in interest in ideas, in reading good books, but my own contribution either for the growth of knowledge or a better and deeper understanding of human nature has been nil. Some times, I wonder what would have happened if I had a different friend and adviser at the age of fourteen. If there had been someone who recognized my budding intellect, my interest in science and took sufficient interest in me helped me to develop it, may be, I might have amounted to something in later life. But as it was, Kuppan was the only guide I had he other plans for my future.

In later years, in my more introspective moments, I used to wonder about this. Would I have become a great scientist? Or, at least a good one? Or, perhaps a writer? At such moments, I used to feel disgusted with myself for doing nothing except convert good food into bad manure. Life should have a social purpose, even if one did not believe in god or religion. Every biological organism takes its sustenance from its environment and contributes sustenance to its environment. If it fails to observe this fundamental law, it ceases to exist. And yet, what have I contributed? Nothing; absolutely nothing! Here, in prison, I have begun to think about it a lot more. But at the age of fifty seven, what can I contribute? Where do I begin? I can only think of wasted years, lost opportunities. Remembrance of things lost!

My new found enthusiasm for studies and reading books meant that Kuppan’s attempts to interest me in sex had no effect whatsoever. But unfortunately, boys have a habit of growing up into young men. As time went on, there was a change in my body chemistry; my voice broke; I grew taller, fuzzy hair began to appear on my face. Kuppan was quick to notice these changes and to take advantage of them.

“You are no longer a boy,“ he used to say. “You are a young man now, and ready to taste the pleasures of life in good measure.”

“A man likes you, good looking and virile; women must be just waiting to have a go at you!”

“Your black god must be itching to get into the temple.”

Such conversation disgusted me at first and I often told Kuppan to go away and not to disturb me when I was studying. I was ashamed that he should talk to me like that and even contemplated complaining to my father about it. But it never struck me that Kuppan had his own interests to serve. I

thought he was my friend; a loyal servant of the family. I did not think of him as corrupting a young mind so much as educating me in the ways of the world.

Sometimes, in the evenings, I used to sit by the window of our house which was facing a crowded street and watch the traffic goes by. Kuppam would often stand next to me and comment on the women walking along the road. There was a girls' high school a few hundred yards away from our house and at five o'clock, a whole lot of girls as well as teacher would be passing our house.

"Look at that one!" Kuppam would exclaim pointing his finger at a girl. "I bet she has breasts like ripe melons! Nice to feel, even nicer to eat. I am sure, she is not a virgin."

At another time, he would say, "Don't be misled by all those shy mannerisms and downcast looks. They are like wild cats when they get you between their legs."

"Some have breasts like coconuts; not hard but rounded and firm; others are like mangoes, the nipples upturned. Very tempting." And then, he described the even more intimate parts of female anatomy for my edification.

It was inevitable that such conversation should have its effect upon me. Disgust turned to indifference and then to curiosity. It provided a vague sense of excitement and finally to a desire to experiment, if only to see what it was all about. I began to question Kuppam about his nocturnal adventures. At first he was evasive. I think when it came to the point, he was reluctant to initiate me into the mysteries of sex. May be, he was afraid of the consequences; perhaps, he wanted to increase my appetite still further. But he must have aware that all his conversations could have but one end.

"You know what it is like," he mumbled. "A grown man can't sleep in any empty bed all the time."

"But where do you go? How do you find the woman willing to go to bed with you?"

I found it impossible to use the kind of coarse words that he used so fluently. Even today, I cannot use four letter words, or even swear words. It must be my strict, puritan upbringing. They seem degrading and vulgar. Gradually, it has become a matter of habit. Now, I never use them, though I don't abject to hearing them.

Kuppam was torn between a desire to boast and a desire to be non – committal. He did want to get into specific details.

"Oh, here and there," he said evasively. "I can always find a temple when I want."

"But how?" I was persistent.

"You are too young to know about such things."

"But you have been telling me I grown up now!"

'It is all in fun I suppose. You go to bed like a good boy," and he abruptly left me.

I was bewildered by his behavior. For weeks, his conversation had been leading to a point where I supposed that all I had to do was to give a hint and he would take me with him and initiate me into all the pleasures of manhood. And yet, he seemed so reluctant now. But he had created a desire that had to be fulfilled, raised a monster inside me which had to be gratified.

But he couldn't resist pointing out the various women that passed along the street and describing their charms in vivid detail. "You see that woman over there; her temple would be like this! And he made a coarse gesture with his hands.

One day, when he was going on like this, I couldn't bear it any longer and stopped him short. "Either find me a woman tonight, or stop talking like this to me!" I spoke sharply.

He had a lascivious look on his face. "So, the black god is demanding his rights, is he?" he grinned.

"What do you say?"

"What will your father say if he finds out? Have you thought of that?"

"But he won't, will he? Not unless you tell him."

"Not from me, he won't" Kuppan replied. "I don't mind obliging. But don't blame me afterwards."

"No, I won't blame you. Why should I?"

"All right, you wait; I will go and make the arrangements."

I was bursting with impatience. Would she be fair or dark? Would she be a virgin? Would she love me? Would she be a virgin? Would she love me? Would she be faithful to me? For ever and ever? I thought of all the romantic heroines I had read about in my novels and wondered whom she would resemble most. Why a young and attractive woman in her senses would want to share her bed with me never entered my head. Thought I had a lot of knowledge – like 'heat expands bodies' – I was a baby as far as sex was concerned. For example, I did not know anything about sexually transmitted diseases; nor was I aware it was possible for me to protect myself. I did not know about an orgasm and I thought it would be one continual pleasure. I was ignorant of the fact that woman too could enjoy it. I thought that they were merely the playthings of men. I had heard vaguely about prostitutes, but never imagined that they had anything to do with my life. May be under kuppan's lascivious promptings, I longed for sex, but my soul was aching for love, for emotional intimacy, for romance. I longed for the caress of delicate hands, for the touch of unknown lips. During the hour that I waited, I felt that all my dreams, my aspirations, would come to fruition.

At last Kuppan came. "Come on, let's go," he said. There was none of the lascivious conversation, the ingratiating smile, or the tempting words. He was brisk. I followed him.

After fifteen minutes, we entered a small dark alley and knocked on a door. An elderly woman opened it I learnt her name was papa. When she heard kuppan's voice, she let us in. "Welcome!" She said with a toothless smile and asked us to be seated on a mat on the floor. She brought me a cushion, I suppose as a sign of additional respect. There was an oil lamp which threw a dull light and the woman's face lighted up with all its wrinkles as she passed it. She also brought a tray of betal leaves and nuts for me chew and placed it before me. I was anxious as well as impatient and kept looking at Kuppan.

"And so, this is the young gentleman, is it?" asked the woman with her toothless smile. "He is very good looking isn't he?"

"His father is a very wealthy man," Kuppan announced.

"Yes, it is nice to be wealthy and have no worries," said the woman. "Rukku is getting ready and will be here presently."

"It is all right about the betal nut tray," said Kuppan. "I shall look after it. The young master need not be bothered with such things. I did not know what he meant at that time but learnt later that whatever 'fees' had been agreed upon should be placed on the tray.

A young woman came into the room. At least I thought she was young. She stood with bowed head and downcast eyes. I remembered what Kuppan had told me about such woman being wild cats in bed and it made me feel excited.

"Come on Rukku, don't be shy. Take the young gentleman to your room," said the mother by way of encouragement. Rukku came to me, still with downcast eyes, took my hand and led me into an inner room. A little lamp was burning inside the room in front of the picture of a goddess. Rukku knelt before the picture and touched the ground with her forehead. "The goddess will bless us," she said to me when she up and shut the door.

Immediately, I caught hold of her and pressed my body hard against hers. She was no longer shy or demure. She pressed her hand between my legs felt me. "Oh! Oh! You are in a hurry, aren't you?" she whispered.

I groaned with pleasure. "Do you love me?" I asked eagerly.

"Of course!" She responded. "Would I be here otherwise?"

"Yes."

"I am glad."

"And for you?"

"I am not exactly a virgin," she laughed. And then she became serious. "But it is not my fault. Life is hard for a girl like me."

I regretted asking her that question. Perhaps, I would have been happier if she had and said it was the first time for her also. I would not have known the difference any way. But I admired her for her honesty and pitied her for her hard life.

She took me to the mattress that was spread on the floor, lay on her back and commanded me, "come!"

She did not undress, did not even undo her blouse, she lifted her flimsy sari and threw it over her stomach. Her private parts were exposed and I looked on it. It was clean shaven. Thanks to kuppan's education, I had always thought of it as a temple! A holy romantic vision! As I tried to play with her breasts, she moved my hand away and whispered, "Now! Now! Don't be impatient. Just put in and then take your time. It will be much better." And she guided me into her. At last, I too had put the black god in the temple! It was all over in five minutes.

But that first orgasm! What ecstasy! What transport of joy! I felt I had discovered a new and enchanting world that was exclusively my own. I was sure other people could not possibly have felt it like me. Later, I learnt that she was thirty years old, had two children and was a prostitute who had one or two regulars, but was not averse to one night stands. All this subsequent knowledge did not in any way minimize the thrill of that first experience. I shall always remember that first unforgettable and exquisite feeling. And the date was fourteenth of August 1939. I had just turned sixteen.

She was brisk and efficient, adjusted her sari and gave me a grubby towel to clean myself

Just for a moment, her face softened. She touched my cheek and remarked, "I shall always be waiting for you," as she pushed me out of the door.

I was reluctant to part from her. I would have liked to talk to her; tell her about my dreams, my aspirations for the future. "Aren't you coming too?" I asked.

"I am too shy to face those people after what happened," she said. I admired her delicacy of feeling.

Kuppan was not there when I came out. But Pappa said, "Your friend will be back shortly. Sit down."

So, I sat and waited. The old woman made searching enquiries about my family, what my father did, how much property we had, and so on. She was evidently verifying the information that Kuppan had given her. But of course, I did not know it at that time.

Kuppan came back in a little while and we walked home. "Did you enjoy it?" he asked.

"It was wonderful!"

"You will enjoy it ever better as time goes on, when you have learnt a bit more."

But I could not imagine anything being better.

I visited Rukku three times during the next two weeks. The fourth time, I decided to go on my own without telling Kuppan. A big, burly man with a moustache was sitting in the room chewing betal nuts.

“Who are you boy?” asked the man.

“I am Rukku’s friend; who are you?” I asked him in return.

The man turned to papa. “What has been going on behind my back?” he shouted at her.

“I don’t know who this boy is! He is complete stranger to me,” cried Pappa. Then she turned to me. “Ay, who are you? What are you doing here? Get out!” she shouted.

I was never more surprised in my life. “You know me papa! I have been here three times. Rukku is expecting me.” I pleaded in desperation.

“I swear I have never seen him in my life!” cried papa. “Believe me sir, he has come to create some mischief, And Rukku has never set eyes on anyone but you.”

The man started at papa for a few seconds, “I will deal with you later,” he told her. Then he came and stood over me, looked me up and down. I was scared, but I wasn’t going to yield and stared back at him.

“Get out you yapping puppy!” He shouted at me and slapped my face hard. The blow stung and burnt my cheek.

“You may be bigger than me, but I will kill you if I had a knife in my hands,” I shouted as I hit in the stomach.

That must have given him a fright, for he did not hit me again. “Get out here!” he said and roughly pushed me out of the door.

I returned home with shame, humiliation and despair. Desire for revenge burnt in my heart. Kuppan was waiting. “Where have you been?” He enquired.

I told him everything, my shame, my anger, my disappointment. I poured my heart out to him and shed tears of longing for Rukku, for I thought that she was innocent and loved me. Only the mother had played the role of a traitress.

“Poor chap!” Kuppan sympathized with me in my grief. “You do not know the ways of this world yet. You are too young. I wish you hadn’t gone alone. But you might as well know the truth sooner or later I suppose,” and he related to me everything about Rukku’s life in all its stark nakedness.

The man I met there was kandaswamy, Rukku’s paramour. He paid her a monthly sum and expected her to be faithful to him in return. But of course Rukku took casual customers when she thought he was not expected. It was then that Kuppan told me that the girl who I thought was a near – virgin was the mother of two children.

Evidently, I was one of the 'casual customers". It had a shocking effect on my mind.

"Casual customers?" I enquired.

"Yes, at so much a time."

"You mean you have been paying her on my behalf?"

"Which women do you think will come to you for nothing?"

It was obvious Kuppan was a cynic. But I still had a long way to go before one. My dreams, my castles in the air, my emotional life, were crumbling one by one, dashed against the cruel rock of reality. But I refused to accept the truth. What more disillusion could there be in a teenager's life? But there was more to come.

"Yes, I have paid Rukku's mother one hundred and fifty rupees for the three visits – at fifty rupees at time. That is what you own me," said Kuppan.

"But I don't have that much money!" I exclaimed completely aghast. "You know what father gives for our expenses every month. And you spend most of it anyway."

"You should have thought of that before you had your pleasures," shouted Kuppan. He was almost menacing when he said that. And then, he softened a little. "After all, I am a servant working for twenty five rupees a month. How can I afford to lose that much money? As it is, I love a lot of money to the shop keepers in the market for the things purchased for the house here."

"But I have been paying you the shopping expenses regularly!" I cried. "How can you be owing money?"

"I need my little pleasures just as much as you do," he smiled. "I may not be able to afford high priced women as you can, but my woman also cost money."

I had nothing to say.

"Anyhow, things cannot go on like this for loon," he continued. "If I don't pay the shop keepers soon, they will complain to your father. Or, I will have to confess everything and throw myself on this mercy."

"You can't do that!" I shouted.

"What else can we do?"

"I will think of something," I said.

That one evening taught me more about life and this world that I had learnt in the previous sixteen years. My first emotional adventure had left me with a bad bruise on my heart. But the financial problems it had left behind had still to be solved.

I gave myself up to self-pity. I was the most miserable of all human beings on earth and I would not be able to recover from the terrible calamity which had overtaken me. Sooner or later, my father would find out and that would be the end. What my father could or would do to me, I did not bother to contemplate. Instead, I contemplated suicide. But it was no use. How could I give up all the pleasure of this world – a small fraction of which I had just tasted – and go? There didn't seem to be any way out of the dilemma.

From that evening onwards, my relationship with Kuppan was radically different. Up till then, I had thought of him as a fiend more than as a servant, a sort of elder brother to guide and advise me on life and its problems. But now, I was wary of him. He had cheated me and my father over the money for house keeping and tempted me into following his evil ways so that I was now committed to helping him or facing my father's wrath. Really, he was blackmailing me. But at the same time, we were tied together as securely as Siamese twins. We had to sink or swim together, if he was caught. I too would be exposed.

In spite of all this, there was a dull ache in my heart for Rukku, a void that no one but a woman could fill. For at that time, I was quite sure I loved her.

Kuppan still cooked three meals a day for me, heated my bath water, cleaned the house and spread my night. He was meticulous in all these things, for if my father should come unexpectedly, he wanted everything to be the same. But we did not talk to each other very much. There was really nothing to talk about.

The, one evening, he came to me. "I have been thinking Raju," he used my pet name by which everyone addressed me when I was a child. "That pot-belly left Rukku; and she is pining for you."

In spite of everything that had happened, I brightened at his statement. So, Rukku still thought of me! "Really?" I asked.

"Yes; that fellow was paying her two hundred rupees a month. But when he found out about you, he stopped payments and doesn't come to her any more."

"But where am I to find the money?" It is surprising how quickly the human mind adjusts itself to radically changing situations. A few weeks ago, I would have been appalled at the idea of going to a prostitute and paying money. I could not have imagined a greater horror. And yet, the thing that worried me most now was how to get hold of some money in order to visit her. I suppose you could say it was a sign of my rapid degeneration.

"I have thought of a way for that also. There is a money lender who is willing to lend you money. After all, your father is wealthy and he knows that one day you will inherit a lot of property from him. So, he is willing to wait until you are able to pay back. But the interest will be rather high and he wants..... a sort of deposit in advance. After all, he is taking a risk, lending money to a minor."

I jumped at the idea. It seemed to be the perfect solution for all my problems. I forgot that Kuppan should not be trusted, that Rukku and her mother were only after my money. But so long as

that man was willing to lend me money and prepared to wait, I did not see any difficulties. I did not realise I was only getting more involved. And the vision of Rukku beckoned to me.....

“How much can we borrow?” I asked eagerly.

Kuppan thought for a little while and made some mental calculations. He spoke with deliberation. “It is not good for a young man to have too much money in his pocket. You will blow it all off on some woman for whom you have taken a fancy. On the other hand, there should be enough so that we would never be put in the same position as we have been so recently. Let me see, I need five hundred rupees to pay off all my debts to the shop keepers.....”

“There should be no more debts!” I tried to lay down the law. “In future you should pay cash for everything out of the money my father gives us.”

“Don’t worry: I have learnt my lesson, “Kuppan assured me. “ I am no eager to lose my job or go to jail, than you are to face your father. As I was saying, I need five hundred rupees, and you owe me one hundred and fifty on top of that. And you will need some “pocket money” to keep you going for a few months. By then, who knows, anything might happen. So, let us say, three thousand rupees, including the money lender’s deposit and interest which will come to about one thousand rupee.”

“Three thousand rupees is a lot of money, is it not?” But I was really in no position to argue. Kuppan’s suggestion was like a life – line thrown to a sinking man.

“We have really no alternative, have we? Of course, if you don’t want to have any more fun with woman, we will just get the six hundred you owe me and forget the rest.”

“No! No! It is just that.....”

“Well? Do you want it or don’t you? You should know that I have gone to a lot of trouble to arrange all this.”

“All right, “I agreed.

So, the next evening, we went to the money lender and I signed an I.O.U for three thousand rupees, but got only a sum of one thousand rupees. The man insisted that he had to deduct three hundred rupees, being a year’s interest and one thousand rupees as ‘security deposit’ in case the loan was not repaid. “As it is, I am taking a big risk lending money to a minor.” He said. I was so anxious and excited; I did not know what I was doing. I just signed wherever he wanted me to sign. Out of the money I received, I gave seven hundred rupees to Kuppan – six hundred and fifty that I ‘owed’ him and another fifty as a reward for all his troubles. And I locked the rest up in my steel trunk.

I had never had so much money in my possession before. I felt like a king and visited Rukku the same night as sort of celebration.

I had a few weeks of undiluted bliss. I could do anything I wanted with Rukku. She let me play with her large breasts. “Would you like to drink some milk?” she would ask pushing them at me. “There

is no milk in them at present, unless of course you do something about it.” Such conversation filled me with rapture. I made her remove all her clothes and examined her carefully, for the female body had always been a mystery to me – an unexplored mystery. I took my time over it all in the secure knowledge that I was the sole possessor of this wonderful woman. Of course she was not young and she had two children. But I told myself it was not her fault. It was poverty that had driven her to it.

Pappa too apologised to me for her behavior. With tears in her eyes, she assured me that pot-belly kandaswamy had terrorized her and her daughter and if she had admitted to knowing me, she as afraid he would have killed her. What a brave young man I was she said, to have stood up to that bully and saving them both from his clutches!

Now that I had money of my own, I took over the responsibility of paying Rukku – or, rather her mother – directly instead of leaving it to Kuppan. From something they said during conversation, I had a feeling that Kuppan had not really paid her fifty rupees a time for those first three occasions as he said, but had kept half the amount for himself. They would not say so openly, but after some time Rukku started hinting about presents for herself and the children, about her coming birth day and so on.

“I don’t leave this house for anything, because I know you don’t like me to , but I must visit the temple for my birth day. And I haven’t a thing to wear.”

“You know the girl next door, Meena? She has just received a gold necklace from he friend. And she is not half as good looking as I am.”

“The children keep asking why uncle doesn’t bring them any gifts. How am I to answer them?”

And Pappa would often complain about the cost of house keeping and about her daughter’s innocence and ignorance.”Rukku is as simple as a child. She won’t ask for a thing, thinks it is not nice to worry you unnecessarily. Otherwise, we would have been rich by now.”

In the end, I had to give money for a sari for Rukku and some money for the children.

Once I became a permanent customer, there was no love lost between Kuppan and those two women. “Do you know, he cheats you right and left? You are such an innocent person. You trust everybody. He is a rogue; he charges you double for all the household shopping. It all adds up in the long run you know. And he doesn’t pay the shop keepers either. You would be better off without him.”

When I told them that Kuppan was from my village, that my father had appointed him, Pappa said, “Why don’t you complain to your father?” I told her plainly that if I did, he would tell him about my going to see Rukku. “In that case, you should be careful. But check his accounts every day. And enquire from the shop keepers. Or, better still ask your father to enquire. In that case, you will be out of the picture and it would appear as if the traders had complained.”

I was surprised they knew so much. Knowing kuppan’s propensities, I asked him one evening, “I hope you are paying all the shop keepers regularly.”

“Why, have those two woman been complaining about me?” he shouted.

I made the mistake of saying ‘yes’.

“I knew it! I took you there in the first place and they haven’t the decency to be grateful for it! That girl Rukku is like a bitch on heat all the time, waiting for any man who is passing by so long as he has five rupees to spare!”

This added a new dimension to my problems. “What are you saying?” I shouted back. “She won’t so things like that!”

“Won’t she? What do you bet? She stands on a stool and pushes one of her breasts through the window for the men in the street to see.”

I was astounded.

“If you like, I will prove it to you,” he challenged. “You go to her mostly on Saturdays and Sundays because you go to school during the week and do your lessons in the evenings. She knows that. So, during the week, she takes any man who happens to come along. She cheated on kandaswamy with you and she is cheating on you with the while town.”

I want to see Rukku on the next Sunday evening. She was particularly affectionate, said how much she missed me during the week, but of course she knew I had to study. That was important for my future. If only she had something from me, something she could wear next to her heart, like a gold chain, it would be some consolation. She had seen the chain round my neck and must reminded her about it. I promised I would think about it. How could possibly believe she would cheat me? Surely Kuppan must be wrong!

The next night, Kuppan and I went into the alley and positioned ourselves near the house. We had covered our heads with dark sheets so that we were not very visible and walked up and down every few minutes. Sure enough, there was Rukku at the window, not with her breast sticking out through the bars as Kuppan had vividly described, but with her face pressed against them and made signs at every passer by. We waited for about fifteen minutes before a man stopped, has a look at her and went to the window to take a closer look. There was a whispered conversation. Pappa opened the door and he went in.

“Are you satisfied?” Kuppan whispered.

“I am not satisfied! I want to kill that bitch! Come on, let us go in.

“Don’t do anything foolish. She is not the only woman in the world. I will find you someone much prettier and younger.”

“You put me up to all this and now you are counseling moderation!” I shouted. In spite of kuppan’s protestation, we went and knocked on the door. Pappa opened it.

“We were not expecting you,” she exclaimed. But she went as white as a brown face could. She averted her eyes as she said, “Rukku has gone to bed.”

“Tell her to come out immediately; or I shall break open the door,” I shouted.

The old woman was frightened. She knocked frantically on the door and shouted, “Rukku! Rukku! The young master is here.”

The door opened and the man came out. “What is all this? Some kind of blackmail?” he asked looking round.

“Go quietly or you will get a beating,” Kuppen cried. I was glad that in a moment of crisis, he stood by me.

“How much did you pay?” I asked him.

“What is it to you? Are you her keeper?”

“You may put it that way if you like.”

“I paid her five rupees.”

“Here is your miserable five rupees. Now get out!” I said.

He took my money and went quietly.

But Rukku would not come out of the room. I went in and slapped her hard. Her blouse was undone and her sari disheveled. She was perhaps too frightened to do or say anything. She just stood in a corner and shivered.

“You wanted something, by which you can remember me, didn’t you? Something next to your heart.”

She would not or could not speak. Could not even look at me. Just stood in the corner. She had her arms together, as if to protect herself. Her left breast was just protruding out of the blouse. I had a great desire to take her at that moment. But anger and humiliation got the better of my lust. I caught hold of her, pulled away the blouse and her left breast hard. I tasted blood. Immediately, I was aghast at what I had done. I let her go as she moaned in pain. “That will be a permanent reminder, next to your heart as you wanted. A mark of chastity that you can proudly exhibit to all your future lovers!” And I walked out.

In spite of it being a warm night, I was shivering. But whether it was from fright or disgust at what I had done, I did not know. Perhaps, it was a little of both. “What have you done to her?” asked Kuppen when we were outside.

I found I could not speak. Kuppen saw the state I was in and got a jutka – a horse cart. We got in, went home and he put me to bed.

He brought me a tumbler of reddish brown liquid. "Here, drink this; You will feel better," he said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Drink it!" he insisted.

I took a big gulp. It burnt my throat and went down into my stomach like liquid fire. "It makes me feel sick," I moaned.

Kuppan got me some coldwater. After a couple of minutes, he said, "Drink the rest."

I did not have the will to resist and drank it all. "Is it brandy?" I enquired.

"I am not a land – owner's son like you. I can't afford such fancy drinks. This is good old arrack. But if you like, I will get you a bottle of biscuit brandy tomorrow. It is imported stuff and very good."

"It is intoxicating is it not?"

But I was already beginning to feel better. A warm glow was spreading over my entire being and I was beginning to get over the events of the evening.

Kuppan brought me another tumbler. I sipped of more slowly and it did burn so much. It had an unpleasant taste and still made me feel sick, but I was convinced of its therapeutic value. And I slept the undisturbed sleep of the innocent till the next morning.

When I woke, Kuppan was ready with a cup of coffee. He was also ready with some news.

"After you went to sleep, I went to Rukku's house," Kuppan informed me. "I must say, you did a good job on her breast; two teeth marks above her nipple and two below it. Her mother had put some ointment on it and she says it is very painful. She won't be fit for 'work' for atleast a fortnight and the marks will be permanent as you intended. Your parting gift to your first 'love'. You are a champion breast biter. The only trouble is, they are threatening to go to court and claim damages."

"But there were no witnesses to what I did! It could have been anyone of her men."

"But would you like a court case?"

No, I did not want a court case. "But I have no money!" I cried.

"You still have the money that we borrowed," Kuppan reminded me. "If it goes to court we will all be in trouble."

I agreed with him. "How much do they want?" I asked.

"We didn't get that far. I had to do a lot of pacifying. They were so angry and hysterical. I said I will discuss the matter with you and return. Meanwhile, I have persuaded them not to go to a lawyer or the police. If it becomes a criminal case, who knows, you may be sent to goal."

I was frightened at the thought. "You had better find out how much they want," I suggested.

The negotiations with Rukku and her mother were tortuous and tormenting. Kuppan went forwards and backwards, returning with a different story each time. First, "They want ten thousand rupees," he said and added, "Of course, that is impossible." Then, he came back and said, "No, they say they don't want any money; they want to see you in gaol. 'We too have our pride, Pappa says.'" The next time, he came and said, "Rukku is reasonable, but that old woman is adamant, she wants nothing less than five thousand." And so it went on. Finally, it was settled for five hundred rupees and I heaved a sigh of relief.

Looking back on it all in the light of subsequent knowledge and experience, I have often wondered whether Kuppan did really give them the five hundred rupees and how much of it he had kept for himself. After all, she was a prostitute, and such things could not be an unusual experience for her. It was a professional hazard. An over-ardent lover might have done it as easily as an over-jealous one. She would also be afraid to go to court, because that was one sure way of losing all her customers. Who would patronize a woman who made a habit of suing her customer for damages I did not realise all this at that time of course. Another thing that struck me later was, how did Kuppan know that she charged five rupees for casual customer? Unless he had availed himself of that privilege, he could not have known it. Perhaps that was how he met her in the first place and then decided to introduce me to her. That I should have shared first women with my servant appalled me some time later, when I thought of it. Did I know this subconsciously, even at time it happened and was that the reason why I developed such a selfish attitude towards women? Could it be explained that way? Could all my subsequent behavior be explained that way? Certainly, it was a great mental agony at the time and I hated all women. The trouble was, I could not do without them.

Another aspect of this incident is also consideration. After all, I knew Rukku was a prostitute, At least my encounter with pot-belly kandaswamy, I knew she took 'casual customer' even before she met me. Then why should I have expected her to be faithful to me? Certainly, it should not have come as a surprise to me. Therefore, why did I react as vehemently as I did? Was it jealousy? Was it because my ego had been hurt? I pondered over this for quite some time before the truth struck me. It was Rukku's Pretence, her hypocrisy, saying she missed me, that she would like to have something of mine next to her heart, that me more than her habitual unfaithfulness. Strange as it may seem, I have always believed in fair-play and justice. Cheating to my way of thinking was an unpardonable crime; and playing false with one's emotions was the worst of those unpardonable crimes. It may be that all this is a subsequent rationalization invented by me to justify my own hasty and barbaric action in biting her breast. But I don't think so. A sense of right and wrong has always influenced me in my actions. If my action was hasty, it was nevertheless the result of a subconscious working of my mind in establishing justice and punishing the guilty.

Anyhow, when it was all settled, Kuppan came to me, "I brought you a bottle of brandy by way of celebration, "and he produced bottle.

"I didn't like it the other night," I said.

“That was just arrack; this is pure imported biscuit brandy. You will definitely like this,” and he poured me a glass, diluted it with some soda water and handed it to me.

It did not taste bad this time. In fact, the addition of the soda water made it very palatable.

After I had finished it, Kuppan said, “Doesn’t it give you a pleasant feeling? Doesn’t it make you think that the world is a fine place and need not care for anything or anyone?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“If you have a drink and a woman immediately afterwards, you will enjoy it much better.”

That drink which had been ingrained into me from childhood. No one respectable in the village went to an arrack shop. The drunkards were social outcasts in the village.

“This is good stuff,” Kuppan continued, pointing to the bottle of brandy. “Not like arrack. You can afford it; it is only fifteen rupees a bottle. Now that the war has started, the prices will go up and you should get a stock.”

“Except that I have no money.”

“What happened to all the money you got from the money lender?” Kuppan asked innocently, as if he didn’t know.

“There has been the month’s expenses, plus a sari for Rukku and the five hundred rupees, I have only one hundred left,” I said miserably.

Kuppan thought for a minute. “You could sell your gold chain or your wrist and tell your father you had lost them,” he suggested.

The gold chain was presented to me when I was born by my grand mother, as a ‘waist’ chain, usual for Indian babies. But according to the sentimental attachment to it as the oldest article in my possession. My father had given me the watch a few months ago as a reward for having done well in my examinations. I did not want to part with either of them and said so.

“Of course, there is always the money lender,” Kuppan said. “I will talk to him and see if anything can be done.”

The next day, Kuppan told me. “That man first wants the old loan to be settled. Also he says he doesn’t want to be bothered with small loans. So, it has to be a minimum of ten thousand rupees out of which the old loan can be deducted. He also wants a large security deposit.”

“How much?”

“He says he will discuss it with you.”

So, I went to see the money lender the next day. The fellow gave me a lecture on living within my means, on not wasting my father's money so much so that I was frightened he was not going to give me a loan. Finally, he said, "Don't say I didn't warn you. But I must protect my interests. If I lend you ten thousand rupees, I will first deduct the three thousand you owe me, two thousand for a year's interest and another two thousand for security. You will only get three thousand in cash. If I were you, I would not do it, but if you want to borrow, those are my terms."

I could have pointed out that since I had returned the old loan, he should refund the security he had taken on the previous loan. I was aware of it, but did not have the courage to ask. I thought he might refuse the loan if I did.

Kuppan nodded. "Your terms are hard, but my master needs the money."

I looked at the papers a little more carefully before signing. The world had taught me some wisdom I suppose. And I found that the promisory note was for a fixed period of one year.

"But I thought you were prepared to wait for repayment until I inherited my father's property?" I asked.

"That is the general understanding," he replied. "But a promisory note to be for a fixed time. It can always be renewed if necessary."

I knew then that I was being taken for a ride and I was anxious. But I had gone too far in a particular direction to be able to withdraw or turn round. I signed it and got three thousand rupees in cash. I felt a rich man, though a desperate one.

On the home, Kuppan reminded me. "You know, I have done so much for you, taught the ways of the world and ensured you have been enjoying yourself. You can now sleep with more women than any man of your age. That is an achievement, is it not? Many young men of your age are still sucking at their mother's breasts. And yet, I have never asked for anything for myself. Well, it is up to you."

"What do you want?"

"It was I who got you loan in the first place. You might say I vouched for you. Don't you think you should reward me?"

So, I gave him five hundred rupees out of the three thousand I had got from the money lender.

"Be careful with all that money," Kuppan warned me. "It is a lot for a young man to have."

I decided I would not depend on Kuppan any longer for my woman. But I did not know first thing about how to get hold of one. When it came to the point, it was not so difficult. In certain streets of the town, all you had to do was to walk along them after dark rather slowly, looking right and left.

I learnt many things during my nocturnal adventures. One of the most important things was there was no such person as an honest and trustworthy woman. They all lied and cheated; made

promises of eternal love and shed tears for the departure of one lover in the arms of another. But I had learnt my lesson from Rukku and decided not to trust anyone. I learnt to estimate their bodies with taste and discrimination. I knew exactly what their skills at pleasing men were worth. Their little tricks were all familiar to me and I knew their worth to the nearest rupee. I was a cynic at seventeen. But I had not totally lost my dreams; I knew there were women in this world who were good and honest and loyal. And I still dreamt about my ideal woman who would be beautiful and would sacrifice everything for me.

It was also during this period that I learnt to appreciate drinking alcohol. What persuaded me at was kuppan's statement that drinking would enable me to enjoy sex much better. But because of the war, imported drink was not easily available and I had to pay more and more for it. But I never drank in excess, just enough to have that pleasant and carefree approach to problems and sex.

Another interesting thing was that throughout this period I rarely missed my classes, did my homework regularly and passed my examinations with credit. The intellectual interest that I had acquired stood by me. By now I was fluent in English and read English books recommended by my teacher with enjoyment, though that pleasure was somewhat diminished as a result of acquiring new tastes. I strictly disciplined myself to one or two outings a week. On other days, I was a model student.

Life went on as before. With three thousand rupees in my pocket – or two thousand five hundred to be more accurate I could indulge myself to a great extent. I learnt to appreciate my drink in the evenings and to miss it on those days father happened to be in town. The word 'black market' was raising its ugly head for those things – like imported brandy – which were in short supply. Very soon, I would be taking my final school leaving examination and then go to the village for the summer holidays. I was a bit anxious about the loan and also how I was going to spend three months in the village without drink and women. But Kuppan assured me on both these points.

"The money lender will wait. I have talked to him about it. And the village girls are any day better than these town whores. They are not money grabbers and will do it for the pleasure. They will be proud to do it with you because you are the big man's son. I can assure you it is just as good behind a bush as on a bed. And I can always get you some arrack."

Going over what I have written about my life in the city, I find that it is factually accurate. But it does not really indicate the degree of my trials and tribulations, the agonies and the ecstasies, my unconscious attempts to find the ideal woman of my dreams and my miserable disappointments. It is said that if you drive into a tree at forty miles per hour, your brain gets shaken up in the impact. It may not cause you physical hurt, but often it changes your entire personality. I was rather like the man who had such an accident. I had run into a tree at eighty miles per hour. The tree was Rukku. But the worst was yet to come.

One afternoon, my father called me. His voice was a mixture of anxiety and anger.

"Yes father, "I went to him.

“Come inside, “and he took me into an inner room. Obviously, whatever it was he wanted to say, he did not want the servants to overhear it.

“What is the meaning of this?” he hissed at me when we were inside. He threw piece of paper at me.

It was a notice from the money lender. It intimated that the sum of ten thousand rupees which I had borrowed and promised to return within a year was long overdue and I had disappeared from my address without intimating him. He had just been able to get my address after considerable efforts. If the money, together with the interest accrued was not repaid within a week of the receipt of this notice, he would be forced to take court proceedings.

“Well, did you borrow the money?”

I kept silent, with my eyes not daring to look at him.

“Come on! Answer!”

When I still kept silent, he caught hold of my mop of hair with his left hand and turned me round to face him. With his right hand, he slapped me hard on the cheek, twice.

“Your silence is an admission on of guilt. All right, what you did with the money?” and two more blows were delivered, so hard that there was a buzzing in my ears.

Meanwhile, my mother had come in and she restrained him from hitting me further. “Whatever he has done, don’t forget he is young, tender and innocent, “she shouted at him.

“Innocent, is he? Look at this! And he threw the offending letter at her.

She read the letter. Then turned to me. “Son, whatever you have done, confess it. Admit everything completely. And promise afterwards never to do it again.”

“And what about this ten thousand rupees with interest? Who is going to pay it? I have half a mind to let him rot in goal, “My father retorted.

But my mother stood by me. “Is ten thousand rupees more important than the honour of your only son, and the honour of your family?” She asked. Then she turned to me. “Raju, tell us everything. Otherwise, how can we help you?” She coaxed.

With tears in my eyes, I related everything from the very beginning. How Kuppan had tempted me first and then blackmailed me into borrowing money, half of which I did not even get. The only thing I did not tell them was about my teeth marks on Rukku’s breast. As I went on relating the tale of my misfortunes, sorrow was added to the quilt I was beginning to feel and I promised - rather rashly as it turned out afterwards that I would never indulge in such things again in my life.

“There you are!” exclaimed my mother. “It is all that rogue Kuppan’s fault. It is he who has spoilt an innocent child! He doesn’t have a good reputation in the village. We should never have let him be responsible for a young boy.”

My father’s anger turned into a cold hatred. “There is something intrinsically bad about this boy,” he announced. “I don’t know where he gets it from. We are both honest, decent, God – fearing people. But he has no sense of ethics or dignity. Don’t you remember, as a child, if he did not get what he wanted, he waited until I started my lunch and then urinated on my plate? That shows his badness is in – born.”

“How can you throw that childish prank against him now?” Cried my mother. “You should get hold of that poisonous snake Kuppan and beat the life out of him. I bet he has made a pretty packet out of all this for himself!”

So my father’s wrath turned on Kuppan. But he must have had some inkling of what to come from the money lender and he was nowhere to be found. In fact, he did not return to the village until after my father died. It is an indication of my father’s position in the village in those days.

I had forgotten all about the urinating incidents till my father mentioned them. Yes, I did it a few times when I was angry, but why I did it, I still do not know. It was rather an unusual way of showing my displeasure. Most children throw tantrums when they are frustrated; they may break their toys or just yell until they fall asleep. Looking back on it at this distance of time, I wonder why – even as a child – I chose this method of expressing my discontent. Was it bad blood? Was it inherited or something that I had acquired very early in my childhood? Was it some kind of inner compulsion related to sex? What made me behave in a particular manner even as a child that culminated in raps? Now that I have paid for it - for all my sins. If sins they were – by being publicly condemned and sent to gaol, will I be free of that curse?

My father consulted a lawyer. He explained that if the matter were to be taken to a court of law, the whole thing would depend on the fact of whether the money lender as aware I was a minor when I borrowed the money. The only person who could have given evidence in our favour was Kuppan and he was missing. Further, it was felt that the publicity of my having borrowed money would have hurt the family. So, my father pocketed his pride, paid the money and ordered me never again to leave the village

Chapter Three

It is now six weeks since I received Sushila's letter. Not a word since. Surely, if her intention was to torment me, she would send a letter at least once a month or so, so that as soon as the effect of one is worn off, another would come to rekindle it; give a few more details each time about her suffering so that it will make me feel like a real cad. May be she feels sorry for having written it and wants no repetition. If so, Should she not write a letter of apology asking me to forget it? Perhaps, she thinks that such letter should not be at regular intervals. Then, they will become routine and anything that is routine is also ineffectual. Surprise is what counts in such matters. After all, she did not write for more than a year after trial was over. So, I probably will not get one for three or four months and then, there will be one or two in quick succession.

The strange thing is, I desperately want to get a letter, even if it condemns me. I thought I had lost her for ever, but that letter, in spite of its hatred and its cruelty, has kept communications open between us. It shows that she is thinking about me. I am someone in her eyes, someone to reckon with. But if she forgets or ignores me, it would be worse. I would rather be someone worth hating than one who is not worth remembering. Then, I would become a nobody, a non-existent – certainly non-recognized – entity. Even if she condemns me, vilifies me, it does not matter. I would like to know how she is getting on, what her problems and difficulties are. I would like to keep in touch.

As it is, here is the only communication I have received, the only contact with the outside world, except for some official papers regarding my property in which I was not particularly interested. Every day, often twice a day, I take the letter out of the envelope, read the one sentence over and over again and put it back so much so that it is quite crumpled. I know every stroke, every curve and dot in her handwriting, now. Day after day, week after week, I wait and nothing happens. I even asked one of the warders. He kindly enquired in the prison office and the answer was 'no'.

It is strange that before I got her letter, I never bothered about her; never even thought of her by name, only as 'her'. It was my problems, my difficulties, my mental agony that worries me. I knew that one day I would be released and I would have to face the outside world. What would happen then? Would my friends still be friends, or would they ignore me? Or would they say, 'Poor fellow' whatever he did, he has paid for it in ample measure. Now let us forget it and make him feel welcome'. Would I be able to walk into public places like cinemas and clubs with my head erect and with a smile on my face, as I used to? Or would I walk in with a bowed head and with shame written all over my face? Or, would I funk it altogether and prefer the solitary loneliness of my garden? These were the kind of problems that were bothering me.

A sudden idea has struck me and it makes me shiver all over. What if every one of her relations and friends had let her down? What if no one would give her a job even? What would she live on then? Where would she live? How would she support herself? The idea horrifies me, but I have to think of the possibilities. Let me be blunt and ask myself, would she or had she become another Rukku? That this girl with all her education, dignity and pride would lend her body to any man who paid for it was a

gruesome and impossible thought. Surely, she would rather commit suicide as she threatened to do sometime during our last and only encounter! If anything like that happened, how can I forgive myself? It was I who drove her to it. For such a crime, there is no adequate punishment, no atonement in this world or the next. If it had happened, I would have to spend the rest of my life trying to restore her pride, her dignity and her confidence; bring her back into the world of civilized men and women. Why didn't I accept her suggestion and retain her in my house? After it happened, she pleaded with me with tears flowing from her eyes, on bended knees, to let her stay as a cook, as a washer woman, even as a slave. 'I have no life outside this house', she begged and beseeched. It wouldn't have cost me anything if I had let her stay. But I merely laughed at the idea. I was insensitive and sent her away. Now, I suffer for it. But why am I saying all this? Is it because I am green with jealousy at the thought that someone else might be enjoying her body? Or am I truly sorry for her plight?

In a prison, you are subjected to the dull, dead routine of prison rules. Your meals, your work exercise and your sleeping hours are fixed and nothing can alter them. You have no friends, and you are lucky if you have no enemies you have nothing to do to obey orders, follow the rules. But you are alone, totally and severely alone. You have nothing to do but to think, for your mind is free. In such a situation, you begin to think in a particular direction, go on thinking of all the possibilities of what might have happened until you get into a cold sweat. Your imagination runs riot. Once you get into such a situation, it is extremely difficult to get away from that mood. There is no one with whom you can discuss it; you cannot go out and verify things for yourself. And you torment yourself in the sure knowledge that the worst has already taken place.

That is the mood I have got into now, thinking she might have become another Rukku. So, in order to get over that mood, I tell myself, the worst could not have happened. She would not possibly have sent such a letter to me if she was in any way ashamed of what she was doing. She was too well educated and too resourceful to let fate overtake her or life defeats her. I think along these lines, not because there is any evidence to think so, but it makes me feel better. At least, it will make me feel better when I have speculated along these lines until I have convinced myself. Actually, I have no evidence of any sort to think anything.

Another thought has just struck me. Why do I think so much about her now? And why do such thoughts leave me with a pain in my heart? Am I at last beginning to feel a sense of guilt? Remorse? Do I feel for her the same kind of attachment that once I dreamt I would feel for my ideal woman? Was I falling in love with her at this late hour? Or is it just the letter that has raised feelings of pity? If it were so, it would be ironical. I, a man of fifty seven, jaded in my appetites, failing in my powers, to fall in love with a girl young enough to be my daughter! A girl whom I have grievously wronged!

Frankly, I don't know what my feelings are. I am confused and worried. Why doesn't she write to me and tell me exactly what is happening and set mind at rest? I can bear the worst; what I cannot bear is suspense.

Perhaps, if I were to relate the incident itself in all its tragic details, it might make me feel better. But I tell myself I have been writing this account, not so much to make me feel better, but to understand

myself better. Whatever the mental agony, I do not want to change that plan. When I relate the incident itself, I want everyone to be aware of the back ground. Even if I have to go through hell, I have to find myself at the end.

So, I was stuck in the village. In an earlier generation, a young man of my age would go to his farm every morning and work with his father and brothers on ploughing, sowing, irrigating and so on. But my father was too wealthy for me to do so. I was too soft and too well educated to go and work in the hot sun.

I tried to consider objectively, the role of Kuppan in my downfall. Was he a criminal who planned and e on how he could corrupt me and profit from it from the very beginning? Or, was he too a victim of circumstances? Somehow, I was inclined to the later point of view. He was a young man with an insatiable appetite for woman and he could not control himself. As my mother had pointed out, even in the village, he had a bad reputation. Going to the city, having its freedom as well as anonymity without any of the social and moral restraints of the village, and the housekeeping money at his disposal, meant that he could give full rein to his sexual appetite. His lascivious conversation with me in the beginning was nothing more sinister than that of a woman – hungry young man. But later, when he found himself in a jam with the shopkeepers demanding money, he was more or less compelled to involve me in order to escape detection. Everything else followed as a logical consequence. Ironically enough, the only thing for which I found I could not forgive him was sharing Rukku's bed with me.

In the village, I had no one to talk to. Loneliness enveloped me. I was also overtaken by remorse for what I had done, for the shame. I had brought on the family. I hated myself for it. I had let my parents down and was sincerely sorry. But at least, I had passed my examinations and hoped to pass the final one. I would be eligible to go to college, but what chance had I under the present circumstances? My father did not even talk to me and ignored presence. When I approached him about going to college, he shouted at me. "You have learnt enough in high school! You don't need to learn anything more in college!"

So, I was reduced to reading newspapers and novels, sleeping and just wandering round the village in the evenings. But a young man of seventeen cannot sit idle day after day with nothing to do. So my remorse was followed by depression and a sense of isolation and futility. But strangely enough, I did not miss woman or drink as much as I thought I would. A change in physical environment, in psychological atmosphere, made the loss seem not so important. It is true that in odd moments I thought of Rukku, but with mixed feelings – her mature but still desirable body and her treachery. But I told myself it was all over. My worry was about my loneliness, my future and the possibilities of going to college.

On the day my examination results came, I showed them to my mother. In spite of everything, my marks were good.

"I want to go to college mother," I cried. "What can I possibly do here in the village? If I go on like this, I will go mad. I want to study; I want to make something of my life. I promise to give up my bad

habits and study well so that I will be a credit to the family. I am willing to swear it in front of the family deity, if necessary.”

“Your father won’t listen. What can I do?” my mother pleaded.

“Show him my marks. Tell him I can go to the dogs in the village just as well as I can in the town, particularly if I have to remain idle. If that happens, it will be worse, won’t it? The son of the biggest landlord in the village flirting with all the low caste women! We will become the laughing stock of the whole village.”

I think my mother understood the force of my argument as well as the veiled threat behind it. She knew of all the temptations for a rich man’s son in a poor village. “I will see what I can do,” she promised.

In the end, she found what she thought was the perfect solution. It is well –known that Satan finds mischief for a rich, young man with nothing to go. Marriage would satisfy my physical needs and I need not go outside the house for my pleasures. It might make me more responsible and enable me to concentrate on my studies at college. My father agreed with reluctance to these plans. I too gave my concurrence because it was one of the conditions imposed by my parents, for letting me go to college. There was nothing else I could do.

They showed me the photograph of a girl. She was supposed to be fifteen, but looked more like thirteen in the picture. It was taken some time ago, I was told. Her name was Meenakshi, the daughter of a land owner in the neighbouring village. The family was not quite as well off as my father said as far as they were concerned, I was quite a catch. They had of course heard vaguely about my doings in the city, but ignored it by saying that marriage would steady me. The wedding was celebrated in an old – fashioned way with all ceremonies as well as some pomp and circumstance. I started my married life before I had reached the age of eighteen.

Meena and I didn’t hit it off from the very beginning. Her knowledge of sex was minimal. To start with, we were total strangers to each other and we did not know where to start. Even ordinary conversation was difficult. She did not want to have light on, would not take her clothes off, would not even expose her breasts while the light was on. To my persistent questions she averted her eyes and murmured, “It is not decent, “and “I am shy,” All this infuriated me. Though I considered myself somewhat of an expert because of my experience with various women, I was in fact worse than a novice, for I had developed confidence without knowledge. I did not know that a young, innocent and tender virgin could not be treated as if she were another Rukku. She needed gentleness, reassurance and love, particularly on the first night. She moaned and I thought she was moaning with pleasure, But when I kissed her face, I could taste the saltiness of her tears. ‘So, that is now much she likes me, ‘I thought to myself.

But I asked her, “Why are you crying? Don’t you like it?”

“It hurts terribly. Can you leave me alone for tonight? I promise, I will be all right tomorrow,” she pleaded.

I moved away in disgust and frustration, and after some time, turned over and went to sleep.

Though it didn't hurt her after the first two nights, she never really got to like it did not know the reason until much later. By then, it was too late. she considered it a boring duty to submit herself to me. I was too young and too ignorant to know what was wrong. Occasionally, I tried to speak some tender words of affection, but it was too late. She would say, 'Please finish quickly; I want to go to sleep.'

All my dreams about the ideal woman had come to fruition in this girl who wanted me to do it quickly so that she could go to sleep! I thought of the ideal wife as described in the epics – a mother in your distress, a minister with your problems, a chef in the kitchen and a loving mistress in bed. Before marriage, I could always dream about such a woman, hope that some day I would meet her and marry her. But now, I knew I would not. Even if I did it was no use; I was trapped for life. There was no escape.

We set up house in the city and I started going to college. During the first month, Meena's mother stayed with us to teach housekeeping and domestic management to her daughter. That lady was very strict and orthodox and made us conform to her ideas of right and wrong. No meat was to be served except on Sundays and we had to go to the temple every Friday evening. It was the solemn duty of a young married woman to pray for the longevity of her husband so that she would never become a widow, she informed me, hoping I would be pleased. We were not allowed to go to the cinema unless it was a mythological picture portraying the victory of good over evil. Cinema was bad, I was informed in no uncertain terms, unless there was a moral behind it. She set up some picture of gods and goddesses in an alcove in the house and recited verses for half an hour every morning. That would not have been so bad, but she insisted that I should also offer prayers at the alcove every morning. Every time I went out, I had to give her an account of where on my nerves and would have resulted in an explosion of temper had not Meena realised what was happening and sent her away.

Meena was a dutiful wife rather than an affectionate one. Though we had a cook, she liked to do the cooking herself, particularly those dishes that she knew I liked. She looked after my every need. She reminded me about things I ought to do, and saw to my comfort in every possible way. She was not gay or jolly as I wanted her to be. If I cracked a joke. She did not laugh, but turned her head away from me and giggled. I could not have any serious conversation with her except about domestic matters for her reading was confined to Tamil magazines and novels. She did not know much English and did not want to go to the English movies with me. If my class mates dropped in, she would not meet them, but sent cups of coffee through the servant. As a married man, my father gave me greater freedom and more money and I did not have to account how I spent it all. The only injunction he imposed was against borrowing and I resolved strictly to adhere to it. But it was inevitable that I should gradually resort to drinking. I told myself it was only because my sex life wasn't satisfactory. It was much better I should take to drinking to relax rather than frequent other women. On the first evening when I brought a bottle home, Meena wanted to know what it was. When I told her laughingly, she fell at my feet and

pleaded with me not to drink. "It is evil; it will ruin your health as well as your mind. And if people find out, it will be a great humiliation for us and all the family." But when she found she could not stop it, and then she insisted that she would serve me, presumably to ensure that I did not drink too much. I welcomed the idea. It was very good feeling to have a nice young girl pouring your drink. Later, I knew that such things happened only in the more expensive bars and night clubs in Europe. If only the logical consequences would follow! Always drank in the bed room, behind closed doors so that the servants would not know anything about with my brandy. I would sip my drink and try to play with her breasts, smack her bottom or embrace her gently. But she would have none of it and move away from me with some excuse or other, which only increased my frustration.

But I did not want a good house keeper. I wanted love, romance, physical affection, eager sexual response. I wanted reassurance regarding my sexual powers, someone to tell me what a great lover I was. I had got it from everyone of my other women before marriage. May be it was all spurious – like the drink that was being sold as 'French' brandy – but it did give intoxication, just like the whores' honeyed words. I was getting more and more frustrated with matrimonial bliss, and began to hanker after other woman. My vows of monogamy lasted just over four months.

I suppose this was inevitable. I say inevitable, not so much to justify myself, but merely to point out that for a youth of eighteen with some experience of women, there are certain basic needs that have to be satisfied and if they cannot be satisfied one way, another way will have to be found.

I began to go out in the evenings on some excuse or other. Meena did not know happening. She thought I was going out to drink, that she had been too strict with me in her rationing. She pleaded with me not to ruin my health or reputation, by keeping bad company. I promised her I wouldn't drink when I was out and was only going out to meet some 'friends'. She was too young and inexperienced to know anything different.

It was then that the second major calamity of my life befell me. I say 'second' advisedly. The first was when I borrowed money and it came to my father's knowledge. The second was when I discovered that I had contracted a sexually transmitted disease. When I passed urine one morning I had a severe burning sensation. I examined myself and there was some kind of puss oozing out. Revelation dawned on me with all the force of a body blow. I did not know when, how, or from whom I had caught it for my knowledge about such things was still rudimentary, but I realised with shock and horror that I had been sleeping with Meena also regularly, the last time being as recently as less than forty eight hours. It was perhaps one of the few occasions that I prayed. I prayed to god that if Meena was not afflicted in any way, I would give up my promiscuous life for ever.

The blow was not long in coming. Three days later, Meena came to me and told me about the symptoms which were similar to mine. She was trembling. "What shall we do? What shall we do? She cried. Poor girl! She thought it was her fault in some way. It never occurred to her to suspect me. "It was like this yesterday also, but I hoped it might go away. What shall I do? Shall I go to my parents?" she asked.

I told her 'no'. Definitely 'no'. In the village, there would be no one to cure her. In the city, there were doctors. But really, I was afraid of her parents finding out what I had done.

"I don't to go to a male doctor," She cried. "How can I explain things to him? How can I expose myself before him?"

"We will find a woman doctor," I soothed her. My heart went out her at that moment, pity and love mingling with my feeling of guilt.

So, I took Meena to a lady doctor. When she came out, she did not speak. But I guessed from her face that she knew the truth.

The lady doctor too had come out. She looked at me severely. "If you do have to indulge in such activity, at least take adequate precautions" she said.

That night, Meena faced me. "You did this to me knowingly didn't you?"

"Believe me Meena; I did not know anything about it. If I had, I would not have come near you, would not have touched you."

"Perhaps," she said. There was a grim smile on her face. It seemed as if she had suddenly grown older, wiser. "But you have been going with street women, women who are unclean and dirty, filthy in body and mind; women who do it for money! You have preferred them to your lawful, wedded wife!" and she was racked by sobs and tears.

There was no one to console her, offer her sympathy, understanding and love. She would not take it from me.

"I hope you will not inform your parents about this," I said my voice full of grief.

She looked hard at me. "What do you take me for?" she cried. "Do you think I want to tell my parents what kind of a husband they chose for me? No, in spite of everything, I want them to feel proud of us both. Further, it might make trouble between our two families, which I don't want."

I almost loved her at that moment. How lucky I was to be blessed with a wife who was so loyal!

There were no anti-biotics or penicillin in those days. The treatment was prolonged and painful. After that first burst of anger and tears, Meena put up with it with stoic resignation, like a true Hindu wife. She still looked after me with meticulous care, poured my drink in the evenings, gave me advice when she thought it was necessary, and did not mention to a soul what had happened between us. I was thankful for that.

But love, as it is normally understood between a husband and his wife, had gone out of our lives. It was replaced by the stern demands of duty on the part of a Hindu wife. As far as I was concerned, the relationship was more and more that of a house keeper and employer than that of a wife and husband.

Our sexual life seemed to have come to a premature end. But one night about six months later, I was very surprised when Meena approached me.

“What is it Meena?” I asked her. Now-a-days, I was a little scared of her, if anything.

“I have not been fortunate enough to have a loyal or loving husband. But is it too much to ask, to have one or two loving children? What else is left for me in this life?”

So, our sex life was resumed.

It was a pity that Meena did not have her wish for children fulfilled. If she had, perhaps, my own life would have taken a different turn.

At high school, I had not been particularly interested in politics. Political activity in India was at very low ebb during that period. The Congress ministries were in power in the various states and the demand for independence had been postponed for the present. I had of course read the autobiographies of Gandhi and Nehru and admired them for their courage, patriotism and sacrifice.

But with the declaration of war in Europe, things began to happen. India had been declared a belligerent without any Indian leader being consulted. Along with everyone else, I too felt a natural resentment over it. It brought home to us more than anything else, the helplessness of India as a nation. Things began to move and the politics of administration was replaced by the politics of agitation. The Congress ministries resigned, what was known as ‘individual Satyagraha’ was launched by Mahatma Gandhi, Japan declared war on the allies and the war came very much nearer home to us. The Cripps Mission came and went with no agreement being reached between the Government and the Congress. The offer made by the British namely independence after the war, was termed by Mahatma Gandhi as a post-dated cheque on a bank that was failing.

During this period, the political activity in the country gradually increased. There were meetings in which Congressmen denounced the British Raj and demanded immediate independence for India. It was necessary even to mobilize India’s resources for the war effort, they said. But they spoke of many other things near to our hearts. They talked about the removal of untouchability, about the emancipation of women, the poverty of the peasants, the greatness of Gandhi, and above all, the right of one nation to control the destinies of another, about truth, non-violence and Satyagraha.

I felt all these things more or less vaguely. As the political fever in the country went up, my own enthusiasm increased along with those of other students. But more than anything else, I felt attracted by the mystic personality of Gandhi, was drawn towards his creed of non-violence. Brought up in a religious atmosphere by my mother, but having lost faith in ceremonial religion, I felt the full blast of this new creed and was completely carried away by it. Love had failed my youthful idealism and I was perhaps seeking unconsciously, something to replace it in my heart and soul and Satyagraha filled a void. To sacrifice and to suffer, to love one’s enemies, to return love for hatred, blessings for insults, to receive the full blast of violence from the stick or the gun with a smiling face, that was the method and

that was the road to Swaraj. Action should spring from the highest ideals and noblest thoughts..... and yet.

There was another school of thought, not very vocal, but which was strong below the surface of national politics. Subash Chandra Bose had already fled India and was busy organizing the Indian National Army in Japan. His followers believed that Britain's difficulties were India's opportunity, that we couldn't defeat the British by merely going to gaol. They believed in arson sabotage, underground activity and clandestine propaganda against the British. They were also members of the Congress party and had no official, separate organisation. But they knew that by themselves they could not act and were waiting for an opportunity.

When the 'Quit India' call came on the eighth of August 1942, both groups united to take common action. The entire national and many of the local leaders were immediately put behind bars. This was perhaps one of the mistakes of the British, for if the moderate leaders had been outside, they would have been able to control their more hot-headed followers. Consequently, there was no one - except a few who had gone underground, like Jai Prakash Narayan - to give any guidance of direction to the field-workers and the masses. They were more or less left to their own devices. The kind of activity indulged in by any particular group was solely dependant on who their leader happened to be at a given time. In such a situation, Gandhism was pushed to the background and the extremists were able to have their way.

Since I started taking an interest in politics, I along with a few of my class mates used to visit a young lawyer named Thirumalai who was an active Congress worker. He was a few years older than us. He was neither a full-fledged Gandhian, nor an extremist. He used to say 'Freedom through non-violence if possible, with violence if necessary.' When arguments broke out among us as to what course of action we should follow, he used to say, 'The strategy we follow should depend on the situation. Let us not be carried away by emotion or ideological hair-splitting. 'Consequently, he made an ideal leader for us.

On the morning of the 9th August, the resolution on 'Quit India' as well as the arrest of all national leaders reached us. Students from all the colleges including my own went on an indefinite strike as a protest. At the same time many of the leaders in all the towns were also rounded up. But a few who had anticipated their arrest or who were overlooked by the police went underground. The masses took to the streets. There were processions, hartals, lathi charges and shooting. There was arson, sabotage everywhere. The revolution had broken out.

For the first time in my life, I felt I was involved in something bigger than myself. I was involved with a great cause that was not only just, but even holy. I felt that I was now truly part of India. Her sorrows and sufferings were mine also. Her victories too would be mine, when they came. Perhaps, there was no logic or reason behind our activity. I never paused to think what we could achieve, what strategies we should adopt for success. It was an emotional upheaval, a national flood, a patriotic wave that swept the entire country, in which we were all dragged away.

Meena knew exactly what I was doing. I had told her about our meetings. She neither encouraged me nor tried to prevent me. She herself, like all young people, was nationalistic in outlook. All she said was, "Your father won't like it if he finds out."

Later still, when I was seriously involved in the movement, she asked me, "If you go to prison, what shall I do?"

"Close up this house and go back to your parents till I am released," I told her. "But I am not thinking of going to prison. I may go underground."

That will be worse, won't it?" she asked. "At least, in prison, you will be safe."

"Don't worry nothing will happen to me," I assured her.

On the night of the ninth August, we met in Thirumalai's rooms. There were five of us. Apart Thirumalai and myself, there were Balu and kumar from the law college and my class mate Boopathi. So long as patriotism was confined to talking and arguing, there were quite a few others but the moment there was any possibility of action, only the five of us were left.

It must be remembered that the art of sabotage and guerilla warfare were not as well developed in those days as they are today. No had we any weapons or equipment at our disposal. We were sheer amateurs, with nothing more than a strong feeling of patriotism and enthusiasm to guide us. With that sort of back ground, we were certainly not going to shake the British Raj, much less topple it. The utmost that we could do was some minor damage to the war effort. But we did not know all this at that time. We knew only that the revolution had broken out we had to play our part. We were young idealists, fired by our own rhetoric and hoping to achieve miracles.

Thirumalai talked to us seriously that memorable evening. "The time has come for action," he said solemnly. "If you follow me, you risk your lives; certainly your freedom. If you have any fear, any misgivings, you should drop out now."

We assured him that we were ready for anything.

Then, he continued, "The time for vocal protests and prison going is over. From now, we are shadows, men without a name, without an address. If we are caught, we do not tell our enemies anything about ourselves or our colleagues. Even if you are tortured, you do not give away any information. Are you prepared for all that?"

We agreed that we were.

"The reason why I am telling you all this is, I have received instructions to attack any British military installations in this area. That, according to British law, is treason. There is a British army camp about twenty five miles from the city. I understand it is an ammunition storage depot. We should set fire to it. It is a dangerous expedition. Do you want to join me in this venture?"

I do not think we realised either the risk or the dangers involved in such an undertaking. It was almost like a game to us, an adventure out of a romantic thriller perhaps. We had to thank the inefficiency of the British security as well as our own good luck for getting away with we did. We were enthusiastic.

Then he outlined the plans. "The camp is a very large one, with a perimeter of about three miles. It is therefore difficult to patrol the entire circumference. We enter the camp, set alight some important buildings and escape."

"But how do we set fire to them?" I enquired. "We have been making preparations, "Thirumalai answered. "Some gun power bombs are being made locally, and these will be available to us nearer the time."

We chose a dark night to do a bit of reconnoitering near the camp. There was a small village at one edge of the camp, about half a kilometer away. Many of the villagers were sympathetic to us, but we wanted to take as few people as possible into our confidence. We reached the village at midnight when everyone was asleep. By previous arrangement, one of the villagers, who was an active congress worker, took us round the fencing. After an hour of looking round, we fixed a lonely spot from where we would enter the camp. Our guide assured us that there was very little patrolling at that spot. It was also close to a cluster of buildings where, our guide assured us, ammunition was store. He has seen lorries come and unload the stuff and return. One great advantage of that particular spot was, it was adjacent to a corn field and the crop stood about five feet high. It would be easy for us to escape through the field and if we had a vehicle on the other side, we could by-pass the village and get away. The authorities would assume that we would seek shelter in the village. To search the corn field would be difficult. All this meant that we had very little time. It had to be done before the corn was harvested.

We chose the next Saturday night for our operation. We knew that Saturday night was a time of merry making for the tommies, with the prospect of a Sunday holiday. Many of them were likely to be drunk. Security would be somewhat lax. Everything went according to plan. We reached the fence around one thirty a.m. The barbed wire was cut easily enough and we jumped over the next wall. The ammunition was stored in sheds with no windows, we were told. Therefore, to get a bomb inside the building, one of us had to climb to the roof, remove a couple of tiles and place the bomb on the crated which were piled almost upto the roof. Balu was an expert climber and it was done in a very few minutes. We placed three bombs in three different sheds. A string tied to each of the bombs and soaked in kerosene was handing outside the building. It had been arranged that I should fire one of the bombs, Thirumalai the second and Boopathi the third while kumar kept watch. In preliminary experiments, we had estimated that it would take about five minutes for the length of string burn and detonate the bomb. It meant that we would have five minutes to get away. But we had not allowed for the fact that a string that was hanging down would burn far more quickly.

The first explosion went off after about two minutes and the second one soon after. The third one did not go off at all. Perhaps, something went wrong, or it exploded much later. But by the time the alarm sounded, we were safely inside the corn field. We could see smoke and fire rising from two

buildings and also some further explosions, indicating that we had succeeded in our objective. By the time the guards located where the barbed wire was cut and started the search, we were well away, speeding towards the city.

We were full of jubilation; flushed with victory. "What do we do next?" I asked enthusiastically on our way back.

"We all grow beards before we attempt another job," Thirumalai told us. "Don't under-estimate British intelligence. They work slowly, but they may get to us in the end. One villager has seen us, but he does not know our true names. But still, we have to be careful."

The next day, there were a few lines in the newspaper about an attempted sabotage at an army camp. 'Two sheds were set on fire, but there was no further damage. The police and the army authorities are investigating,' it said. I was sorry that our heroic attempt did not receive greater publicity. Later, we learnt that the village next to the camp was collectively fined for harbouring saboteurs.

From then on, order not to arouse the suspicions of the police, we in different places. Thirumalai was known to be a congress worker, but he was not arrested because he was carrying on with his profession and his senior was a highly respected advocate of the high court. He got news of uprisings in various parts of India mainly through couriers and this information; we circulated among students, industrial workers and the general public. A duplicating machine was acquired and set up in my house as being least conspicuous. We listened to German and Japanese broadcasts and added their version of the war to the local news of agitation. These bulletins were left in front of schools, factories, street corners, etc. The police were doing their utmost to find out who was responsible. We knew we could not carry on for very long. Sooner or later, one of us bound to be caught with the material in our hands and that would be the end.

It was then that Thirumalai thought of another idea. Like me, he too was from a village and had migrated to the city. He had no parents, brother or sister and the house in the village was empty. It was even more backward than my village and the police would never think of looking for anyone there, particularly if Thirumalai himself was in the city. It was therefore decided to shift the duplicating machine to the village. Balu, Kumar and Boopathi would go and live there while I would spend some of my time there. Thirumalai would be the courier, bringing the material for duplicating and taking back the bulletins when they were ready. I would help him in this task as well in helping the boys in operating the machine.

The village of Palayam was situated on the eastern slopes of the Sarvaraya hills. It was approached through a rugged, unpaved road from the nearest railway station which was fifteen miles away. One could see dark, rocky hills thrust against a light blue sky and a thick foliage of tropical forest vegetation forming a beautiful background to the village. In the heart of those hills could be seen a waterfall, shining like a streak of silver against the sun. On the right hand side of the road was a small river that was often visible as the road rose and fell. Everywhere, there were green meadows and fields.

It was as different from my own village as it could possibly be. Mine was flat, dry and arid, dusty, with an occasional green patch if the well in that farm happened to have some water.

It was to this village that we moved our duplicating equipment in a privately hire car and also the stock of paper we had. Every Sunday, Thirumalai would bring the material for duplication and carry the bulletins that were ready from the previous week. I often went back with him if there was not much work. As the only married man in the group, it was felt by everyone that I should go back and see if my wife was all right.

This was a completely new life for me. I had never worked at anything with devotion or dedication. It was surprising how satisfying it was. What we achieved with all our efforts was a different matter. But the effort itself was worthwhile. We went for long walks, swam in the river, played with the village children and had discussions with the school teacher, the only educated man in the village. He refrained from asking us what we were doing in the village and we didn't volunteer any information, except that we were Thirumalai's friends spending a holiday there, as the college was closed.

Thirumalai had a small library of very good books and I read a lot. I liked to go away by myself for long walks to some lonely spot and watch the sun set. In the evenings, the hills seemed to have acquired a tint of copper and I liked to watch the rapid descent of the sun behind them, leaving them a black rugged mass in the fading twilight.

In the enchanting atmosphere of the Sarvaraya hills, my mind wandered over all sorts of subjects without rhyme or reason. All the thoughts and feelings of the past few weeks, the vague mental struggles, the deep emotional yearnings, the purely illusory dreams, began to crystallize into ideas. In spite of the fact that I was a married man, in spite of my wide experience with woman, I was still a youth of twenty and it was difficult to keep romance out of my thoughts. It was nice to have dreams, beautiful to think about them, glorious to imagine that I had achieved great things for my country and to live in a world of phantasy while it lasted. I was surprised to find that during these few months of purposeful activity, I had rarely thought about either drink or women. Abstinence has its own pleasures; sacrifice gives one a feeling of virtuous satisfaction. I had been taken out of myself; my own needs and desires were forgotten before a larger, nobler cause. My past life seemed trivial, fruitless by comparison. And I wondered, was I the same person who had bitten Rukku's breast and infected my wife V.D? How could I possibly have done such callous, cruel things? Am I really two people in one body? Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? Was I swinging away from the diabolical to the sublime temperament? Would I revert back to my old behavior, old tastes, when once the emotional compulsion of the national cause was removed? I did not know.

It was at such moments that I started to compose poetry. The first one I wrote was entitled 'Love is our only sword.' In spite of my participating in setting fire to the army camp and in the clandestine publication of bulletins, my heart was dominated by the philosophy of mahatma Gandhi and I had to express it in some way. The first poem I ever wrote glorified that glorified that philosophy of nonviolence. I thought it was good and showed it to Thirumalai rather diffidently on his next visit. He thought it was wonderful and read it out to the others. Balu who had no sympathy for Gandhian

philosophy merely laughed about it. “That is good coming from one who set fire to the British camp!” he laughed.

“Don’t be silly!” Thirumalai chided him. “Let us not forget that whatever we may do for achieving independence, Gandhian philosophy is going to be our great contribution for resolving conflicts in the future world.” He said. “Further, as poetry it is good, really good. What’s more, it can be sung.” Then, he turned to me, “you are the only one among us who has real talent. Cultivate it; don’t let it go rusty.”

So, my poem was published in our next bulletin and it soon became popular among the people. It had a haunting melody, that expressed the yearnings as well as the frustrations of people under alien rule, of people who were trying to stick to non – violence and sacrifice and love in a world full of hatred and war. Soon, people were singing it in the streets, others copied it, republished it and the next time I went into the city, I was amazed at its popularity. Even Meena had come across it and showed it to me. When I told her who the author was, I think for once, she was proud of me. She got hold of my hand – written manuscript and kept it locked up in her jewel box. The police were naturally very much on the look out for the author.

I wrote some more poems afterwards and they too were published but none reached the level of popularity or sensitivity of that first literary effort on my part.

In the evenings, the five of us used to gather by lamp light and argue endlessly about moral values, ideologies, about the India of our dreams. The ideas were interesting and stimulating, even electrifying at times, because we were carried away by our own enthusiasm. Often, we talked about the great glory of India in the past. But I always argued that the past had no relevance to the present, that we were merely sentimental and nostalgic about it and the burden of the past prevented us from being more decisive in the present. Embracing a dead past or a dead idea was no better than embracing a corpse. In the end, it tended to putrefy. It was impossible to move forward if you were looking back all the time. The result was stagnation, indecision and confusion. If one lives in the past, he lives much less in the present and not at all in the future. I used to say that ideas – like modern medicines – should have date stamps on them, indicating that they should not be used after that date.

I was often carried away by my own rhetoric. Life should be lived as it came, in all its diversity and change, however brief or long it might be. The excitement of growth, the glory of action, the splendor of achievement, these should be our aim, our goal, our single minded objective. Yesterday was nothing more than a dream and tomorrow, a vision of hope and anxiety, but today well lived would make yesterday a dream of happiness and tomorrow a vision of fulfillment. We had to live for today, in today. As the dawn broke, we had to look at the challenges, opportunities, the dangers it brought rather than being burdened with a dead past.....

Yes, often, I would come out with original, inspired statements, ideas, epigrams and they would wonder and ask, “That is great Raju; we must put in our next bulletin.”

And I would say with my usual modesty, “I got it from somewhere.”

But Thirumalai easily stumbled on to my trick and said, “oh no! He is not a cultural brigand. He doesn’t steal from the wise and distribute it to the dull witted. He is culturally rich in his own right.” Then he would tell me, “Raju, your talent is precious. It can be great if you care to develop it.”

Living and working so closely together had made us true friends and comrades. Sacrificing for a common cause and facing common dangers had bound us together as nothing else could have done. After it was all over, we went our diverse ways. But on the few occasions when we happened to meet, we had a warm affection and friendship for each other. I had lost touch with Balu, Kumar and Boopathi many years ago, they having left the city and gone away for various reasons. Only Thirumalai – after a distinguished political career – lives in Palayam now. Whenever he came to the city, we used to meet and revive old memories. He is the only friend I have in the outside world. What a long time ago it all seems!

I was a different Raju then; and those were glorious days when we were full of noble sentiments, heroic thoughts. It was perhaps the best period of my life the point of view of intellectual satisfaction and emotional fulfilment. One could not expect it to last for ever.

When the blow did fall, it was sudden and swift. Evidently, Thirumalai was being watched because of his frequent trips to his village. He was arrested one day as he got off the train in the city with the bundle of bulletins with him. But his assistant escaped and sent a message to us so that we were able to make our escape. When the police arrived at Palayam, they found the duplicating machine and the stocks of paper and ink, but no people. And the villagers gave them no clues. I went to my own village from Palayam and returned to the city after about ten days, to avoid suspicion.

I was sad and disillusioned, like a defeated soldier returning from the battlefield. Physically, I was not hurt, but my heart was bruised. The flame of revolution had been put out. Now, only the cinders of hatred were smouldering. When we started, we thought we were going to humble the might of the British Raj. We had achieved no such thing. Everywhere, the rebellion had been put down. People went to prison or returned to their houses – like myself – with no reward for their efforts. Some were killed. But I think we did achieve one thing though we did not know it at that time. We made the British realise that it was no longer possible to hold India by force of arms.

I returned to the hum – drum life of the college. Though it had started functioning after one month of the strike, I did not return for nearly six months. It meant that I had to spend an extra year before taking my degree. My father was very much upset over this, but he could not treat me like that time when I had borrowed money a few years ago. He realised I was a hero in most people’s eyes. My mother and my wife were ready to support me. Meena even showed him the song I had written, very proudly. He was surprised, but his reactions were predictable.

“How much did he get for it?” he asked.

“He did it for his country,” Meena announced proudly.

“Patriotism doesn’t feed you, does it?”

“Father, I am well known, even famous among Congressmen. If they should come to power, we could cash in on it,” I said mischievously.

“May be, the fact remains that if the police know that you are the author, you will be sent to gaol. And you have wasted one full year! Have you learnt anything from your experience other than how to set fire to buildings or to write doggerel?”

“Yes father; I have become wiser, more experienced. I have also learnt something.”

“And what is that?”

“Many well - to - do people are leaving the city, afraid of Japanese bombing. As you know, even the high court has been shifted. Consequently property values are coming down. You should buy some properties in the city now. The chances of Japanese bombing are of course very remote. You will make a packet after the war if you were to sell them again.”

My father was thoughtful. “Where did you learn all this?” He enquired.

“When you run an underground newspaper, you learn all sorts of things,” I replied.

“My boy! You have not entirely wasted your time, “My father complimented me. “You have a good business head on your shoulders. If what you say is true, the one year does not matter so much. Find out what properties are available and let me know.”

So, what started as a sort of joke on my part turned out to be a very profitable venture for my father. I entered the real estate market even before I left college. I would collect and place a list of properties with their prices before my father; he would inspect them and negotiate the price and buy one or two every time he came to the city. They were all purchased in my name in order to reduce taxation. I sold many of them in later years for nearly ten times the price we had paid. The other, I still own and get very good rent. The one property that I persuade him to buy and which is my home was one hundred acres of land, about fifteen miles away from the city. It was a wide open space, near the sea and with plenty of water in the two wells it had. After having seen the lush greenery of Palayam, I was determined never again to live in a place that was dry and dusty. These hundred acres had been purchased at my persuasion and later developed as an orchard with coconut, mango and lemon groves. Later, I also started a poultry farm, grew flowers for the city market, built a nice house for myself with a beautiful garden and lived there permanently.

To return to the war period, my father was very pleased at my suggestions and ideas and one evening, he said, “You know, for a boy who signed an I.O.U for ten thousand rupees and got only five which he wasted on women, you have turned out to be quite a good business man. What do you want to do after you finish college? Stay in the city and manage these properties I suppose?”

“No, I want to go to England for further studies,” I replied. “I hope to goodness this war will be over by then.”

My father and Meena both stared at me in surprise.

Chapter Four

Suspicion is eating into my soul. It is months now and I have not received any communication after that single, cruel note. What can have happened to Sushila? Can she possibly be dead? The idea frightens me. May be she jumped into a well. I still remember vividly the gruesome sight of the dead woman being brought out of a well in my village when I was a small boy. Even now, it horrifies me when I think about it. Could such a fate have befallen her? Perhaps, she took some folidol. It is so easy to get hold of these insect killers now- a- days. If so, it would have been a painful death. I cannot bear to think of such things, particularly when I realise that I am the cause of it all.

But surely, she would not commit suicide after all this time! If she had wanted to do it, she would have done it immediately afterwards, within the first few days or weeks of the incident when the injury to her mind and soul was still fresh! Why should she have waited for more than a year, sent me a note and then done it? After such a long time, surely, the injury would have and only the scar would be left! Supposing she had fought against the stigma of rape and failed? It is strange that society treats the victim of a rape far worse than it treats a murderer. It is not so much the vocal criticism as the unspoken condemnation that destroys the victim of a rape. The silent disapproval is far more potent than the polite sympathy that is offered. The assumption I suppose is that if she was selected as the victim of a rape, she must have done something – in thought, word, or deed – to have deserved it. She must have invited such unwelcome attention in some manner. She has become unclean, polluted, in some way after the incident. Somehow, this kind of ‘pollution’ doesn’t seem to affect a man. Often, there is a sort of pleasant notoriety about him. The other prisoners often look at me with some envy. When you come to think about it, this unfair distinction associated with sex and particularly rape – is perhaps the cruelest of all handicaps suffered by women. Therefore, one need not be surprised that if the silent condemnation of Society had ultimately defeated her and made her take the final, irrevocable step.

As far as I am concerned, that letter was like a time bomb, set to go off one year after it all happened, destroying my peace of mind and bringing down with it my serenity and self – confidence. It is pointing an accusing finger at me, a finger more lethal than the point of a gun. Yes, slowly, almost unconsciously, I have been feeling sorry for what I have done to her. Thirumalai was right when he said that guilt would overtake me and my conscience would rebel against my egotism. Under these circumstances, how can I write about my own life, calmly and objectively, as if I was a successful politician or a popular film-star? On the other hand, what else can I do?

I decide to ask for an interview with the superintendent of the gaol. In spite of the fact that I was a model prisoner and some high-ups in the outside world interested in me, it was three days before the interview was granted.

“What is it Raju? What can I do for you?” he asked.

"I have been worried about that letter that I got a few months ago sir," I replied.

"What letter?" he enquired. He had evidently forgotten about it. After all, there are nearly three thousand prisoners in the goal and he can't be expected to remember the problems of each and every one of them. So, I reminded him about our last interview when he handed me the letter. I showed it to him now.

"Oh yes," he said. "I remember now. You haven't received any more letters, have you?"

"No sir; that is what is worrying me, in case she is in any trouble. I would like to help her if I can. But I don't know where she is."

"Well, I can't find out where she is," he said. "It is really not our job here."

"At least, would it be possible to find out if she is still in her old address sir?"

"Well," said the superintendent. "I suppose I could do that; purely unofficial of course. Have you got the old address?"

I gave it to him.

Two days later, he sent for me. "I am sorry, but the party is not at the old address given by you. There is no one there by the name of Narayan. They moved soon after the case went on trial."

He had been extremely kind and I thanked him. Then he said, "You obviously have influential friends outside. Why don't you ask one of them to make enquiries?"

It was then I thought of writing to Thirumalai. Perhaps, he would be able to trace her or find out what has actually happened.

My dear Thirumalai,

Normally, I would not have disturbed you with a request. But I am in prison from where I can do nothing. Also, the request is somewhat unusual.

I would like to find out about Mrs. Sushila Narayan who was the 'Victim' in my case. Where does she live, what does she do, how she is getting on, and so on. If she is in any difficulties, I would like to help her. You rarely visit the city I know, but you have sufficient influence and enough friends to set the ball rolling. I hope you will be able to help me.

Yours ever,

Raju.

After I posted the letter, I felt much better.

Let me resume the story of my lost life.

I took my degree in June 1945, but could not get a passage to the United Kingdom immediately. The British soldiers from the eastern theatres of war were all being sent home as soon as the Japanese war was over and the ships were full. Unless one had a priority of some sort, one could not travel. Going to study law at one of the Inns of Court did not certainly qualify for a priority. Finally, I sailed in the middle of 1946. I was twenty three years old.

Meena had mingled feelings about my trip. She was pleased that I was going abroad to study. On the other hand, she had to face the prospect of loneliness for a period of three years. After my adventure in the 'Quit India' struggle, our relationship had improved gradually and reached a point of friendliness, if not passionate love. She would certainly miss me. She had got used to being in the city. Now, the house would be shut and she would have to live alternately with her parents and mine. Having had a house of her own, she did not relish the prospect.

But my father was supremely happy. The evening before my departure, he invited some of his friends for dinner as sort of farewell for me. It is the tradition in India for elders to give advice to a young man going on a long journey and these gentlemen took it upon themselves to uphold that tradition. The first gentleman started, "Young man, I am going to give you the same advice that Mahatma Gandhi's mother gave him when he went abroad. 'Don't eat meat, don't drink and don't have anything to do with women.'"

"He already eats," My father reminded them.

The second gentleman, more broad minded than the first, chided him. "If you make impossible conditions, how can you expect him to observe them?"

But the third, who was more worldly wise and sophisticated than the other two now spoke, "After all, when to are in Rome, you must do as the Romans," he philosophized. "It is no use telling him not to have anything to do with woman. I have heard that in England, woman serve in restaurants, work as shop assistants an as clerks in offices. He has to deal with them." Then he turned to me with his eternal wisdom, "No my boy, women are like fire; if you go too neat, you will get burnt. If you are too far away, you will feel cold. So, I would advice, 'thus far and no further.'"

I could not help retorting. "England is a very cold country and I believe you need a fire nine months in the year. " Needless to say, my remark was not appreciated.

But that did not stop them from giving further advice. Another gentleman who had probably been reading the more juicy sections of the British Sunday papers advised me to be particularly careful of landladies' daughters who always had an eye on the boarders from India, thinking that they were all Maharajas. "I believe English girls do not hesitate to go to court and sue you for breach of promise if they have any written evidence against you," he warned me. So, in my first letter to him from England, I thanked him for his advice and sent the following verse.

"You can say it with flowers,

You can say it with mink;

You can do what you like

But don't say it in ink.'

Only one person was at all optimistic about my trip and that was my father. 'He will be able to look after himself,' he said. "After all, he is going to study law."

That night, I did not make love to Meena. Neither of us felt like it. But we talked for a long time. "If only you had given me a child, I would not feel so lonely and so lost," she cried. Finally, before we went to sleep, she said, "I know I cannot expect fidelity from you..... No, don't protest," she said seriously. "I don't expect it also. But I want you to promise me one thing. Please don't do anything about which you will have to be ashamed later."

She had more wisdom in her little head than all those old foggies put together, I thought. I promised her and sealed it with a kiss before we went to sleep in the early hours of the morning.

If only I had remembered that advice at the time I met Sushila, I would not be in gaol now.

A study of English literature had given me an intimate knowledge of England – particularly London in certain aspect. But the London that I saw in 1946 was very different from what I had imagined it to be. It was gloomy, crowded and miserable. The faces of men were like grey masks and the women's were all made up. The buildings were sooty and the ravages of war very much in evidence. There was food rationing and life was still that of wartime Britain, minus the bombing. My desire for seeing the literary landmarks of London were soon exhausted and the predominate feeling left with me was loneliness. There were only a few Indians in London at that time, some students whose number was increasing, a few permanent residents, doctors and so on. The mass problems of colour had not yet arisen. If there was any colour bar, it was camouflaged in politeness rather than in open rudeness. But I had no friends at all, not a single one and the feeling was new to me.

Loneliness in a jungle is one thing. One expects it. One can adjust oneself to the company of birds and animals, the nocturnal voices that come in monotonous succession, the rustling of the breeze in the night and the general rhythm of the forest. But here, people were everywhere; one could not get away from them. During rush hours, there were no seats available in the underground trains, in crowded restaurants, in busses and trams and cinema houses. There were jostling men and women laughing and jostling. To be alone among them without privacy, to see their emotions exposed without being able to expose one's made me more lonely. It made me long for communication, for companionship, for affection, for home and for one's own dear ones. There was a sense of jealousy about other people's friendship, a longing after the unknown, and a feeling that perhaps, there was something lacking within myself.

What intrigued fascinated and at the same time disgusted me was the physical intimacy of young men and women. Even if I did not go looking of them, in the back seats of cinema houses, in the doorways of quiet alleys, in unfrequented corners in the parks, I came across couples in various stages of

passion and emotion. I averted my eyes and walked away, but I must confess they left a deep impression on my youthful mind. In spite of the experience I had had in India, my puritan upbringing had instilled into me that such activities should be confined to the privacy of one's bed room. I instinctively felt that they were wrong, but at the same time, I was honest enough to admit that if I had a similar opportunity, I would certainly take advantage of it. It was a peculiar situation, a moral dilemma intensified by a feeling of loneliness.

It took a few months perhaps, for this feeling of loneliness to go away. In the beginning, I was disgusted when I saw people holding their bodies close and dancing I did not think of it as a social pastime so much as a physical contact between a man and a woman. At first, I never attended these dances often patronized by my colleagues at the classes I attended. Then, I told myself there was no harm in watching. Very soon, I found myself taking lessons in dancing. This classical move east to west as I term it took anything from three to six months of one's arrival in those days. I had put my foot on slippery ice and there was no looking back.

A majority of students from India still stayed with Landladies in those days, a breed that seems to have completely disappeared after the fifties. I stayed in Camden Town with a widow in her early thirties. She had lost her husband during the war and having a small daughter was not able to go out to work, perhaps, she did not want to go out to work. In the beginning, we got on rather well together. Mrs. Barrow took it upon herself to improve what may be called my social education. She told me that I should clean my shoes regularly. "People in this country judge you by the shine on your shoes," she said.

"But I don't know how," I said truthfully.

"I will show you," and she gave me a lesson in shop cleaning.

"In India, we have servants to do such jobs," I commented.

"Well, you don't have here and if you want to be thought of as a gentleman, your shoes should always be shining."

"But I am not a gentleman; I am only an Indian" I said mischievously.

But she had sense of humour. "Don't be daft," she chided me. "You are as good as the best of them. It is just your shoes that are not good."

Mrs. Barrow was nothing if not persistent. Under her expert tuition and guidance, I gradually learnt to clean my shoes. I realised that this was the very first job requiring the use of hands that I had learnt to do.

Mrs. Barrow also took it upon herself to advise me about 'girls'. Having warned me about not having any 'goings on' in her respectable establishment, she felt that as a 'raw' student from India, I needed advice and guidance to keep me in the straight and narrow path. "I know in your own country, you don't mix freely with girls and marry the ones chosen by your parents," she started. I hadn't told her about my married state. "But here, it is different. It is a free for all. When you young men come

here, it is a great temptation to have girl friends like everyone else. But don't forget, sooner or later, you have to leave England. The girl is miserable to part from you and will it difficult to settle down and marry the girl of your parents' choice. Besides, complications might arise," she warned me darkly but did not bother to explain what the complications might be. "So, I say, leave the girls alone."

With her respectability, membership of the conservative club and the importance she attached to behavior, one would have expected her to be an embodiment of rectitude and blameless virtue. She was, except perhaps in one minor aspect. I discovered this quite accidentally one night when I returned late from the cinema and went into the kitchen for a glass of water. There she was, sprawled on one of the chairs with a couple of bottles of beer on the floor beside her and a glass on the table nearby.

She got up with an effort when she saw me. "Hello Raju, I thought you had gone to bed."

"I just came in for a drink of water," I said, feeling guilty that I had caught her like this. "I am going now."

"Please don't go; come and sit here," she pleaded. Her voice was thick. I obeyed somewhat reluctantly.

"Are you surprised to see me like this?" she asked.

"Well, yes."

"You are very young and innocent still," she said. "You see, this is the only relaxation I have, the only change from the dull, daily routine. I suppose I could go into the pubs and get picked up and have a 'good time', but I can't stand that sort of life. Much better to drink yourself to sleep at home than make an exhibition of yourself outside." When once the flood-gates of emotion were opened, she poured forth her life, about her late husband, about making ends meet, about the difficulty of bringing up a girl and keeping her weakness hidden from her. "Don't hold this against me Raju, "she kept saying, pointing to the empty bottles on the floor. "It is my only weakness and I need it to carry on."

I think her 'Weakness' made me like her more than all her airs of respectability. I assured her that I did not think any the worse of her. But as I got up to leave, she put her arms round me. "Oh, Raju!" You are so nice and I am so lonely and miserable!" she cried. "Love me a little Raju! Love me! Please!" she pleaded. All my resolutions went overboard as I kissed her and led her slowly upstairs.

The next morning, we were somewhat shy with each other. I still thought of her as Mrs. Barrow and called her by that name as usual.

"I think you can call Mabel now," she said. "At least when there is no one else."

"Of course Mabel," I said.

"I hope you don't think I do this sort of thing every day," she said. "But loneliness is a terrible thing. And to sleep in an empty bed for the rest of your life is a grim prospect. And you have been nice."

I fidgeted with my toast.

“Don’t worry, I will not make any demands on you,” she assured me. “Our relationship will be that of a landlady and lodger, except when I am lonely or you are hungry” she smiled at me. “When you finish your education, you are free to go home.” You are free to go home.”

“What will you do then”?

“I expect I will manage.”

I was grateful for her wisdom and common sense, and also for the pleasure she had given me. As my mother said before I got married, “A man should not have to go outside his house for his pleasures.”

Many of my leisure hours were spent in browsing around bookshops, particularly those that sold second – hand books. One often picked up a rare book or a first edition. I still have with me a number of books I bought at that time at bargain prices. In these shops, I came across a number of people who lived on the fringes of the literary world. They were what were known in those days as a Bohemian crowd. Many of them were unsuccessful writers or artists, making a living in various other occupations. We often used to get together in a pub in old Compton Street and talk endlessly about literature and life. We talked loftily about creativity and inspiration and not succumbing to the bitch goddess. The important thing was to be ‘Original’. We talked about ‘form’ and ‘imagery and new dimensions. Successful writers were discussed with a certain degree of condescension and were often dismissed as being part of the establishment.

There were of course many Indians among us. Naturally, I got to know them better. They had all come to England as students, most of them before the war. They had hoped to make good as writer, left their class rooms and got jogs during the war – which was easy. The odd poem or on article published by an unknown journal had encouraged them. They were all going to write a novel or a play that was going to revolutionize the literary world, but never really got down to it. Meanwhile, they were making a living as shop assistants or doing odd clerical jobs. They spoke nostalgically about India, were intensely patriotic. They were willing to do anything for their country except live there. But there was in this environment, a freedom that was unknown in India. There were no family ties, no obligations and no responsibilities no burden of tradition. Under the influence of my friends. I too began to write. A few poems were published in obscure journals that did not pay anything to its contributors, a few short stories and that was all. But it entitled me to become one of that literary community and enjoy the doubtful blessings of a pseudo-intellectual conversation and drink beer.

Looking back on my literary effort at this distance of time, I have come to the conclusion that a little talent, like a little knowledge, is a dangerous thing. People with no talent are aware of it from the very beginning. They know that they have to work hard for whatever they wish to achieve. Therefore, hard work becomes a second nature to them. But I have generally found that I could do whatever I wanted reasonably well with very little effort. I passed my examinations merely by listening to the teachers; became a reasonably good tennis player without exerting myself. My efforts at literary

composition were liked and appreciated. It was perhaps natural that I should assume that everything could be achieved with very little effort.

I did not realise until much later that for excellence in any field of worthwhile endeavour, concentration of effort and perseverance over a long period was essential. Sporadic efforts at intervals or between various other activities are not good enough. Except in those rare cases where talent amounting to genius is present and it comes bursting forth in spite of the individual, there is no alternative to hard and sustained effort. But by the time I realised this, youthful enthusiasm, idealism, freshness and courage had been replaced by a desire for an existing world.

After I had been in London for a year, I met Trude in one of the bookshops in Charing Cross road. She had come to England as a little girl from Nazi Germany and now, she was a naturalized British citizen. I asked her about the collected works of Bernard Shaw, a volume which was published as a limited edition before the war for the subscribers of the newspaper, the daily herald. She said they hadn't got it, but would make enquiries. When I called again a week later, she had the book for me. It must have been a lot of trouble, because, I had enquired about the book in a number of bookshops without success.

I thanked her profusely and invited her for a drink after she finished work. She accepted. What started as a drink on the first evening went on later to dinners, theatres etc. Within a month, I was seeing her at least two or three evenings a week. We had common tastes in literature endlessly, the books we both read. I lent her the cuttings of my published poems and short stories as well as a few unpublished ones. She was rapturous over them and told me I should write, write, write, without wasting my time. That was the only way to success, she told me.

Our friendship grew and blossomed into something more. For the first time, I knew that in a relationship of this nature, it was a greater pleasure to give rather than to receive. I knew all the usual clichés about love and had looked upon the whole idea with a certain degree of boredom and cynicism. But when it happened to me, it seemed fresh and unique and somehow different from all my preconceived notions. I was sure she felt the same way. We held hands and kissed and made jokes about love in a somewhat strained manner. She invited me to her flat I would not take the initiative in getting more intimate. I desired her most intensely, but every time I thought of her, the promise I had made to Meena came to my mind. My relationship with Mabel might also have helped me to restrain myself. No, I dared not hurt Trude.

And yet, I had not bothered about hurting Mabel. Though I could not define it, there was a fundamental difference between the two relationships. With Mabel, I did not feel guilty. I would not feel ashamed to leave her. We both knew that our relationship was transient. With Trude, I knew I would feel ashamed. Perhaps, the real difference was that I loved one and not the other.

Trude did her best to encourage me in every way, but she knew that there was some kind of a barrier. One day, she came out with it. "You say you are so fond of me yet, when it comes to the point, you stop. Why?" She asked.

“I do not want you to be disappointed later.”

I think she misunderstood me. “When two people are as fond of each as we are, there can be no disappointment. There can only be fulfillment, satisfaction.”

“You see Trude, I am married. I have a wife in India. So, I could never marry you. That is what I meant by disappointment.”

“I see,” She was silent for a while. Then she squeezed my hand. “I am glad you told me. Not many men – with a wife six thousand miles away – would have said so.”

“I did not want to have you under any false pretences. I would have been ashamed for the rest of my life.”

“Now, I know you truly love me,” She said.

The permissive society of the pill and the casual living together of young couples had not yet arrived in 1947. Both of us were still dominated by the pre-war values of morality and ethics. So, we continued as before, knowing we could not have each other, and yet unable to part.

My friendship with Trude was the beginning of the end as far as Mabel was concerned. She knew about it of course, because Trude used to ring me up sometimes. And when I returned late two or three nights a week, she started nagging me about it and asking the most intimate and vulgar questions and accusing me of being unfaithful. My assurance that there was nothing sexual in our relationship had no effect at all. Frankly, she did not believe me. After a couple of glasses of beer, she would wait for my arrival at nights and taunt me about just having left Trude’s bed. “I bet you can’t get it up for me because you have had it with her,” She would shout. And I couldn’t, not because I had slept with any one, but because I was disgusted with the vulgarity of it all. That of course confirmed her worst suspicions.

In the mornings, when she was sober, she would shed tears and plead with me not to see Trude again. Or, she would ask forgiveness for her previous night’s behavior, say she was lonely and miserable when I did not come back till late at night. Her moods became more and more unpredictable. Once she was particularly nice and loving without any recriminations and I responded. But when we were in bed making love, suddenly she said, “Are you thinking of her when you do it to me?” I went limp.

The situation became impossible and I decided to move to a different house. She begged and pleaded with me not to desert her, but I had made up my mind and left. Strangely enough, over for an occasional evening of fun. She never mentioned Trude again. I think it was living in her house and going out with another woman that she could not stand. At twenty five, a woman becomes richer by giving herself to a man she loves. But at thirty five, a woman feels insecure, particularly if she is a widow. She wants to maintain an illusion of youth and vitality and sex is not so much a matter of satisfying one’s appetite as satisfying one’s vanity and ego. So it was with Mabel I suppose.

It is surprising how often fate intervenes to change the course of one's life completely. After I had been in England for two years, I got a telegram from my mother:

'FATHER CRITICALLY ILL STOP START IMMEDIATELY STOP LOVE MOTHER'

Air services to India had just started and I took the first available flight. I just had one evening with Trude before I left. Perhaps, it as well that the goodbye was so sudden. There was no time for grief or tears. I did not see Mabel at all, but dropped her a note after I returned to India.

There is no equality in love. Generally, one partner always loses when the end comes. It is agonizing to be attached to a person, to have loved and grown into each other and then to be parted, not through death or rejection, but through compulsory separation. Only the more stupid and more insensitive of partners can fail to feel such a separation. The joy of a truly loving relationship becomes a dream and an illusion and in course of time, what is left is an ache, a pain and a longing for what is lost. In our relationship However, I think Trude and I both lost.

In my long life of nearly sixty years, my restraint with Trude was the only truly unselfish thing I have done.

From London, it took me three days to reach my village. I was just in time to light the funeral pyre. My mother was completely heart – broken. Her life had revolved round my father for a period of nearly thirty years and she did not know what would happen to her no that he was no more. Meena tried our tenants and farm workers. I was stunned more than anything else. My father had seemed so permanent, so full of life that it seemed impossible to be in a world without him. We had never been particularly fond of each other. He was harsh and ruthless in his punishments and as a boy, I was very frightened of him. Only during the last year or two before my departure to England did we get to a reasonably good working relationship. So, I did not shed tears as people expected me to do though I was badly shaken.

After the funeral obsequies were over on the thirteenth day, I started the job of taking over the management of the properties in the village. Things were in a mess. As the big land owner in the village, a lot of local people – not used to banking – had left money with him for safe keeping. A number of windows – who did not wear jewellery, had also deposited their jewels with him as they had no safes in their houses. They were using him as a bank as well as a safe deposit vault. There were no them all in his head. My mother knew some of them of course, but certainly not all. The first thing, I did was to make an inventory of the money as well as jewellery, check them where possible and return them to the rightful owners.

The strange thing was, they did not want them back. They merely wanted to ensure that I knew about and accepted responsibility for their safe keeping. It was then I had to tell them that I would not be living in the village and they could not get their things back when they wanted as I would not be there to deliver it to them. I also advised them to deposit them in a bank in the nearest town and nothing would happen to them.

My mother was greatly upset when heard that I was not going to live in the village. "What is no happen to me in my old age?" she cried. "It is your duty and Meena's to stay here look after me."

I told her that the new properties in the city, purchased during the war so cheaply, were far more valuable and I had to be there to collect monthly rents, attend to their maintenance and so on. She could easily manage the properties in the village as she knew everything about agriculture and I knew nothing. It would give her something to do and I would visit the village once a month to attend to anything that needed my presence. I also invited her to come and stay with us in the city for as long as she wanted."

"No, my home is here, in the village," she said. "The people depend on me. I can't neglect them and go away like you can. I feel needed here. No one will need me in the city I will be totally useless."

But then, she continued in a more bitter tone. "Of course you have lived in the city since you were fourteen. You have learnt the ways of the city people and you can't give them up. And now I suppose you have learnt the habits of while people on London. If I came and lived you in the city, you will only be ashamed of me. After all, what does it, matter what happens to a poor widow?"

She said many bitter things. I have generally found that when woman are upset, they tend to say more cruel things than men would under similar circumstances. I was upset by all this and there would have been a major quarrel, but Meena soothed my mother and said that if necessary, she would stay on in the village and look after her.

"No, your place is by your husband's side," said my mother. "Without you, he would go to the dogs sooner than ever. Don't you think I know my own son?"

The recriminations went on day after day, but finally, it was agreed that I would visit the village once a month and spend a few days and attend to matters which needed my decisions. I have noticed that middle – aged or elderly widows, with their humility, self – pity and a spurious helplessness are in fact very determined people. After she got over my father's death, my mother was really happy to exercise a certain degree of power in the village and be known as some one of consequence in her own right. Whenever I visited the village later, she told me proudly about the things that she had done to improve the farms and about the income she had got from selling various crops. She often used to say that she could manage perfectly well without my assistance!

But I knew that a large number of dry, arid acres depending solely on the vagaries of the monsoon were no use, that the new governments with their socialistic policies were likely to introduce land ceilings which would have meant surrendering a lot of land to the government. I explained all this to my mother. Where money was concerned, she was not sentimental at all and agreed with my suggestions. We disposed of quite a lot of property in the village and invested the money more profitably so that when land ceiling did come. I was not unduly affected.

So, Meena and I set up house in the city again. But this time, it was not in a crowded locality as when I was a student. I chose a small house with a nice garden in front in a quiet street and very near

the sea so that we generally had a cool breeze during the hot weather. I also bought a car and engaged a driver so that Meena could go out whenever she wanted. One was that during my two years' absence, Meena has learnt English. She had been taught a little of that language in her school days, but she had taken lessons from the school teacher, had worked hard at it and could now follow conversation though she was still too shy to speak. I was also pleased to find that Meena's clothes were more fashionable. There was also a subtle change in her hair style which made her appear more modern without however offending the tastes of people like my mother. She bought quite a few fashion magazines. Apart from learning about fashions, they also enabled her to improve her English.

When I expressed my happiness at all this, she retorted, "I thought I was going to be wife of a barrister. An eminent lawyer cannot have a country bumpkin for a wife, can he?"

In fact, she seriously suggested that I should return for a year to England and complete my studies. I thought of the idea rather wistfully. Thoughts of England brought back memories of Trude and I wondered what she was doing and how she was spending her leisure hours. We had decided not to write to each other. There was no point in prolonging the agony.

When you leave a place where you have been happy or emotionally excited and involved, you start counting the days as they recede from under your feet. Is it already one week, you ask yourself, though it seems a million miles away. Then, you calculate it in terms of hours; one week is only one hundred and sixty eight hours. To count it in hours somehow seems to make it shorter. Then, it is one month..... two months and so on. However, much one tries to hold on to it, other incidents, impressions, events keep crowding in and it is inevitably pushed to the background. And slowly, gradually, inexorably, the memory begins to fade. The faced become blurred and the entire life escapes from one's grasp. And you have nothing left except a vague feeling of discontent to replace the emotion and the involvement. So it was with me I suppose.

But from the verandah of my house, London seemed a long way off, a distant dream that was already beginning to fade and I did not want to revive old memories and old emotions. I was quite happy as I was.

Further, I got deeply involved in developing and improving all the properties my father had left me. Apart from selling away the vast low yielding and often useless acres in the village, I wanted to use those funds for developing the hundred acres we had purchased near the sea. The first thing I did was to engage an agricultural graduate. I was also making plans to plant coconuts, mangoes, lemons. I was also making arrangements to grow flowers on a large scale for the city market. The best architect in the city was engaged to design a house in the new fruit garden that I was developing. I was busy supervising the leveling of land, bringing in of fresh soil, selecting the best varieties of plans for planting, and so on. Meena was most helpful with her suggestions which were full of common sense. Her knowledge of agriculture was also much better than mine and she was able to take a lot of responsibility off my shoulders. With all this work before me, I felt I was really doing something useful, not just making money, but creating something worthwhile. Under these circumstances, to become a barrister, put up a board and wait for clients did not appear to be worthwhile objective.

I showed Meena the few poems and short stories I had published while in England. She was now able to read and appreciate them and was proud of me. She kept them along with that single poem I had written during the 'Quit India' days. 'You should write more,' she told me.

Gradually, we were growing closer together as a couple. I realised how much effort Meena had put in order to make herself 'worthy' of me in spite of the cruel way I had treated her when we were first married. For a girl from a backward village whose parents were uneducated and old fashioned and who had so few chances of coming across any modern ideas, I felt she had achieved a great deal. My heart went out to her and I was determined that she should be happy. With all the work to keep me busy and feeling as I did towards Meena, I rarely thought of other woman, though she probably knew that on one or two occasions, I had departed from the straight and narrow path. She did mind it so long a it was discreet and hinted as much at times. My love for her was not the blind and romantic passion I had felt for Rukku for a brief period, nor the mature and intellectual kind love I had felt for Trude. It was like a tender, slow – growing plant that almost withered at birth, but survived by some miracle. Now it was growing, putting out new shoots and gradually entwining us, getting stronger day by day. It was a love based on mutual trust and affection, on a willingness to sacrifice, at least on the part of Meena, on an identity of interest, on a desire to build a lasting relationship, on a desire to have children and family pride. I suppose in a successful marriage these are the things that endure. Yes, for a brief period of two years, I was as happy as man had a right to expect.

Therefore, the blow that fell was all the more cruel and unexpected.

One day Meena told me she would like to see her doctor.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked her anxiously.

"No," she seemed rather shy. "My period is two weeks late.

"Does those men.....?"

"Probably, but I want to make sure and take any precautions if necessary," she smiled.

When she returned from the doctor, her face was glowing. I knew without her saying anything that the doctor had confirmed her pregnancy.

I have always thought that pregnant women somehow become more beautiful, particularly in the early stages of pregnancy, before they become heavy and unwieldy. There is a glow of satisfaction on their face figure, a languor and suppleness in their movements. I suppose it is because they are fulfilling their fundamental biological function as women. Meena certainly blossomed. Her happiness was evident in everything she said and did.

I was more tender towards her, more solicitous her comfort. I did not want her to do any work, lift or carry anything and to rest as much as possible. "The doctor tells me I am perfectly healthy and normal. There is no need to worry or make a fuss," she told me.

I went out and bought her a necklace that she had had her eye on for sometime. She was happy to have it and said, "I think you should get a present also. After all, it was a joint effort. But I don't have any money of my own. Even my dowry has gone into your account. So, I can't get you anything."

"I will soon remedy that," I told her. My accountant was instructed to open a bank account in Meena's name with the equivalent of her dowry and to deposit a certain amount into that account every month. I presented her with a cheque book and a pass book. She immediately went out and spent almost the whole amount, buying me a pair of diamond cuff links.

We decided not to mention anything about it to my mother or to her parents for some more time.

It therefore came as an unpleasant surprise to me when Meena complained about stomach cramps one morning. I immediately got the doctor. She examined her and suggested that Meena should be moved into a nursing home where she could be under observation. "She may be heading for a miscarriage, and we should try and prevent it," said the doctor.

Two days later, Meena had miscarriage. The doctor could not understand it, for there was nothing that could have induced it, they said she also lost a lot of blood and consequently was very weak. Meena was naturally very upset and felt that she let me down. While I was also upset, I consoled her saying that we were both normal and healthy. When her health was restored, she could easily have a baby. We would take greater precautions to ensure that this was not repeated. The doctors too agreed with me and performed what was known as D & C before sending Meena home.

Meanwhile both my mother and Meena's had arrived. They blamed us for not letting them know earlier so that they could have come and looked after Meena and avoided all this. "There must always be some elderly ladies under such circumstances," My mother told me. "What do you young things know about having babies?" They made a fuss over Meena, gave their own concoctions to restore her health and strength. They had no belief in doctor or their medicines. But after about two weeks, Meena said she was perfectly all right and persuaded the two ladies to go home.

So, we resumed our usual life, a little more subdued. But after all, a miscarriage was not a major calamity, I assured Meena.

"I won't wear the necklace you bought me," Meena smiled ruefully. "I got it under false pretences. I will only wear it after I have had a baby."

"In that case, I won't wear the cuff links either," I told her.

"That is not right; it is not your fault that I lost the baby," she insisted.

But I did not wear the cuff links. I suppose I still have them, lying somewhere in my safe.

The doctors had advised us against another pregnancy for at least six months. So, we were very careful. It was therefore a cause of great concern when she complained about her admitted into the

hospital immediately. Various tests were done. X – Rays showed an internal growth which was probably the cause of the miscarriage which was not noticeable at that time but which had become larger. Further exploration indicated that it was malignant.

I was now to pass through the worst period of my life, three months of unbearable grief and mental agony. The first question I had to face was, should Meena be told? If not, how could I hide my own sorrow in her presence? But Meena saved us all that trouble. When I told she had a growth which had to be operated upon immediately, she said, “I suppose it is cancer.”

I did not have to reply. My face gave her the answer.

“You need not say anything. I understand,” she said.

Her own doctor who was present with me assured her that if the operation was performed immediately and was followed by radium therapy, there was a good chance for her to recover.

“Thank you doctor, I am sure you and your colleagues will do your best,” said Meena. Then she turned to me, “You will have to inform your mother as well as my parents before the operation. Otherwise, they will never forgive you. But don’t tell them what it is. Just say it is an operation and I will be all rights afterwards. They won’t be able to bear the pain like we can. They will upset the whole hospital.”

Was I in any way responsible for it, I wondered. Could it the result of that infection I gave her nearly ten years ago? My mind was plagued with doubt and guilt as well as grief. But the doctors assured me that had nothing to do with it. It was what they called a random occurrence, something that happened in one out of a hundred thousand cases.

After the operation, she recovered rather slowly. That was only to be expected, according to the doctors. They had to remove quite a lot of her inside in order to make sure that no affected portion was left behind. Even if she was all right, there would be no question of her having any children. After about two weeks, the stitches were removed, she was able to walk and the doctors were very pleased with her progress.

They even talked about sending her and she could come every day for the radium treatment. We even made plans for moving into the new house we had built on my hundred acre estate which was nearing completion.

But again, fate was cruel and the pains started again. In the beginning, the radium treatment gave relief, but its effect proved to be less and less. The dreadful disease was gaining which the treatment every day. There was a point beyond which the treatment could not be increased. The doctor had to resort to pain killing drugs in order to spare Meena from excessive suffering.

My mother and mother- in- law demanded to know what was happening, why Meena was not being sent home. From my expression, from the whispering of the nurses, they knew there was

something seriously wrong. Finally, I explained to my father -in-law what had happened and he was able to keep the ladies quiet.

Day after day, I sat silently and watched Meena suffer. Her serene face lost its composure; her body was wracked with pain and discomfort. She became a pale shadow of her former healthy, robust self. Her mind wandered between consciousness and drowsiness. In her lucid moments, I sat by her side and held much suffering." On another occasion, she whispered, "I am sorry I did not have that child I so much wanted. But it is not your fault; you your best." And she smiled one of her rare smiles. She still retained her sense of humour in spite of all her torment. "Please get married again," she told me on another occasion. "You need a good wife to keep you on the straight and narrow path."

"Meena! Meena! Don't talk like that. You will soon get better, "I said, thought my heart was crying.

"Cremate me in our new estate. I would like to sleep among the flowers," she asked me.

My mother and my parents-in-law realised the seriousness of the situations and took turns at keeping vigil by Meena's bed. My mother did her best to persuade me to go home and have some rest.

But I could not sleep or rest. I wondered why this had to happen to me. May be, to blame for many things, but why should Meena suffer for my mistakes? Why should her young, innocent life be cut off at such a tender age and why had she to pass through such agony in the process? What had she done to deserve it? What was the logic behind unmerited suffering? Perhaps, it was something either of us might have done in our previous births, for the Hindu balance sheet of destiny was not drawn up for a single life. All deeds – good and bad – had to be balanced and brought up to date.

In my sober moments, I wondered, was there a divine providence that ultimately rewarded Virtue and punisher crime as most religious books would have us believe? On objective scientific evidence, the answer seemed to be 'no'. Truth and virtue did not necessarily succeed. If they did, Meena would not be suffering like this. Even in the long run, falsehood and wickedness seemed to thrive and did not receive their just punishment. In spite of knowing all this, I prayed. Hoping against hope, I prayed that she should get well. And when I realised the futility of my prayer, I prayed at least that she might not suffer. But prayer with a specific objective in mind is never answered; I knew that. But perhaps, it made you feel better for having prayed.

The doctors assured me that she was not suffering. Thanks to the drugs were administering, her periods of lucidity were getting less and less. The question was whether the drugs would kill her before the dreaded disease did, for the dosage had to be increased or stronger drugs had to be given. I longed for her not to suffer, but I also wanted her to say a few words to me.

For hours together, I sat by her bed and held her hand in the hope that she might speak to me. Occasionally, she would open her eyes, see me and smile. But the smile was one of grief and resignation, not of happiness. Sometimes, she would try to speak a few words that were incoherent. Our two mothers stood on either side, watching us and shedding silent tears. Meena's father could not bear

it all. He sat further away with his head between his hands. Then, one morning, her eyes opened; there was a gentle pressure on my fingers and then she went limp. She died exactly six and a half months after she had told me she was pregnant. The ironies of life are only matched by its unpredictability.

Famous people are not necessarily great. Unfortunately, great people are not always famous, not even well-known. Meena was one such a great woman, comparable to any heroine in our mythology. But she died in obscurity – mourned only by very few near and dear ones.

She was cremated on my estate as she had asked. I collected her ashes on the third day and immersed them in the sea that was only a few hundred metres away. I did not perform any of the other ceremonies and my elders did not press me to do so. Yes, Meena now rests in a garden of roses, about a hundred metres from my new home that we had both planned and built for her, but which she had never occupied. Looking back on it all, I only hope she forgives me for all the transgressions I had committed in her home so near the rose garden, and particularly the last one.

For the last five months, I had held myself together by a sheer effort of will, not wanting to give way, not to let Meena down. Now the tension was broken and I went to pieces. Meena was like the reins of a horse; now that the reins were snapped, there was nothing to control the horse. I hit the bottle and went on a more or less continuous binge for a period of six months. Letters of condolence remained unanswered; any official letters were dealt with by my manager or accountant as best they could. My parents-in-law left after a decent interval, fully convinced that somehow I had been the cause of Meena's death. I did not see them go in spite of my mother's efforts to make me keep up appearances. She stayed to 'look after' me and to console me, but it was of no use.

In the few sober moments I had, she tried to speak to me about my future. I was only twenty eight years old she pointed out. I had most of my life ahead of me. I should think of the future. Meena was nice girl, a dutiful daughter-in-law, but I could not mourn her for ever. After a decent interval, I should think of getting married, have children.....

"Do not talk to me of marriage!" I should at her. "I do not want to become fond of another woman and see her suffer and die like that. I want no more ties, no more responsibilities, no more complications in my life."

One would have thought I hated Meena.

"Meena herself wanted you to get married again."

"She did not know what she was talking about."

Then, my mother tried line of attack. "If you go on like this, you will follow Meena very soon. Then what is to happen to me? What is going to happen to all your property?"

"It will mangle itself," I told her. "And don't worry; I won't die."

She did her best for about three months and failed. There was very little communication between us. I do not even remember exactly when I left the city and went back to the village.

I came out of it all a different man. There was a hard core of bitterness in my heart. All my feelings were coated with a thick layer of cynicism. I felt the world owed me something for having taken Meena away.

Dr. Jekyll had gone to sleep, like Rip van Winkle. Only Mr. Hyde was around.

The human mind is capable of suffering only so much. After that, either it overcomes its grief or cracks up under the weight of its own sorrow. I got over it, not slowly but suddenly. One morning, I became sober and started asking questions about my future. As my mother had pointed out, I was only twenty-eight. But I felt as if I had lived through ages. Maybe I was young in age, but old in experience.

The first thing I did was to take charge of my estate and my properties. My manager was good and honest, but by no means brilliant. I had a rose garden planted around Meena's grave which was now represented by a single marble slab, and just one word 'MEENA' chiseled on it. From now on, my life was divided into two halves –after Meena and before Meena. I visited my village and put things right with my mother. She shed tears about my life style and went on about marrying a nice girl and having a house full of children. This time I was more diplomatic. There was no point in upsetting her. I said as soon as I found a nice educated girl, I would marry. That made her happy.

Then, I began a life that was to last for twenty-eight years. In the early morning, I went to play tennis or golf. After bath and breakfast, I spent two to three hours with my manager and accountant and went over the problems and progress of my properties. Occasionally, I might meet my auditor or lawyer, if there were any important problems to solve. As one of the 'martyrs' in the 'Quit India' movement, I was well known in the ruling circles and people would drop in to see me and ask for recommendations and favours, particularly when Thirumalai was a minister. But I was scrupulous in observing political norms and rarely used my influence for anything but public good.

In the afternoons and evenings, I was free to enjoy a life of pleasure. The circumstances were all in my favour. My bereavement and grief seemed to have added a touch of quiet glamour to my life. When I wanted a woman, I did not go into the dark alleys of the city in search of a prostitute and pay so much a time. The society with which I associated was compact and microscopic, wealthy with a superficial veneer of westernisation. Occasionally, one came across an intellectual. But wealth and intellect seemed to go together all too rarely. In clubs, in the bars of five star hotels, even in coffee shops and lounges, it was possible to strike a sort of friendship with women led to something. There was the thrill of adventure in such a situation, and not the commercial negotiations of the back alley. In such places, women often in pairs came and waited, having a drink or a cup of coffee, hoping something interesting might turn up. They were not professionals in the true sense of the word. Many of them were on the look-out for excitement, a change from the dull routine of a monogamous existence. Many husbands use their wives as sleeping pills, a mild tranquilizer before they went off to sleep, like I myself used in the early days of our marriage. But the wives of the other men who had not had the same opportunities as myself were naturally frustrated. And if they got over the traditional inhibitions of an

Indian wife, they were on the look-out for an adventure. As someone said, the more under –developed a country, the more over developed are some of its women. Then, there were others, educated, cultured, middle-class women who wanted to lead a more glamorous life than their husbands could afford. They were the ‘daytime butterflies’ for they had to be home before their husbands got back from work.

Up till now, women had largely ignored me because I seemed to be happily married and Meena was with most of the time. But now, many women came and offered their sympathy and appraised me at the same time. The older women introduced me to their daughters. They knew I was young, presentable, popular in the ‘social set’ of the city, sophisticated and wealthy. But I was careful to keep away single girls. I did not want any matrimonial complications. As I told my mother soon after Meena’s death, I did not want to get myself involved in deep human relationships. They made demands on you, began to offer you love and affection, they demanded eternal fidelity and set right what they think is wrong with you. You found yourself loaded with endless responsibilities, advising or being advised by others, solving other people’s problems and worrying about what you had to do next.

On the other hand, I liked women. I loved their company. Fun and laughter attracted me. I was fond of going to parties. Sparring with women, subduing and ultimately conquering them was a game I enjoyed. And more than all, I was popular in a somewhat superficial way, which I liked. I had a friendly voice. My conversation – particularly with women had a touch of intimacy even when I said the most mundane things. I was always full of amusing stories, anecdotes and epigrams – which I often made up on the spur of the moment, but which I attributed to others. I was good at doing small favours, like buying flowers for ladies, offering drinks to their husbands, tipping generously in restaurants and giving lifts to people. It made me very popular. When men cheated at cards, I pretended not to notice. But when women did, I gave them a sly wink which made them somewhat anxious and excited at the same time. But I was cynical underneath, which was rarely noticeable, except when people got to know me very well.

In the early stages of my ‘career’, I exercised considerable discrimination in the choice of women. I always thought of them as being equivalent to Rukku, or Meena or one of the other women I had had in my early days. But as time went on, that did not seem very important. What started as a desire for variety, itself became monotony and a routine. Love, tenderness, trust, constancy, were words that had no relevance or meaning as far as I was concerned. I suppose I used those words as occasion demanded them and no more. For me, there were only two kinds of women, those who were desirable and those who were not. Desirability was on the basis of youth and good looks – not necessarily beautiful, but an ability to induce desire. I suppose some would call it being ‘sexy’. The rest were ignored as being undesirable. At one time, I even tried to work out a desirability index by giving marks for various characteristics and working out a composite factor. My education was not entirely wasted!

The other classification I made was on the basis of availability; those who were available and those who were not. In course of time, I became quite an expert on judging availability. No, I do not mean prostitutes, for they were always available. There were some married women, fond of their husbands and children, yet vaguely dissatisfied. They would probably be horrified at any suggestion of

unfaithfulness. But if there should be time, opportunity and an assurance of safety, they are the types who would fall for a man like me. In more sophisticated societies such as in Europe or the United States, at the first sign of mental restlessness, sex is the only thing women think of. But in India, where chastity is still considered a desirable quality in a woman, things are a little more difficult. But I learnt to understand the various moods of women the signs and signals and if an opportunity offered itself, I did not fail to take advantage of it. As some one said, I tried to make a pass at every conceivable opportunity and if I got a five percent return on my investment, I considered myself fortunate.

I also found that good, honest and reliable men were also dull. Perpetual honesty leads to eternal boredom and women were not interested in such men. If a woman says, 'he will make a good husband' it means that she is really not interested in him unless she is a mother with an eligible daughter. That is why rogues are so often lovable from the women's point of view. They pose a challenge to their reforming instincts. Women want to 'tame' such men into doing what they want. It gives them a feeling elation and success. It was no wonder that women generally found me interesting. There was always some harmless gossip about me which was exaggerated at every repetition. A little eccentricity, a slight departure from the normal and not too harmful a voice, if present in an individual, makes him interesting to women. Throughout history, women have always fallen for clever rogues, to the frustration of up right and honest men.

Sometimes, I used to wonder, did I have no respect for women? Did I think of them merely as objects of pleasure, to be used and discarded? After all, they were also human beings, with the same needs, desires and aspirations and ideals as men. Did they not have rights of their own? I knew all about women's lib and at a purely intellectual level, even agreed with it. But at the emotional, psychological level, I suppose I was basically a chauvinist. There is a world of difference between intellectual acceptance and emotional conviction. At one time, I too idealized womanhood as something purer and nobler than Man. But it was an abstract idea and did not refer to any individual woman I knew. My idea of such a woman was based on the Indian tradition. She would be young, attractive, sexy and would be willing to lay down her life for me, as many of the great heroines of the mythology had done for their divine spouses. I did not want much, did I? Needless to say, I never found such a woman and after a while, I settled for quantity rather than quality.

Of course, there are many men who are chauvinists but who love their wives and are monogamous, who are genuinely fond of their sisters, mother and daughters. Male chauvinism does not necessarily mean a lack of respect or affection for the opposite sex. It is merely an attitude towards the relationship between the two sexes. Therefore, my problem was not chauvinism, but something much deeper.

I also used to keep a list of the women I had 'conquered'. Of course, I could not keep their names and addresses and did not even remember the faces of some of them – except a few outstanding ones who had impressed me in some way. They were kept in the form of a code. I seemed to have a passion for statistics of this nature in the same way as a cricketer keeps a record of the number of centuries he had scored or the wickets he took in first class matches. Unlike a cricketer's my statistics would not be published of course, but I had great satisfaction in going over them in my leisure moments.

To me, it represented a kind of achievement, an assertion of my masculinity. I wondered how many men would have reached my record in relations to the number of women. Unfortunately, I had no way of knowing it since it is not published in the Guinness' Book of records!

Having read a number of books on psychology, I used to wonder whether this excessive preoccupation with sex was due to any abnormality on my part. Did I suffer any inferiority complex which compelled me to assert myself at every opportunity? Was I a nymphomaniac? But many women – not professionals who will compliment you on your prowess in any case, but experienced amateurs who had no axe to grind – had assured me that I was perfectly normal in every way. So, I gave up worrying about it and indulged in enjoying myself as possible.

Only once, a woman with great discrimination in the choice of her lovers and considerable intelligence discussed it with me with great frankness and a considerable degree of understanding. We were in bed having a drink and chatting after our love making. It was really not a time for serious conversation. "You are good in bed," she said after we had been together a few times. "You know all the tricks of how please a woman. But one had a feeling that you are not real, that you are playing a part, to prove something to yourself. There is something missing. But I just can't put my finger on it."

This was quite true I suppose. Often, while I was enjoying with a woman, I was at the same time watching myself, as if I was sitting on a chair on the other side of the bed. Nevertheless, I was rather hurt, for I had liked her much better than the average run of women I usually came across. "But what is it?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she mused. I think she was honestly trying hard to analyse and understand her own feelings and reactions. "I don't know; it is nothing physical. It must be something emotional or psychological, a feeling that one has missed out on something."

I realised I had exactly the same feeling, not only with this woman, but with all others as well. But she continued, "I am fond of you; I would like our friendship to continue, to grow and develop into something permanent and lasting; something that is valuable that we can both share and look back on with pleasure and pride. But I have a feeling that you may see me, maybe a few more times and then drop me. That's it!" She brightened. "I think it is because you are incapable of trust, tenderness, and lasting love. Maybe it is not your fault. Perhaps, you have been badly hurt, or you are afraid of a close relationship. It is just that you don't have it in you. To you, a woman is a cunt and nothing more."

I didn't like her vulgarity. "I am fond of you, you know," I said by way of defence.

"You know, there are many men who go after other women," having started, she seemed unable to stop. "It is nothing unusual. They have an affair and it comes to an end either because one of the partners has to leave town or loses interest and they go back to their respective spouses, if anything, more loving and affectionate than before. Or, some men go after prostitutes for a change from the monotony of monogamy. But they all love their mothers, wives and daughters. But you have nothing; no one. The only thing that is permanent and constant about you is change and variety. That is what is difficult to understand."

“It is just that I have never found anyone who really attracted me enough to fall in love,” I replied.

“I know what it is!” she suddenly snapped her fingers. “You are downright selfish! Even when you please me, I have a feeling that you do it not so much to please me as to prove your ability. That is all you are interested in. yourself! And now, I suppose you will throw me out and never see me again, because I have unmasked you.”

She was quite right. I did not see her again.

About ten years after Meena died, my mother passed away. She would not come to the city for treatment and I had to be content with the treatment of the local doctors. I could not leave her when she was seriously ill and after she died, I had to stay on, not only to perform the various ceremonies, but also to make arrangements about the farms, our house and so on. It was a melancholy task. I had become a stranger to the people there and had wandered far away from my moorings. But my roots were very deep. So long as my mother was there, I felt I still belonged there, that my nostalgia was in safe keeping. But now, I knew I had no place there and yet, to pull my roots, to wind up everything and come away was heart –rending.

So, that was my life for nearly thirty years, with minor variations. There was only one incident that brought me into limelight, but that needs a separate to itself.

It happened about fifteen years after I had lost Meena.

I had Subbiah for some time. We were not particularly friendly, but we moved in the same social circles and often came across each other at parties. We also played cards together, sometimes in my house and sometimes in his or other people’s houses. I was therefore not surprised when he invited me to his farm house in his village for a weekend of cards with some other friends.

He had a friend by the name of yesoda. No one knew quite what her status in his household was. Was she his wife, house keeper or friend? She was very sociable and had made eyes at me whenever I had met her. But she never came to the club alone and never left subbiah’s side when she came with him. So, I had no opportunity of talking to her alone. But there were of course lots of comments among the men folk about the couple. In the society in which I spent my time, everyone was on a first name basis and she was known as ‘Yes’ for Yesoda.

“She is a ‘yes’ woman,” quipped one of my friends one day.” she never says no’ to anyone.”

“You are not far wrong,” another commented.

With this kind of background, I was looking forward to the week – end; you never knew what kind of cards would turn up under such circumstances.

I had an enjoyable week – end. Not only did I win at cards, but was also able to persuade yesoda to meet me when we returned to the city. When we did meet a few weeks later, she complained bitterly about Subbiah's meanness. "He has no idea how to please a woman," she said.

About a week after this, I received another invitation from Subbiah. I assumed that the usual crowd would be gathering. However, when I got there on Friday evening, there was no one else.

"Where are the others?" I enquired.

"They must be late," replied Subbiah. "You go up and have a shower and change while I telephone them. Then, let's have a drink."

When I came down, Subbiah was not there. But Yesoda was not Yesoda was. "He knows about us," She announced.

"How?"

"He must have suspected something; may be, he overheard us. When I returned, he forced me to confess."

I cursed myself for being such a fool as to be caught by these two crooks. The fact that there was no one else was also extremely suspicious. There was nothing for it but to brazen it out, I decided.

Subbiah came in. "Yesoda, pour us both some drinks; you know what we both like," he said as he sat down on the sofa. "You might as well make your self useful while you are still here."

"What happened to the other? Aren't they coming?" I asked.

Yesoda brought the drinks, "They seem to have been unavoidably detained," said Subbiah as he sipped his drink.

I decided to take the initiative. "You didn't really invite anyone else, did you?"

"How clever of to have found that out! As a matter of fact, I didn't. I wanted to have a private chat with you." Then, he turned to Yesoda. "Come and join us my dear. You might as well hear this, since it concerns you also."

She came and sat with us.

"Yesoda tells me you have seduced her," He began. "With all your 'Charm' and 'good looks', you caught her in a moment of weakness and seduced her." He emphasised the word 'seduced'. "This has put us both in an agonizing situation. I can't keep a woman who has been unfaithful to me; on the other hand, I can't throw her out on the streets, to be devoured by unscrupulous wolves like you. Therefore, you should pay a suitable compensation for both of us."

“Compensation is a purely legal matter,” I said. “Your lawyer can discuss it with mine and they can come to some reasonable arrangement. Or, you can go to court against me for alienating your wife’s affections, that is, if she is your wife.”

He ignored the implied insult. “There is no need to be sarcastic my dear chap, “he remarked. “We don’t want your unsullied reputation to be dragged through the mire of court proceedings, with all the attendant publicity, do we? Further you have not alienated her affections. She still loves me. Isn’t that so, Yesoda?”

“Of course! She murmured.

“There you are!” he spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. “It is just that you have taken advantage of a momentary weakness on her part. Don’t you think you should pay some compensation for your..... dastardly behavior.”

“To Yesoda, Yes; but why to you? What have you done to earn it?”

“You have humiliated me! He shouted. “Don’t forget, you are under my control here, in this house!”

“So, it is blackmail, is it?”

“No, it is not blackmail! It is just a private arrangement between us for the physical and mental hurt you have caused us both.”

“If it is not blackmail, then let me go back and we will discuss it with our lawyers.”

“I hope you realise you are in no position to dictate terms, “he said. There was an ugly grin on his face. “You are completely in my power and you will do exactly what I say.”

“I was wrong. It is not blackmail; it is extortion, a much greater offence!” I drained my drink and stood up. “Let me see how you are going to stop me,” and I walked to the door.

Two hefty men came suddenly from nowhere and held me on either side. Subbiah produced a revolver at the same time. While I was being tied with ropes, Yesoda quietly left the room.

They pushed me back into a chair. “Don’t make me use force Raju,” Subbiah spoke almost affectionately. “Let us not have any violence among friends. For your information, your car has been immobilized; your bed room has bars on the windows and the door will be locked out side for the night. And these two chaps will stand guard for good measure. So, do not think of escaping; you might easily have an accident.

I knew then that the situation was hopeless. “All right, what do you want me to do? I asked.

“First, if you promise to behave yourself, I shall have you untied. Second, I want you to ring up your bank manager at his residence,” Subbiah spoke calmly. “Here is the telephone number. Tell him that this is an emergency and you need one hundred thousand rupees in cash immediately. Tell him to

get the cash first thing in the morning and come to this address without delay. I know he will do it to oblige you, because apart from being a good customer, you are also his friend.”

I was untied. I spoke to the bank manager and after some hesitation, he agreed to do what I said.

After the ‘business’ was over, the social niceties were resumed. Yesoda came in with two more drinks and Subbiah ordered dinner to be served in fifteen minutes.

The bank manager arrived at twelve noon the next day. He was a little perplexed but handed over the cash to me in Subbiah’s presence.

“I hope you have made a note of the numbers,” I asked the banker.

“Yes Mr.Raju, I have the number.”

“There is no need for all that, “said Subbiah. “I shall give you a receipt for the amount.”

“But I want a receipt from Yesoda also,” I demanded. “After all, the money is for both of you.”

In the presence of the bank manger, Subbiah did not want to argue. But before he could reply, Yesoda, herself volunteered. “Yes, I will also sign it.”

“You want to make sure of your share,” I thought.

So, the receipt was signed by them both and was marked ironically enough ‘for services rendered’.

As we left Subbiah’s house after lunch, I asked the bank manager to travel with me, as I had no driver. On the way to the city, I explained to him what had happened.

‘Please go to the police, “He pleaded. “There have been one or two other cases lie regarding the same gentleman, about which I had heard from bankers, but this is the first time that the manager of the bank has been summoned to help in the transaction.”

So, we drove straight to the office of the Commissioner of police. Fortunately, he was known to us both. A case was registered and Subbiah was arrested in the course of the next few days.

Needless to say, the case made headlines. For the first time, my photograph appeared in the papers. Evidently, Subbiah and Yesoda had done this before, but the men concerned were afraid of a scandal, afraid of their wives or families and therefore swallowed their pride and kept quiet about it. That had made the couple bolder, and careless. Subbiah never imagined for a moment that I would go to the police.

But strangely enough, what sent him to gaol was Yesoda’s evidence. He had not given her, her share of the money, so she came into the court and spilled the beans. She also mentioned the names of people who had been their victims and they were all splashed in the papers. For about six months or so,

it was the talk of the city. When I went into public places, people pointer me out to each other and whispered, of just stared at me. For a little while, I enjoyed the doubtful distinction of being notorious.

Subbiah was convicted and sent to goal for five years. No one seemed to know what happened to Yesoda.

I had always had a gnawing feeling that I was wasting my life. After this unsavoury incident, that feeling increased. But unfortunately, such thoughts were never strong enough to make me change my way of living. Occasional advice from Thirumalai was ignored. He even offered to find me a suitable job that would be socially meaningful. But I refused. In rare moments of introspection however, I did ask myself, what was I trying to prove by my sexual diversions? That I was better than anyone else? Was it a biological or a psychological need? Frankly, I did not know. And after a time, such feelings left me.

Chapter Five

There were of course other reasons why I did what I did what I did apart from simple lust list and a desire for revenge because she had called me an “uncivilized brute’. At fifty six, I was somewhat jaded with normal sex. I had had every kind of experience from the innocence and tenderness of first love to the sexual acrobatics of Kama sutra. But they had all been with women who were willing, even eager, either for sex or for money, often for both. There was nothing new, nothing original to whet my failing appetite. It was always the same; the variations had all become routine. The same false words of endearment, the smiles and kisses that meant nothing, and the final words of parting, even tears, without ever meaning to see each other again. But what was it like to have an unwilling woman? To master her, subdue her, bend to my will; would that not be a new experience?

There is perhaps another aspect to which also I should refer. In the early stages of my ‘career’ it did not bother me at all, but later on, when I became quite ‘adept’ and the women became more and more anonymous, I felt a slight degree of disappointment after each affair. It was very gradual, almost unnoticeable at first, but as the years rolled on, I began to feel it. It was as if I had lost a hundred rupees and found fifty in their place. In the beginning, I thought it was the fault of the women. But slowly, I realised it was something within myself some power that drove towards endless variety in any way satisfying me, for if I had been satisfied, I would have ceased my quest, I was eternally searching for something I could not find. Each time I hoped to find it and each time I was disappointed. I thought that perhaps, it was not finding that elusive satisfaction that was the end, but the search itself. Unfortunately, the body is not always equal to the demands of the spirit. Physical orgasm can tire you out. But a psychological quest that is never ending gives you no rest.

If all this sounds boring or tedious, I am sorry. But I want to ensure that my mental state is fully understood and appreciated, a mental state that drove an educated, cultured and civilized man to rape. This increasing disappointment in sexual relations was making me somewhat desperate. I began to wonder, what was it like to have sex with an unwilling woman? Would it satisfy my eternal longing? At least, would it give me a new thrill? A deeper experience? It was a question to which I did not have an answer. Only a trial; an experiment would give me the answer. The idea had been in the back of my mind for some time, slowly evolving itself into a decision. But it was not pursued because of a urgency as well as a lack of opportunity.

I was fifty six. I considered myself healthy and vigorous. My hair was streaked with streaked with grey which added a touch of distinction to my good looks. But my inner, private life was getting more and more complicated and frustrating. I was beginning to lose confidence in myself, in my powers as a man. It was becoming more and more difficult to reach an orgasm. While this increased my desperation, I was also becoming acutely aware that in a few years time, I would have nothing but memories to sustain me, for my physical powers would have completely let me down.

I went to a doctor friend of mine and explained my problem. He knew my life style and my background to some extent. He examined me and told me I was completely normal and quite capable of sexual activity for some year to come. "Physically, you are O.K" he said. "You should be good for another ten years at least. But your problem may be psychological. Why don't consult a psychiatrist? If you like, I will introduce you to a friend of mine."

I thanked him and left.

Should I see a psychiatrist? Frankly, I was afraid of what he might discover. I also felt it was unnecessary. Looking back on it, I now wonder, what was I afraid of? That he might lay bare my innermost thoughts, feelings and inhibitions, including a e desire for rape? If so, he would certainly dissuade me from committing it. I was already planning it in my mind though I told myself that when it came to the point, I would probably not go through with it. Physical illness is easy to tackle; there is pain or discomfort, and in serious cases, the fear of death. But there was nothing like that here. As far as the outside world was concerned, I was perfectly normal, popular and sociable, with no worries of any sort. Mental illness – even serious cases of maladjustment – is considered an abnormality. India is not like the United States where going regularly to a psychiatrist is a sort of status symbol, indicating the level of one's intellectual sophistication. I could not get up enough courage to face one. And I told myself that things would right themselves after some time.

From that moment on, the day was cast; rape became inevitable. The motive had grown until it became a compulsion. I was no longer a person, moved by logical reasoning, influenced by a sense of right and wrong, restrained by social taboos or conscience. I was in the grip of a cold and dreadful fear that if I did not do it, all would be lost, my needs and desire destroyed, my manhood castrated. Life thereafter would not be worth living. It became a sort of mania over which I had lost control. I was dragged along by a strong current of dread and passion, struggling, helpless..... Ready to explode. And Sushila put a match to it by calling me an uncivilized brute.

It may be asked, did I not have a fear of the consequences? Of public condemnation and contempt? Was I not afraid of going to prison? Of course, I had thought over these risks a thousand times. But somehow, I thought I would be immune. Which decent family girl in her senses would go and complain to the police and invite unsavoury publicity? She would rather pocket her pride and shame in the innermost recess of her heart. She might suffer in silence and after a time, even the scar on her heart would disappear and the whole thing would become a vague, unpleasant and fading memory. No, the fear of the consequences did not bother me unduly.

And so, I come to the fateful day. However much it might hurt me, I shall have to relate it in all its callousness, cruelty and tragedy.

Between that first heart – rending experience with Rukku and my last with Sushila, it was exactly forty years to the day. I chose that date for sentimental reasons, as a sort of celebration of victory, a day of remembrance of that first occasion. As I grew older, I seemed to think more and more of old times with nostalgia and sentiment. It was a way of living in the past I suppose, of relating myself to my youth exploits. From being a simpleton of sixteen, I had become a man of the world with considerable

knowledge and experience, but perhaps little wisdom. My entire experience seems to have a long preparation for this final act.

If they had not come to the beach on that day, my plans would have gone astray, the anniversary as well as the psychological moment, would have gone, and perhaps Sushila and I would not have been tied together by cruel destiny. I might have changed my mind later on. But as luck would have it – was it luck, I wonder – they were there at the usual time. From then on, events started moving. Even I could not have stopped it.

Usually, one could set one's watch by their arrival and departure at the beach. Sushila and her husband were so punctual. But that evening, they were ten minutes late, leaving the beach. Perhaps, he had persuaded her at last to have a little fun in the open air. Darkness as well as loneliness were essential for such a purpose. So they were, for my purpose also.

As they went behind a boat, they were attacked by two men. Sushila tried to scream, but was quickly gagged and blind folded. And the husband with a twisted leg was no match for a man with a knife. He too was quickly bound and gagged and left on the beach. I had given strict instructions that under no circumstances should he be harmed in any way. On the other hand, I did not want him to go the police about the disappearance of his wife. The night was warm and it would not be too cold for him on the beach. No one would find him till morning for he was more than a hundred from the road. By the time some one found hi and released him, Sushila would be back, none worse for wear.

I expected them to be at my house by eight p.m. They were actually ten minutes late. Everything had been calculated to the minute. Sushila was taken upstairs. "Did everything go according to plan?" I enquired.

"No problems sir," said one of the men.

"Alright, have some food and wait around," I said.

I poured myself a stiff whiskey and went upstairs to face my destiny.

She was crouching on the bed, her hands tied behind her back, her eyes bandaged and mouth gagged. I released her from all these restraints. She stared at me like a hunted deer, wiped her face and eyes with the end of her sari.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Why have you brought me here?" this was the first time I had seen her in a good light and fairly close to. She was even more beautiful and 'sexy than I had thought. I could sense fear and anxiety in her voice. But there was also an undertone of challenge.

"If you are expecting to make any money out of kidnapping me, you are mistaken. We are not wealthy people."

I sat in a chair and sipped my drink. "Money is not my object," I replied.

She looked around the room; saw the air conditioner working, the television set, the quality of the furniture.

“Yes I can see you don’t need money,” she said. “But don’t you know that kidnapping a woman is a serious offence? You can go to ten years.”

“I thought you were a school teacher; I did not know you were a lawyer as well.”

She stared at me. “You obviously know me and my family. Then, why have you done this? She cried. “Is it for revenge? But we have never harmed anyone! Is it something my husband has done in his office?”

I took another sip of my drink and lit a cigarette. I did not speak.

“What is it? Tell me!” she stood up. I could sense desperation in her voice. “Whatever it is, is can be put right, without scandal, without publicity. Just tell me what it is.”

I still did not speak, but watched her with fascination. Fear and anxiety had given her greater animation. Her serene face had acquired greater vivacity.

“I was frightened because I thought a couple of ruffians had kidnapped me. But you seem like a gentleman, educated and well to do. I even see Mahatma Gandhi’s Autobiography in your book self,” she picked up the book. “You must have a standing in society, a reputation. Why do you want to go and kidnap a decent family woman?”

“Because, I am an uncivilized brute.”

“What?”

“You said so yourself, remember?”

Her face was quizzical; worried. She was trying hard to remember. She looked at me more closely.

“Not you!” she cried out.

“Yes, your obedient servant, the uncivilized brute, who happened to cross your path.”

She burst out laughing. If she was acting, she was certainly doing a good job. Was she really amused or was she trying to bluff her way out of a difficult situation?

“Surely, you don’t hold that hasty, unthinking remark, uttered in a moment of anger, against me after all this time, do you? Are you that sensitive? Alright, I am extremely sorry for what I said. I apologise. Now, we can part as friends; how’s that?”

I wondered if she knew what was coming to her. Perhaps she did, from the very beginning and was trying to put on a brave front, for I could see panic in her eyes, though her words never betrayed it.

“An insult is not wiped out that easily, by a more apology,” I said smiling.

She became angry. Her eyes flashed. “What do you want me to do? Fall at your feet and beg forgiveness? What were you doing there anyway? Watching a decent, family change her clothes after a holy dip in the sea? Aren’t you ashamed of your own behavior?”

She was taking the war into the enemy’s camp, putting me on the defensive. She was a woman worth subduing.

“Trying to take a closer look at the beauty of your curves; I am a connoisuer of the female form,” I remarked.

“I might have known,” She cried. “I have had other men try to do the same. My body is my curse.”

“When you were a school teacher I suppose. But don’t you realise, your body can be your salvation also.”

She became quiet. There were tears in her eyes.

“Anyhow, why did you go and marry a man with a twisted leg?”

“That is more of your business! She shouted at me.

“I suppose your father couldn’t afford a big enough dowry for a normal man. And to remain a single girl is a humiliation for the family.”

She broke down. “Why do you humiliate me? What have I done to you that you torment me so? Alright, I will tell you. Yes, my father is poor; he couldn’t afford a big dowry. There are other daughter for whom he has to provide. All he could afford was a son-in-law with a twisted leg. At least, he hasn’t got a twisted mind like you! But my husband is a good man, provides for me protects me.....”

“He didn’t protect you this evening, did he?”

“That is because you employed your goonda to do your dirty work for you!” she shouted her tears.

A human relationship, whether it is for two years or for a mere two hours, is never static. It is constantly changing and shifting. Every mood, the slightest inflection of the voice, each single gesture, changes that relationship. Our relationship was changing too and every change was reflected in her eyes. It was like a game of cat and mouse and I an ashamed to say I was enjoying it.

Suddenly, she turned round and fell at my feet. “Please let me go,” she pleaded. “I shall pray to all the gods for your salvation; pray for you every day of my life!”

Perhaps, that was when she realised what my true intentions were. It may be that the game of cat and mouse had exhausted her. I was sitting in a chair. She clutched at my knees. "Please! Please! Send me away," she wailed.

Even that innocent, simple physical contact inflamed me. I stood up, raised her to her feet and pressed her hard against the length of my body.

"Oh no! No" she cried as she struggled to free herself.

There were moments during this conversation though my own doubts and anxieties regarding my abilities though I never showed it. I had failed so often recently. But I need not have worried. She was different from all the others. There was no artificiality about her; no plucked and penciled eyebrows permanently raised, no make up. To her it was not a game. She was simple, pure and innocent. In some ways, she reminded me of Meena, but far more beautiful, more provocative. She smelt of jasmine flowers which she wore in her hair. The gentleness of the breeze, the scent of flowers, the romance of the moonlight, the sweetness of honey the intoxication of wine had all been combined to make her form and figure. Why hadn't I met her thirty years earlier?

"Don't struggle my dear," I spoke gently. "I don't want to have to use force or hurt you in any way. I promise you, you will enjoy it. At least, I don't have a twisted leg." And I moved her slowly to the bed.

"Don't throw that humiliation in my face!" she shouted as she succeeded in pushing me away.

But I could afford to take my time, savour the occasion in all its excitement and sweetness. I wanted her to get used to the idea. I went back to my chair, took another sip of my drink and returned to the attack. In such cases, what matters is not so much physical dominance as psychological mastery. It is only men who rush things who get their faces scratched. I was well on the way to achieving such mastery.

She stood in the corner, her hands folded in front of her, trying to make herself look as small as possible and to protect herself from danger. I went to her and stroked her cheek. "Forgive me Sushila," I said. "I like you so much."

"Go away!" and she violently thrust my hand from her cheek. "Have you no wife, mother, sister? Would you like them to be treated like this?"

"What you need is a real man. You are a girl of spirit; and you are made for love, and I will give it to you."

"You beast! You will pay for this! Every one of my tear drops will turn into a monster to torment you!"

I ignored what she said and spoke soothing, gentle words, words of love and romance, of the delights of the flesh and of our being made for each other. I stroked her gently, moved her slowly to the

bed, undid her blouse and played with her breasts. She struggled a little at first, but the fight had gone out of her.

As I got top of her, she cried, "Please listen to me for one moment before you do anything. Please!"

"What is it now?" I asked without letting go of my grip. My passion was getting the better of me.

"If you have to do bestial thing, please do not violate me. I have heard it said that people like you, men who do not respect women..... they like all sorts of unusual things..... so, if you like.... I will do anything. But I beg you, do not put it there!"

"Why? Is it so sacred, a temple that an untouchable can't enter? Is it?" I thought of kuppam's analogy and it made me laugh.

"Have you no respect for anything, not even for such holy things as temples that you compare your hideous act to entering a temple? And laugh about it too! But please, please, I beg you, don't do it!"

"I am one of your blasted perverts my dear. May be your husband is; I like to do as god intended it."

After that she did not speak; did not even struggle. Just moaned and silent tears flowed down her cheeks in an unending stream. I was not brutal; I did not rush or hurry. My penetration was almost unnoticed. I was gentle and slow and caressing. In spite of her suffering, I knew she had an orgasm. It is one of the things I can always tell. For the first time in years, I had a sense of fulfilment. How many people who commit rape are able to bring their victims to an orgasm, I wondered. That too must be some kind of a record.

"You enjoyed it didn't you, in spite of your virtuous scruples?" I laughed.

"You are a poisonous snake, to cheat me and then to throw it in my face! If I had a knife I could kill you!" she hissed. I think made her hate me all the more, that she had been made to enjoy it against her will.

"Anyhow, you can now relax; it is all over. Would you like something to eat? Or, perhaps a cup of coffee?"

"You have made me permanently unclean," she cried. She was sitting on the floor and refused the offer of a chair. "I am eternally impure. Not all the waters of the holy Ganges can wash away my sins. No penance can obliterate what has happened. Why didn't you kill me while you were at it? Then all my troubles would be over."

"Because, I am not a murderer," I smiled.

“No, you are not a murderer you are much worse.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic,” I tried to reason with her. “When you get back, just tell your husband that you were abducted by some ruffians, but before anything happened, they had an argument and you managed to escape and reach the main road and someone gave you a lift into the city. Your husband would want to believe it even if he thought the contrary. Your friends and relations would sympathise with you on your unhappy experience and congratulate you on your providential escape. There will be no scandal or publicity and after a few days, you will forget the whole thing and resume normal life. Who knows, we might even come across each other on the beach occasionally.”

“Have you no pity in your heart?” she cried. “How can I live with a lie for the rest of my life? Be false to my husband and to my unborn children? How can I carry such a heavy burden?”

I went and got her a cup of coffee. Strangely enough, she accepted it. She asked if she could use the bathroom. There was no way in which she could harm herself there, so I let her go, she was quiet and subdued when she came back. She was not even crying. She seemed to have come to a decision.

We were both quiet for some time. Then, she turned to me. “Look, you have this terrible, unmentionable thing to tell me. I cannot go back to my husband with a falsehood. And if I tell the truth, he will discard me. People will not consider me an innocent victim. I will be a subject of gossip, rumour, slander. And I will be unable to contradict it. There will be no place for me in decent society. I will have no life. So, please keep me here.”

“What?”

“Keep me here. You don’t have a wife. I will be anything you like, your cook, your washerwoman, your slave. After the horror of tonight, that is the least you can do. I beg you; please don’t throw me out, now that you have used me.”

Now that my passion was fulfilled, I could think a little more clearly. For the first time, I felt a feeling of pity for her. To her, I realised it was not a game. But it was too late. She would be alright after a few days, I told myself, I did not want an emotional involvement. A permanent liaison would not suit me. No ties, no responsibilities that was my code.

“What let you stay here and be sued by your husband for a million rupees for the alienation of his wife’s affections?”

“That won’t happen,” she assured me. “He would not want the publicity. If there is one thing my husband is afraid of, it is scandal. He will forget the whole thing and after a decent interval, look for another wife.”

“With another fat dowry?”

“How can you talk like that after the cruel way you have treated him? But if he should go to court, I am willing to swear that I came to you of my own accord, because of the cruelties of my husband.”

‘She was loyal to her man to the bitter end. It was the kind of devotion I had rarely come across and it affected me greatly. I knew she would loyal to me. I was almost tempted to keep her.

“No my dear; it won’t work. I am a lone wolf.”

“You told me a little while ago, that my body could be my salvation. You have destroyed my self – respect, killed my soul. But take my body; do what you like with it. Only don’t send me back into the world. I can’t face it.”

I was silent.

“I don’t mind you having other women. Now more than ever, I need the protection of a man. Otherwise, I cannot live. Please! Please!” she begged again and again and clutched at my feet in supplication.

I looked at my watch. She had been in my house for more than two hours. I thought it best to sent her away before she succeeded in persuading me to keep her.

“Listen to me carefully,” I said slowly, seriously, measuring my words. “Your husband is still on the beach where you left him. He has been tied up but otherwise unharmed. I will see that you join him there. Tell him the story I told you, release him and both of you can make your way home and forget this thing ever happened. Do you understand?”

She looked at me then, with those dark, piercing eyes glistening with tears. I could see anger, hatred. But there was something else too, I thought, a wild look. But she did not speak.

“Do you understand?” I repeated. “I am telling you all this for your own safety.”

But there was no answer. She submitted herself meekly to being blindfolded. I told my men that she need not be gagged. The time for screaming was long past. The men were instructed to take her back to the same spot and released.

I poured myself another drink and contemplated the situation. On the whole, it had been very successful, I felt. But it was a pity that she was so upset. It couldn’t be helped. I could not help admiring her. She had so few cards in her hand, poor girl. She had played them brilliantly, but lost. In a way, I was sorry to lose her.

I finished my drink and went to bed. I slept more soundly than I had done for a long time.

I went to the beach once or twice during the next week, but understandably, Sushila and her husband were not there. I wondered what kind of a story she told him and how much of it he believed. But since she had assured me that he was afraid of scandal concerning his family, I was not particularly

worried even if he knew the truth. How were they going to locate me anyway? Gradually, the incident assumed less and less importance in my mind, except for a pleasant feeling when I contemplated Sushila's body.

I was therefore surprised when one morning, about three weeks later, the local inspector of police called on me. I knew him slightly.

"Good morning inspector! What can I do you?" I enquired.

"Sorry to disturb you sir," he replied politely. "I wondered if I could have word with your servants."

"Why? Have they reported a theft? We are always having people stealing fruit from our orchard."

"No sir; it is just that they might be witnesses in a case that I am investigating."

"Please go ahead and talk to them," I said and issued suitable instructions.

"Thank you sir; I won't disturb you again," and the officer left.

This was the first inkling I had that she might have gone to the police. Later, I learnt that my driver and my gardener – loyal servants who had been with me for many years – had been taken away by the inspector and they did not return. I wondered if I should telephone the inspector to find out why they were being detained. Or better still, should I speak to the commissioner of police whom I knew well? Would it be natural to telephone and enquire about one's servants or would it appear as if I was worried about something? Finally, I decided against it.

Another week passed and became anxious and nervous. How did they find out? What mistakes did I commit that had led them to me? If they had the driver and the gardener and their statements, why had they not arrested me so far? Suspicion began to eat into my soul. One can protect oneself against known danger. But how is one to guard against unknown dangers? It was just like the dread of the unknown that I had experienced as small boy in the village. Fear gripped my heart and I asked myself, "My god! What have I done?"

After another week, a minor item in the newspapers attracted my attention. It mentioned a case of abduction and rape of a young married woman. Were the police building up a psychological pressure so that I would cave in when at last I was arrested? Were they expecting me to make a false move, such as leaving the city? Thought her name was not mentioned, there were adequate hints to indicate that it was Sushila. And the report ended with the usual bald statement that the police were investigating.

There was nothing for me to do but to sit and wait. I stopped going out to my usual haunts and out put people off with some excuse or other when they telephoned me. I thought people might know what I had done, might recognize me. I only went to the beach, to the same spot where I had first met

her. A murderer is supposed to revisit the scene of his crime. Perhaps, I had the same compulsion to go there. If I had met her then, I would have fallen at her feet – as she had done at mine – and asked for forgiveness. But of course, she was not there.

I could not bear the suspense any longer. I telephoned the commissioner and enquired what had happened to my driver and the gardener. “I understand that the local inspector took them away and I have not seen them since,” I complained.

The commissioner sounded vague. “Were they up to some mischief?” he asked innocently. But I was sure knew the whole story by now.

“Not that I know of,” I answered.

“I will make enquiries and let you know,” he rang off.

Usually, he would ask how I was, if I was going out of town and indulge in small talk. But this time, he was rather abrupt. What did it mean?

After all this anxiety and suspense, the arrest came almost as a relief. The commissioner did me the honour of coming himself. “I did not want my subordinates to come,” he said. “That is the least I could do for you. While you are in custody, you can have food sent from home or order in from outside. I shall also for any other comforts you may outside. I shall also arrange for any other comforts you may require. But if you are convicted, the matter is out of my hands.”

“Thank you.” I said. Already we had become almost strangers.

“I would advise you to get the best lawyer you possibly can; probably Selvaraj would be the best. Many murderers whom he has defended are walking around the streets as free men.”

“That means, you consider I am guilty.”

“My dear chap, it is not for me to judge. All I can say is that the evidence looks very black.”

I made headlines in all the papers the next morning. It was something for all my friends and acquaintances to gloat over and gossip about.

The famous lawyer Selvaraj met me the next morning. “The first thing is to get you out of here. I am applying for bail straight away. I think the police have burnt their fingers this time. A man like you, who has studied for the bar in England, a person with status and reputation in society, to be dragged in like a petty criminal, I shall blast them before the court.”

I said, “Please apply for bail; but do not drag my past into it. I do not want more publicity than is necessary.”

‘Alright,’ he smiled. “I will play it on a low key if you like.”

I was released on bail with the condition that I did not leave the city and that I reported to the police every day.

Between my release on bail and the actual trial, Selvaraj met me quite a few times to discuss the strategy of defence. "The prosecutions are not giving anything away," he said. "They must have a very strong – I would even say a fool-proof- case against you. Otherwise, they would have arrested a person of your standing. I don't want to put you on the witness stand if I can avoid it. They will bring up everything in your past including the blackmail case and it won't do you any good. Of course, I will try and rattle their witnesses and get them to contradict themselves, but we have to be prepared for the worst.

"What I can't understand is, how they got to me in the first place," I said.

"It will all come out only during the trial. But what I would like to know is, are you willing to see a psychiatrist?"

"What for?"

"We have to be prepared for all eventualities," the lawyer explained. "Supposing they are able to pin the charge of rape on you, you may have to plead temporary insanity or that you were unable to tell the difference between right and wrong. The psychiatrists know the technical jargon and it will impress the judge."

"No, I won't do that!" I replied.

"Think about it my dear chap. Ultimately, that may be the only way out for you."

"But I am not insane," I cried.

"Many people who are perfectly normal and sane are still legally insane."

"I would rather go to prison."

"There is no need for you make up your mind in a hurry, but I would suggest that you seriously think about it."

Then he went on a different line of enquiry. "Were there any extenuating circumstances that we could site as an excuse for your behavior?" he asked.

It was obvious that even my own lawyers thought me guilty, for he did not ask me if I had actually committed rape. He did not ask me to recount the events of that fateful evening. Then, what chance had I of being exonerated?

I thought for a minute. "No, there were no extenuating circumstances." I said.

"You are not very helpful, are you?"

“You want me to tell the truth, don’t you?” I cried.

“Of course, I want you to tell the truth. But I also want you to give me any information that may help me in defending you. I cannot defend you in a vaccum.”

“The first time I ever met her, she called me an ‘uncivilized brute’; is that any help?”

He made a note in his pad. “Of course, it will come in handy. For a person of your standing to be called such a name must have been a cause of great pain and agony. What else?”

“If I think of anything else, I will let you know,”

“It has been my experience,” the lawyer said somewhat pompously. “Rape is rarely committed without the tacit I do not say willing but tacit – consent or concurrence of the woman.”

“Why, how many rapes have you committed?” I smiled at him.

“Don’t be flippant Mr.Raj,” he said severely. “You don’t seem to realise the serious situation in which you are placed. When I say ‘experience’ I refer of course to the experience of my clients, many of whom have got off free because I used that line of defence. You are an attractive man; you have a reputation with women, if I may say so. It is general knowledge, so there is no point in hiding it. You also happen to be a fairly wealthy man. Otherwise, you couldn’t afford me as a lawyer. Therefore, it would not be surprising if this particular woman was attracted by you and sought your company. May be she did not expect you to go as far as you did and resisted you, but yielded in the end. That would make a plausible line of defence, don’t you think?”

“No.” I did not want to tell that she did not come there voluntarily. She was gagged, blindfolded and brought there by my driver and my gardener.

“In such a case, it would be your word against hers.”

I could have accepted any one of the lawyer’s suggestions, but I think by that time, the fight had gone of me. The mental tension of the past few weeks had sapped my will power. I was tired, miserable, fed up. I wanted to get it all over, whatever the result.

“I will think about what you have said,” I replied.

“Please do; we can decide on the line of defence only after knowing what the prosecutions have up their sleeve. But for heaven’s sake, think seriously about the situation. I will see you again before long.”

The next day, there was an identification parade. About ten men, all about my age and build, dressed in similar clothes to mine were lined up and I was asked to stand among them. After a few minutes, she was brought in to have a look at us. I was surprised how much she had changed in a short period of one month. She hardly looked at us.

“Look carefully Mrs. Sushila,” said the inspector who brought her there. “Can you make a positive identification?”

She looked up for a second. Our eyes met for a moment.

“It is number four the left,” she almost whispered.

“You are quite sure?” asked the inspector.

She nodded.

I was the ‘fourth from the left’.

The only person who met me during those dark and agonizing days was Thirumalai. Since the glorious period of the ‘Quit India days, our paths had diverged very considerably. He continued with his political work while I went away to England. He became a minister in the state government when popular ministries were formed and was very influential in the hierarchy of the ruling party. He combined the idealism of the pre-independence days with practical wisdom and common sense and consequently was very successful in the solution of intricate problems. But the atmosphere of post – independent India in which many people clamoured for power in the guise of doing good to the people was not to his liking and he soon left the government. He was known to be absolutely honest and incorruptible. Therefore, though he was not in power, his influence both with the people and with national leaders was very high and he was often consulted on important and delicate matters of policy.

During the past thirty years, I must have met him perhaps once or twice a year. But the bonds of working together, fighting for a common cause and suffering together had cemented our friendship more than anything else could have done. On the rare occasions that we met, he showed considerable affection towards me and advised me to do something useful with all my ‘talents’. I was therefore not surprised when he came all the way from Palayam to see me when he heard the sad news.

“You are in real trouble, aren’t you?” he asked as we both sat down.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Yes did commit crime you are accused of, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” I said with averted eyes.

“Then, it will not be possible for me to help you; the law will have to take its course.”

“I understand.”

“But do you understand how sorry I am? How much I suffer for you and with you?”

“What I most need is your sympathy and understanding which I have always had in ample measure. What more can I ask?”

“Don’t think that this is the end of the world,” he gave my hand an affectionate squeeze. “Who knows, this may prove to be your salvation.”

“How can you say that?”

“If you can come through your ordeal with dignity and courage, being convicted or going to gaol does not matter very much.”

“But how can I be dignified or after what I have done? After all the gossip and slander in the newspapers, what is left for me now?”

“What matters is not what other people think or say, but what you think about yourself. First, do not throw any more mud on that poor girl’s reputation in an attempt to extricate yourself from an impossible situation.”

“That is exactly what my lawyer wants me to do.”

“I know. After all, I was also trained as a lawyer and practiced law for some time.”

I was silent.

“My advice is, throw yourself on the court’s mercy. Say that you did it is a moment of mental aberration and you are truly sorry. That way, you may do better than prolonging the agony both for yourself and for that poor girl.”

“I will think about it,” I replied.

“I had such great hopes for you,” he mused. “Among our friends in the old days, you were the only one who was clever. You could have done anything you wanted. I still remember; during our discussions, you used to talk so brilliantly. When I think about it, I could easily shed tears for the opportunities you threw away, for the life you have wasted.”

“Oh no!” smiled. “All that wonderful conversation as you call it, it all came from some books I had read.”

“That is one of the things I liked about you. You never took credit for your abilities.”

Then his mind went off at a tangent. “Talent without will power, without discipline and determination to succeed, is not only a waste but is dangerous. Look at Oscar wilde.”

“But he did succeed!”

“But he didn’t have discipline. You of course have not had any of the other attributes.”

“I have never advised you seriously before,” he continued. “Perhaps, that was my fault. Nothing is more easy to give and more difficult to take than advise. But in the situation in which you are

placed, whether you come out without much damage to your future depends on how you now. Take my advice; it will certainly make you feel less guilty.”

“But I don’t feel particularly guilty.’

“You will; you will in the long run. Now, you are so sorry for yourself that you have no other feelings left. By the way,” he changed the subject. “Do you remember the Profumo affair?”

I remembered vaguely about some political scandal in England. But I had forgotten the details.

“Profumo was the defence minister in Harold Macmillan’s cabinet. He had an affair with a woman who also happened to be sleeping with the Russian military attaché. When the matter became public, he lied about it in Parliament. Consequently, he had to resign in disgrace and give up politics. But what many people don’t know is that many years later, he was given award by the Queen in her birthday honours list for the excellent social work he had done after giving up politics. He could hold his head up again among his fellow men.”

“So, you think I still have hope?”

“Of course!” he smiled. “What are you now? Fifty five? You have many years of active life ahead of you. You can still rehabilitate yourself if have the will.”

I wondered if what he said was true, not about Profumo, but about myself. “I don’t know; I am confused and frightened.” I said.

“Don’t lose heart Raju. The trouble with you has been that you have never had a strong will of your own. You have never been ambitious. You are easily led by your environment and by the friends of the moment. Look at the way you acted during the ‘Quit India’ days. I could not have had a better companion or more true and loyal friend. But you have never been able to resist temptation. You have never set a worthy objective before yourself and pursued it relentlessly, except women of course. But I don’t consider that a worthy objective.”

“I don’t know what I will do or how I will behave from now on. But talking to you has helped me a great deal. I don’t have many friends at the moment.”

“That is not very surprising, is it?” Thirumalai smiled. “And another thing; you have never had to work for your living. I know you have developed and managed your estate very well, but it is not the same thing. If you had to go out to work, you would have acquired a sense of discipline.”

“I am glad about one thing. There is no one else to be ashamed of me, except myself.”

“The loneliness too is of your own choosing, perhaps, you have always been afraid of deep and lasting relationships.”

How well he knew me, I thought.

We talked a little longer. Finally, he said goodbye. "Don't lose heart my dear chap. And for God's sake, don't do anything more about which you need to be ashamed."

He reminded me of Meena and the advice she gave me when I left for England. I was deeply moved, not only by his words, but because, for the first time in our long relationship, he embraced me when he left. I noticed his eyes were glistening.

The trial opened sometime later. The prosecutor rose to address the judge and sprang a surprise.

"Your honour, I have a somewhat unusual plea to make. In cases of rape, the first witness is almost always the victim. In this particular case your honour, the victim is not present in court under medical advice. Two experts have certified that because of her physical health as well as mental condition, she is not in a position to give evidence. On the other hand, in the interests of speedy dispensation of justice, we do not want the case to be postponed any further. Therefore, may I request the indulgence of the court that she may be examined as the last witness?"

The judge inspected the medical certificate and remarked, "This is a peculiar request. Are you sure she would be in a position to give evidence in a few days' time?"

"She is under treatment your honour and the medical experts have declared that in a few days from now – certainly before the prosecution case is completed – she would be able to do so."

The judge turned to Selvaraj. "What has the defence to say about it?" he asked.

"As you yourself have pointed out your honour, it is a most peculiar request," commented Selvaraj. "However, the defence has no desire to put a sick woman on the witness stand and cross – examine her. If my learned friend the public prosecutor can give an assurance first that the lady will be put on the stand before his case is concluded and second, the defence will have an opportunity to further cross examine prosecution witnesses in the light of what she may say, the defence has no objection to the request your honour."

'On that understanding, you may proceed Mr. Prosecutor," ruled the judge.

I had been told that Sushila would be the first witness. I had been dreading coming face to face with her and going over the events of that fateful night. The change in the order of witnesses was therefore like a reprieve for me.

The first witness was the husband Mr. Narayan. After being sworn, he told his story carefully guided by the public prosecutor.

On the evening of the fourteenth of August, he and his wife had come to the beach. As they were about to return, at about seven o'clock, they were attacked by two men. He was bound and gagged and left on the beach while his wife was carried away by them. At about two thirty a.m an inspector of police came and released him and took him to the police station where his wife was

present. She was very distressed and somewhat incoherent. They were both sent home in a police jeep after he had made his statement to the inspector.

Selvaraj's cross examination was brief. "Mr.Narayan, you say you were blindfolded by your attackers?"

"That is right," replied the witness.

'If so, how do you know that your wife was carried away?"

"That is what I understood."

"You don't know of your own knowledge what happened to your wife from the you were blind – folded till the time you met her at the police station, do you?"

"No."

"That is all your honour." Selvaraj sat down.

The second witness for the prosecution was Mr.Rao. On the night of the fourteenth August, he was driving along the Beach Road. It must have been after midnight; he did not look at the time. He was returning from the pictures when he saw a lady on the footpath frantically waving her arms. He stopped to find out what was wrong and if he of some assistance. She was agitated and incoherent, but from her confused statements, it was obvious that she had lost her husband and her modesty had been outraged. Under to the circumstances, he thought it best he should take her to the nearest police station. Fortunately, the inspector was on duty. He entrusted the lady to his care. The inspector recorded a statement from him, took his name and address and let him go home.

Selvaraj cross-examined him.

"Mr.Rao, which cinema house did you go to, that evening?"

The witness mentioned the name of the picture house.

"Is the Beach road on the direct route from that picture house to your home?"

"No, but it was nicer to drive along the beach on a hot night."

"Was that the only motive in going out of your way by about five miles?"

"Of course!"

"It was not because you hoped to meet either this or some other young lady....."

"I object your honour!" protested the prosecutor.

The judge upheld the objection.

Selvaraj continued. "Mr.Rao, how long was it from the time you first met the lady till you handed her over to the police?"

"May be fifteen minutes, perhaps twenty; I really couldn't say."

"Could it have been longer? Say half an hour, or may be forty five minutes?"

"No, not as much as that."

"I understand that it is only a five minute drive from where you met the lady to the police station. What were you doing during fifteen minutes?"

"Well, it took me some time to understand what she was saying. Then I suggested I should take her to the police station. At first she refused. But I advised her it was the best thing to do. She didn't want a scandal, she said. All this naturally took time."

"Do you mean to tell the court that you took her to the police station against her will?" there was righteous indignation in Selvaraj's voice. "You forced her to go to the station?"

"No, I did not say that. I said she thought it might lead to a scandal, but I advised her to go."

"Did you take her straight to the police station or did you take her somewhere else? Say, the sands on the beach for example?"

The prosecutor again vehemently objected. "This is nothing more than an attempt to discredit an honest and upright citizen your honour! He only did his duty and tried to help a poor girl."

What are you trying to prove Mr.Selvaraj?" asked the judge.

"Your honour, the witness has already admitted that he had detoured from his direct route from the cinema to his house to the extent five miles. He has also admitted that he spent twenty minutes with the lady when five minutes would have been adequate. He has admitted taking her against her will..... "Selvaraj paused.

There was a titter in court and the judge banged his gavel.

"..... to the police station," continued Selvaraj. "It is not at all unusual for men to go prowling on the beach during lonely hours in search of likely women. My point is your honour. This gentleman might well be responsible for whatever happened to the young lady.'

"It is preporterous! It's....." stammered the witness.

"Please answer the question!" directed the judge.

Selvaraj repeated the question. "Did you take her straight to the police station or did you take her on the sands and 'outrage her modesty' as you put it?"

"No, I did not.'

“No more questions your honour,” my lawyer sat down.

Mr.Rao left the stand, probably vowing never again to help a damsel in distress.

Listening to the proceedings, I felt like an interested observer rather than a participant whose future was to be decided on the outcome of the trial. While one part of me was standing in the dock, another part of me was in the visitors’ seats, deeply absorbed in savouring the finer points that the defence and the prosecution were trying to score over each other. Acute misery – even a feeling of tragedy – does not flow like a continuous stream. It flows in waves; suffering is often followed some glimpses of hope, even if there is no justification for it. At first, I had suffered from a great sense of tragedy. But talking to the lawyer and later, talking to Thirumalai had made me feel slightly better. The feeling of hope still continued.

The evidence of the driver and the gardener was taken up next. They ought to have been charged along with me as accessories for aiding and abetting, but evidently, under pressure from the authorities, they had turned approvers and gained a pardon.

The driver was first. He took much longer to give evidence because he was not educated and could not speak logically or coherently. He deposed that I had given him and the gardener instructions to go to the beach, wait until it was dark and lonely, tie up and gag the husband and bring the lady to my house blind folded. The couple had been pointed out to them the previous day. They carried out my instructions because I was a good employer and had treated them and their families generously. There were tears in his eyes when he said that. After about two and half hours, they brought the lady back to the beach and let her go.

“Do you what happened when the lady was inside the house?” Selvaraj asked by way of cross examination.

“No sir.”

“Did you hear any screams, or notice any signs of violence on the part of the lady?”

“No sir.”

“Did you know that she had called your employer an uncivilized brute sometime ago?”

“No sir.”

“Did you know that your employer and the lady were acquainted before?”

“No sir.”

The prosecutor got up. “Your honour,” he said. “I do not see the point of these questions. The witness obviously does not know anything prior to the day of the actual incident. If my learned friend wanted to bring out any extenuating circumstances, he can do so by putting the accused on the witness stand.”

The judge looked questioningly at Selvaraj.

“Your honour, my client has been accused of serious crime. His reputation and standing in society has already been considerably damaged. I am entitled to bring out any circumstances that may be of benefit to the accused.”

The judge thought for a moment. “I cannot permit this line of questioning Mr.Selvaraj. if you wish to plead extenuating circumstances, you will have to bring them out through witnesses who have knowledge of such circumstances, or as the prosecutor says, by putting your client on the witness stand.”

These questions were a surprise to the prosecution. The public prosecutor whispered something to his assistant who went out. If Selvaraj could prove prior acquaintance between us, than the prosecution case became that much weaker.

Meanwhile, Selvaraj was on a different line of attack. “Were you threatened by the police that if you refused to give evidence, it will be bad for you?”

The driver was silent for a moment. “Come on; don’t; be afraid. Did they threaten to beat you up?” Selvaraj shouted.

“No sir.”

The hesitancy in the reply was adequate for his purpose. “I understand,” he said. “Did they offer you any bribe to give evidence?”

“No sir, no money was offered.”

“I see, I suppose they told you that if you gave evidence according to their suggestions, you will not be charged with abduction, but allowed to go free. Is that it?”

The witness looked round, frightened. “I was told that if I told the truth, the court might consider pardoning me.”

“And you were taught what you had to say?”

“The gentlemen went over what I had to say.”

Selvaraj had finished. But the prosecutor got up again. “Have you told the truth, the whole and nothing but the truth?” he asked.

“Yes sir.”

“Have you told any lies?”

“No sir.”

“Did I or anyone else ask you to tell what is not true?”

“No sir.”

The witness was excused. The gardener’s evidence was on similar lines and nothing new was elicited.

The prosecutor asked for an adjournment at this stage, and the case was postponed till the next day.

The first witness the next morning was the doctor who had conducted the medical examination. He related that during the early hours of the fifteenth of August, at about two thirty a.m a lady was brought for examination because there was a suspicion of sexual assault. He examined her and found that there was evidence of recent sexual intercourse. The lady was in a state of shock and he administered a sedative. In the cross examination, he admitted that there was no evidence of blood, bruises, or other indications of violence.

“I put it to you doctor, in view of what you have said with regard to lack of violence of any sort, the intercourse was by mutual consent. Can you deny it?” asked Selvaraj.

“No, I cannot deny it.”

“Thank you doctor,” said Selvaraj with a smile on his face.

The next witness was the inspector of police. He was veteran of many legal battles and was not to be easily rattled by Selvaraj. I was so interested in how they were able to identify me that I listened to his story with great attention.

The young lady was brought to the station by Mr.Rao in the early hours of the fifteenth of August. He had noted the time in his diary; it was one twenty five a.m she seemed to be in great distress and kept saying, ‘Please find my husband!’ and ‘I want to go home’. But by gentle and careful questioning, he was able to gather she had been kidnapped by some ruffians. Her husband had been bound and gagged and left on the beach and now, she couldn’t find him. To his questions whether she had been molested in any way, she merely nodded her head ‘yes’. She could bring herself to speak. He recorded the F.I.R. (First information Report) as given by the lady and sent her for a medical examination and went to the beach in search of her husband. He found him behind a boat as the lady had said, untied him and brought him also to the police station. The husband confirmed the lady’s story as far as the kidnapping was concerned. He sent them home and had a more detailed report from the lady the next day when she was more composed.

“How were you able to identify the accused as the perpetrator of the foul deed inspector?” asked the public prosecutor.

“When the men dropped her on the beach around midnight, they made the mistake of stopping the car near a street light and moving her blindfold. In spite of her shock and distress, she noted that the car was a green ambassador and the numbers were eight, two, three. She couldn’t remember the fourth number, nor the letters, nor whether the fourth number was before or after the digits. It was

then a matter of three. But since we knew the colour and make of the car and that it was fairly new, I was able by a process of elimination to bring the possibilities down to four green ambassadors. Of these, one was owned by a lady doctor, one was owned by an elderly gentleman who had been out of town for quite a few days and the third was in a garage undergoing repairs. The fourth belonged to the accused.

“Further, the lady had mentioned that the journey from the beach to the house where she was taken took approximately forty five minutes. That also fitted in accurately with the time it would have taken to reach the home of the accused,”

“Did you then proceed to question the accused?” asked the public prosecutor.

“Oh, no. I still had to find the men who had done the kidnapping. The accused obviously was not one of them. But from the description given to me, it seemed to indicate the driver and the gardener of the accused. So, I took them in for questioning. At first, they denied everything, but when confronted face to face with the lady, they confessed to the abduction and to tying up and gagging the husband.”

“Did you question the accused after the arrest?”

“He refused to answer any question and referred us to his lawyer.”

“That is all your honour” concluded the prosecutor.

So, that was how they were able to locate me, through the idiocy of my servants who did not follow the instructions I had given them. If they had taken her to her husband, the subsequent events might have been very different. They would not have gone to the police for one thing. And even if they did, they would not have known the number of the car. Such is the irony of fate!

Selvaraj rose to cross examine the inspector. “Tell me inspector, you just said that the lady was in distress. What were the symptoms that made you come to that conclusion?”

“Well, she had a look of complete despair in here yes. The spot on her forehead was smudged; the flowers in her had been crushed and had not bothered to rearrange them. And her words were incoherent.”

“Were there any other signs? For example, were her clothes torn? Were there any sign of violence, any marks on her body as there would have been if she had attempted to resist the advances of an unwelcome person?”

“As far as I could see, her cloths were not torn. As for marks and bruises, I sent her for a medical examination. It was for the doctor to determine those things.”

“Supposing inspector, there was no outrage on her modesty, supposing it was an act of mutual consent but the lady got a sever attack of conscience afterwards, would no the symptoms you have described hold good just as well?”

“If that were so, she would not have come to the police station in the first place.”

“But a previous witness has already testified that he brought her there against her will!”

“My impression was that she was the victim of a sexual assault.”

“We are not here to collect your impressions inspector, however interesting they might prove to be to a fiction writer. We want to hear irrefutable evidence. But you have still not if the lady felt conscience-stricken afterwards, would not the symptoms you have so meticulously observes account for it?”

“It is like saying, supposing aunties were to grow a moustache, would she become uncle?”

There was loud laughter in the court. The judge banged his gavel and called for order. He spoke sharply to the inspector. “You are not new to have witness box inspector. You should show sufficient respect and maintain the dignity of the court and not give way to levity. Please answer the question.”

“I suppose it could account for it,” conceded the inspector reluctantly.

The case was adjourned till the next morning.

That evening. Selvaraj met me. He was in a pensive mood. “Things are going rather badly. I have thrown a spanner in the wheel of the prosecution by hinting at previous acquaintance, but unless we can follow it up and prove it, it is of no use. We have only two options before us. One is, when the girl comes to the witness stand tomorrow morning, get her to admit that the act was by mutual consent. I have to treat her gently because she has a lot public sympathy including that of the judge. But the fact that there are no marks of violence on her body makes my theory very plausible.”

“She had an orgasm, if that is of any help,” I said.

“My dear chap, that is wonderful!” exclaimed Selvaraj. “But I have to use that information in a very roundabout way. It is going to be tricky.”

I was sorry I had mentioned it to him. I did not want him to throw it at her in the public court room. “Please don’t ask her about it,” I requested.

“As I said, it is going to be very tricky,” the lawyer repeated. I will have to approach it obliquely.

“Whatever you do, please don’t refer to it in any way.”

‘For one who committed rape, your sense of chivalry is quite amazing.’

It was then that I threw a small bomb at him. “There may be no marks of violence on her, but there are on me,” I said quietly.

“What!” I gave him a jolt alright.

“Yes, she scratched me with her finger nails, on my chest and shoulders. I myself didn’t notice them at the time. They are healed, but you can still see the faint marks.” I removed my shirt and he inspected them.

“You never told me,” he complained.

“You never asked me. You only wanted to know of any extenuating circumstances and I told you about her calling me an uncivilized brute.”

“In view of what you had said earlier, could those scratch marks not have been the result of pleasurable excitement rather than resistance?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I wonder if she had mentioned scratching you in her statement,” Selvaraj wondered. “If she had not mentioned it, they cannot bring it out now. And it will be of doubtful advantage to us.”

“May be she doesn’t realise it herself,” I said. “She did not know what she was doing at that time I should think. Or, perhaps, the prosecutions are deliberately holding it back, to throw it at me at a psychological moment when it will be most effective.”

“Yes, that is possible,” conceded Selvaraj. “It means, I can’t put you on the stand. If they ask you about scratch marks, we are sunk.’

We were both silent for a while. I think at that point, Selvaraj knew I was going to be convicted. But he was not easily defeated. “Oh well,” he said. “Our one hope now is to fall back on the idea of a psychiatrist. I will get a short adjournment while we get a reputed specialist to examine you.”

‘How long do you think temporary insanity lasts?’ I nearly shouted at him. “Six months? For that is the period over which I have been planning this thing. No, it won’t work.”

“Of course, if you are intent on going to gaol, there is nothing much I can do,” he said in a tone of resignation.

When the court reconvened the next morning, the next morning, the prosecutor announced, “Your honour, my next witness will be Mrs. Sushila.

She got up and slowly walked to the witness stand. She seemed so frail and delicate. “She can have a chair Mr. Prosecutor,” said the judge. A chair was brought. The clerk administered the oath and she sat down.

I couldn’t stand it any longer. I had caused her enough harm; at least I could spare this ordeal. I had a whispered conversation with Selvaraj. He gesticulated and told me to keep quiet as the prosecutor, the judge and the other watched. Sushila had her head lowered.

Finally, my lawyer turned to the judge. “Your honour, before this witness gives evidence, my client wishes to make a statement. I do not know what the statement contains and I have advised him

not to so until the prosecution have completed their evidence and I have had a chance to study the statement he proposes to make. He insists on it and I have no alternative but to permit him to do so.”

“But are you still his lawyer or are you withdrawing from the case? Does he wish to conduct the case himself?” asked the judge.

“Only the accused can answer that question,” Selvaraj replied. He was completely taken my surprise and obviously very annoyed.

‘He is still my lawyer your honour,” I spoke up. “I would like him to argue the case on my behalf. But I have decided to make the statement I order not to cause any further pain or grief to anyone else.”

“This is more unusual, but you may proceed,” said the judge.

I had spent a lot of time in preparing the statement the previous night. It caused me considerable pain, but I felt it had to be done. Though I had a copy of the statement in my pocket, I thought it would go down better if I spoke ex – tempore.

“Your honour, my aim in making this statement is no spare any further agony to the lady who is on the Witness stand. I have caused her enough pain already. I wish her to forgive me for what has happened though my apology at this stage may be totally inadequate. Yes your honour, I did commit the crime I have been accused of in a moment of blind passion, in a moment of mental aberration. It has been suggested to me that I was temporarily insane at the time happened. But whether I was legally insane is open to question. In any case, I do not wish to evade responsibility for what I have done and will accept whatever punishment you may give me. I throw myself on the mercy of this court. I wish to leave this court with whatever dignity I still have left. Thank you for your indulgence, your honour.”

I looked at Sushila to see her reaction. Was there any indication of relief? I was looking for some sign that she understood my sacrifice. Or did she think I only did it because I knew I would be convicted any way? She looked up for a minute, not at me, but at the judge who excused her and she left the stand.

There was buzz of conversation when I finished and the judge banged his again and before silence was restored. The reporters out to file their copies and there was certain degree of confusion.

With my statement, the recording of evidence was over and the argument began. The public prosecutor was very eloquent about the chastity of Indian womanhood, how losing one’s chastity was worse than death. Therefore, rape was a more heinous crime than murder. It was pity that the death sentence was not provided for, for such an offence. He compared Sushila with the great heroines of Hindu mythology, described her suffering in vivid detail and finally he came to my statement. He used heavy sarcasm as a means of emphasizing his arguments.

“Your honour, that statement is the most preposterous, the most hypocritical piece of hoodwinking I have come across in my long career as a public prosecutor. A little drama has been

enacted for our benefit. The accused knew he was cornered. The police had done a wonderful bit of detection to nab him. Every piece of evidence pointed n accusing finger at him. Every witness – inspite of my learned friend’s attempts to side –track the issue – spoke for justice. Then, all of a sudden gets a pricking of his conscience. He doesn’t want to cause any more distress to the lady whom he has grievously wronged. I he were honest, if he truly repented of his sin, why did not make that statement on the day he was arrested? Or, at least on the first day of the trial? Why did he cause so much distress to his unfortunate victim during the last three days before exhibiting such noble and dignified sentiment? I will tell you why. It is because he did know how strong the evidence was against him. He was hoping against hope to get away it. Only when he was cornered, trapped like a rat did his conscience start to trouble him! It was said at one stage by my learned friend on the opposite side that the lady had called the accused an uncivilized brute. I do not know if it was true, but it was an apt description, your honour. I would go further and say that he is not fit to live among the primitives or the barbarians, for even they have a code of ethics and a sense of honour. But this so called gentleman, who is supposed to be educated and cultured, has no idea of ethics, no sense of honour or decency. Our wives and sister and daughter are not safe so long as he remains o free man. In the name of Indian womanhood, in the name of justice, in the mane of civilization, I demand the maximum penalty your honour!” He sat down and mopped his forehead.

Selvaraj was obviously at a disadvantage. My statement had taken him by surprise. But he did his best. “My learned friend the public prosecutor need not have gone to the trouble of all that eloquence when my client had admitted his crime and thrown himself at the mercy of the court. He has gone through the entire spectrum of Hindu mythology to draw our attention to the simple truth that to molest a woman is wrong. He has also cast aspersion at my own role by hinting that a ‘drama’ was being enacted in this court this morning. I wish to assure you, your honour that I was as much taken by surprise as you were by my client’s statement this morning.

“It was I who suggested that some expert psychiatric evidence should be made available to this court on behalf of my client. I am convinced that the accused has a split personality, like Dr.Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I have spent a lot of time with him during the last few weeks and I believe there have been occasions when he could not tell the difference between right and wrong. I could give many examples but that would be betraying the confidences of my client. That is why I suggested such a course. But my client would not agree. After listening to his statement, I am convinced more than ever that I was right. If he had the benefit of such expert examination and if the court had had the benefit of expert advice on the state of mind of the accused, the decision of the court might be entirely different. Or if we had gone on appeal, it would have been dragged on for many months to the distress and inconvenience of everyone concerned. My client obviously did not want to follow such a course. Instead, he has thrown himself on the mercy of this court. It means your honour, whatever decision you give will be final. This places a great responsibility on this court, not only to see that justice is done, but it is tempered with mercy.

So far, Selvaraj has been conversational; now, he raised his voice. “Your honour, it was Mr. Hyde who committed the crime. But it was Dr.Jekyll who admitted it and made that statement this morning. No psychiatrist could have proved this point to the satisfaction of this court as my client has

done by his honest, unconscious behavior. His statement reveals his innate goodness, repentance and dignity. I have only one thing to ask of this court. When you sentence Mr. Hyde, please do not forget that Dr. Jekyll will also go to gaol. Thank you, your honour.”

The judgement was delivered the next day. The judge gave me some advice mainly in the form of clichés, but accepted my repentance as genuine and sentenced me to three years rigorous imprisonment.

Before I was taken away, Selvaraj had a word with me. “That was very shrewd on your part. It reduced the sentence by at least two years. You should have completed your bar finals.”

Was it shrewdness? Did I really have a split personality as my lawyer suggested? Selvaraj had brought up the analogy of R.L Stevenson’s story without any prompting on my part. This has cropped up again and again since my childhood. Was I really two men imprisoned in one body? I had always thought so, but now I was not sure. Was I truly repentant of what I had done? Frankly, I did not know.

Epilogue

Remembrance of Things Lost.....and Found

I have come to the end of my story.

I started this account by saying 'I want to tell the plain unvarnished truth.' I think I have kept to that bargain.

On going over it, I am satisfied that I have related all the relevant facts covering my intimate personal life as truthfully and as honestly as I possibly can. In fact, my life seems to have fallen into a logical pattern, as if it was nothing more than a preparation for the final act of rape. Beginning with urinating on my father's plate, biting Rukku's breast, my casual relationship with Mabel, my treatment of Meena, my affair with Yesoda, and life of debauchery – all of them form a logical sequence that could only have one ending – a disaster of some sort. The only solitary exception was Trude- the exception that often proves the rule.

Perhaps the only things I have left out are my dreams. For many years, I have had two dreams that have been frequent. One was that I often found myself naked among a crowd of people. Sometimes it was in our club, on other occasions it was among a group of women or in the lounge of a hotel. It made me very embarrassed and often frightened and always woke up with perspiration drenching me. The other dream was that I frequently found myself on the edge of a precipice. My legs were powerless to move away from danger. I was prevented from falling down the abyss only in the nick of time. What did these dreams signify? Emotional insecurity? I did not know. Strangely enough, I have stopped having dreams after I was convicted.

This account has also been liberally sprinkled with my ideas and opinions which may sound somewhat pompous to the younger generation. But if I am to project my personality and my character truthfully, they are essential. Is there not also a suggestion of boasting about my sexual exploits, one may easily wonder. All I have done is to portray my mental and emotional state at the time the events took place. I do not want to colour or distort them in the light of subsequent knowledge or wisdom or attitudes towards life. The fact is, in the past I have suffered from something deeper, even more sinister than mere guilt. My activities that ought to have created a feeling of regret have instead given me a sense of excitement. Every time I thought about them, I had only a desire to repeat them if opportunities were available. How can one expiate the feeling of thrill over wrong-doing? It is perhaps this thrill and excitement that is reflected in my account of the past rather than a desire to boast or to show off.

In fact, the whole account has been like a true confession, without a priest and consequently without absolution. Guilt can be expiated; even mortal sin can be forgiven. Repentance would make one feel better, give immense relief. But what relief is there one who gloats over his sins? A grief that is

dissociated from guilt is easy to bear. It is also more easily forgotten. But the sorrow that comes from one's own wrong doing lasts for ever. My torment is not because of the condemnation of society or the conviction by the judge. It is not because of the discomforts of prison life. Mine is the torment of a lost soul.

Yes, I have many debts to pay in life, to Rukku, to Meena, to Sushila, each one a bigger burden than the last. If I can, I would like to make amends for my past. But by the very nature of these debts, I cannot pay them back. If I dedicate myself to a noble as Thirumalai hinted, I suppose it is one way of repaying them, But the people to whom I owe these debts will not benefit from them.

Now that I have completed my life story in a way, I am beginning to wonder about of the eternal problems of life. What else is there to do in prison? What do we live for? I ask myself. Only to fulfill ourselves I suppose. Our life is the sum total of all our acts, our achievements and failures, our conscience and how we been able to fulfill ourselves through these activities. By giving us options to choose from, by giving us a will and a conscience, god has sentenced us to freedom. Should we not use that freedom for a deeper understanding of our individual selves? From that point of view, I suppose I am a total failure. But nevertheless, fulfilment is the only goal for Man, either individually or collectively....

In the old days, when the world was full of mystery and imagination, it was easy, almost imperative to be a believer. But our knowledge of the external world, our mastery over the forces of Nature, followed incidentally by a rationalist philosophy, has removed faith out of religion and left us with a whole lot of meaningless symbols and ceremonies. Unfortunately, it has also removed romance out of love and left us with nothing more than sex and the pill.

And yet, is there not a mystery in life? What about the inner world of the heart and the soul? In spite of all the progress, we know very little about them. From worshipping the elements of Nature and animal sacrifice to transcendental meditation and transactional analysis, we might have travelled far but learnt little about our inner selves. Perhaps, the prophet who said 'The kingdom of god is within you' knew what he was talking about. Under these circumstances, the only mystery that is left is the mystery of the 'self'. The mystery of simple things like love, affection, yearning, consideration, the desire for sacrifice and renunciation how can these be explained by a purely rationalist philosophy?

But I cannot help going back to my own problems and my own future. Thirumalai was right – as so often before – when he said that guilt would overtake me. Though I started this account by saying I had no feelings of guilt, the entire exercise has been an unconscious effort at unearthing my guilt and exposing it to public gaze in the hope that I can bear it more easily. Repentance is the first step towards absolution.

Only a wounded tiger becomes a man-eater; it cannot chase its natural prey. I was somewhat in a similar position I suppose, for my heart was badly mauled first by Rukku and later by the loss of Meena. But strangely enough my incarceration in prison seems to have soothed my heart.

As the day of my release draws near, I am confused and frightened. At the same time, there is a sense of urgency about my future, an imperative need to solve my problems.

In the past, I have always considered myself emotionally self-sufficient. I prided myself on the fact that I was not dependent in my other person for my social and emotional well-being. But now, the prospect of loneliness scared me. How am I going to face my future with no one to support and sustain me and with only guilt as constant companion?

Rightly or wrongly, Sushila and I have tied together by cruel destiny. Our bonds are far stronger than holy matrimony, for we have been tormented by the same incident; we have both suffered from the same cause. I remember Sushila saying, 'Now more than ever, I need the protection of a man. Otherwise I cannot live. Please!' She had cried. I had rejected her then; will she reject me now? What is the relationship between a man and a woman? It is love, passion, sex, when they are young. The bonds of children keep them together as they grow older. And in old age, it is companionship that Sustain them. That is all I ask;

Our ties cannot be broken by any earthly power. There is no future for me without her and none for her without me. To find he, to project her, to love her, to love her, that is my penance and that is my absolution. That will also be my supreme happiness. There is no other life for me in this world or the next.

I was released from prison about a week ago one morning. My manger was waiting for me with a new driver to take me home when I came out.

Everything felt strange. To be out in the open, to be able to go where one wanted, was an unusual experience for me after nearly three years. I felt nervous and apprehensive. My manager tried to reassure me.

"You don't need to worry about things sir," he said. "I have managed everything fairly well during your.... absence. You will find everything ship -shape.'

"Thank you, "I said.

"The servants are all there, except for those two rogues of course," he continued. "They have looked after the house very nicely. And I have engaged a new driver and a gardener."

"Good."

"The accounts have all been brought up-to-date. You can inspect them whenever you are ready."

"There is no hurry," I said.

There was nothing more to say.

As I entered the house, the old cook who had been with me for many years was the first to greet me. With tears in his eyes, he fell at my feet. I was deeply moved by his devotion and loyalty. I lifted him up and embraced him. "Sir, it is all fare; none can escape it," he murmured. The other servants too greeted me.

The house had been well kept. Everything in her place; nothing had been disturbed during my absence. Even the morning paper was neatly folded and kept near the chair where I usually sat. Yes, nothing had changed, nothing except myself.

The house boy brought me a glass of ice cold beer. I had not tasted alcohol for nearly three years. The strange thing was, I had not missed it in gaol, as much as I thought I would. But now, I did not enjoy it as much as I thought I would. My mind was too preoccupied with other things.

I rang the bell and asked the manger to come. "Has there been any personal post for me?" I enquired.

He hesitated. "There were a few sir," he said. "I took the liberty of opening them as they were not marked 'confidential'."

"Why didn't you send them to me?"

"They were scurrilous writings by anonymous people sir," he confessed. "I did not think you would be happy to see them. Further, I was allowed to send you only two letters a month. But I have preserved them and if you so desire, I shall bring them now."

I found most of them were written by women cursing me and bringing the wrath of all the gods on my head for committing the sin of rape. What kind of frustrated women wrote such letter, I wondered. My manager was right not to have sent them to me.

He came in again and said, "There is a telegram for you sir," and handed it to me. It was from Thirumalai. It said,

'WELCOME HOME STOP YOU TOMORROW STOP REGARDS

THIRUMALAI'

This was the only encouraging news I had so far. I wondered if he had done anything about locating Sushila. I eagerly waited to see him.

Thirumalai arrived the next afternoon. We embraced each other fondly. I found he had aged in the last three years.

"I have not been keeping too well," he said. "But I see still prison has not done you much physical damage. You are still youthful."

After the preliminaries about his health and my prison life were over, I asked him, "Did you receive my letter? I wrote to you more than six months ago."

“Yes, I am sorry I did not reply. The reason was simple; I was able to locate Sushila a few weeks ago. And I thought I might as well wait for your release, because it was so near.”

I was excited. “Have you met her? How is she? Is she still angry and bitter?” I wanted to know everything at once.

“Yes, I have had quite a few sessions with her, the last one as recently as yesterday evening. That is why I could not come yesterday.

“How did you locate her?”

“I employed a private detective agency. Incidentally, it is going to cost you a lot of money.”

“Never mind. Tell me everything about her.” I pleaded.

“Raju, she is in a very delicate state. She does not want to be reminded of the past. Her wounds are deep; even the touch of friendly hands her bleed. She cannot stand any more suffering. Can you understand all that?”

‘I understand only too well,’ I said.

“Well, that is just an indication of what she has had to go through, “Thirumalai answered. “But let me tell you her story so that you will understand her state of mind.”

“Please do, “I said.

“You see, when Sushila and her husband did not come home from the beach at the usual time, his mother who lived with them became anxious and went to all neighbours to ask for advice, so that everyone knew that something had happened. When they reached home about four a.m in a police jeep, one or two of the neighbours were still there and the husband, in his eagerness to justify his absence, blurted out to his mother what had happened. The arrival of the police inspector the next day, followed by incident became public knowledge. Sushila could not go out without being stared at and talked about; the husband could not face his colleagues in the office who had all got wind of the tragedy.

“People sympathized with her to her face, but there was venom even in their sympathy. And they gossiped behind her back. But the mother-in-law was forthright. She stopped Sushila going into the puja room to worship because she claimed, she was ‘unclean’. She could not go into the kitchen for the same reason. The mother-in-law did not want her to sleep in the same room as her husband and she had to sleep in the outer room on a mat. Instead of being a wife, she was rapidly reduced to the position of a servant girl, sweeping the floor and washing dirty pots.

“Sushila complained to her husband of course, when the mother-in-law was out shopping. He was helpless and suggested she went to her parents for some time until everything blew over. But of course the news had already reached them and they were by no means glad to see her. “Do you think any prospective grooms will come for your younger sister if you stay with us?” her mother chided her.

So, after some time, her father agreed to pay an allowance and also found a room for her to live. Her attempts to get a job were not successful. Meanwhile, she realised she was pregnant.....

“Don’t tell me any more!” I cried. “Her suffering was a thousand times more than mine!”

“Except in one respect,” Thirumalai corrected me. “She did not have a felling of guilt to contend with, though the world had condemned her.’

“Oh, that! I waved my hands meaning it was nothing.

“Once, she returned to husband’s home o see if he would pity her condition and take her back. But she learnt that soon after she left, he had got a transfer to their Calcutta office. So that was the end of that. She had her baby in the poor ward of the government hospital .Even her parents did not come to see her, but sent her some money through her brother.

“People would not have her in the old house where she had been staying before she had the baby. They did not want an illegitimate child in their house, they said. It was a question of moving from house, street to street, begging, pleading.....”

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“A girl; a beautiful child.”

I had tears in my eyes. “That must have been when she wrote to me. The time scale fits.”

“Perhaps. Fortunately, some social workers came across her and gave her accommodation in old people’s home. Thought she was not old’ they said she could stay there with her child provided she did some and housework in return for her keep. She has been there now for a year and a half. She is not comfortable, but she has security and peace of mind which are very important to her. And she is very popular with the inmates.”

“Is there any chance of my seeing her, persuading her to come and live here? Can you give me her address?”

“I certainly will not give you her address, “said Thirumalai firmly. “ I do not want you to go disturb her there until she is ready to see you. She is very bitter, not so much against you now, but against her husband, and against society as a whole. I even offered to find her job as a school teacher, but she refused. I think she is frightened to face the world.”

“I do not want her to come and live here as my.....” I hesitated. “My wife or mistress or anything like that,” I added hastily. “She cannot stay in a place like old people’s home doing a servant’s job and not even getting paid for it. I merely want to provide for her comfort, for the child’s education, and so on.”

“My dear fellow, you don’t seem to understand her plight.” Said Thirumalai. “She is frightened and confused. The strange thing is, she has not forgotten you either. She keeps coming back to that

incident, to you, even when I don't mention you. I think yours is a love-hate relationship; she can neither do with you nor without you. Give her time; let her get used to the idea."

"How long? Tell me long am I to wait?" I pleaded.

Thirumalai smiled. "Are you willing to take the responsibility for the protection and comfort of the mother and child, in honour and in respect and to provide for them?"

"Of course!" I said. "Don't you realise, that is the sole reason why I wanted you to find her?"

"Even if she does not want to have anything to do with you..... emotionally or sexually?"

"Yes, you can my word on that too."

"Do you realise what you are saying?" Thirumalai asked me. "Do you wish to accept family responsibilities when you are nearly sixty and when have consistently avoided them for the last thirty years? And that too, without the pleasures of family life?"

"You may not realise it Thirumalai," I pleaded. "But I am a changed man. I have had a lot of time to think in gaol. I may look the same, but I am very different from what I was before I went there. In a way, prison has been my salvation."

"Yes," Thirumalai patted me on the back. "The moment of your greatest crime was also the beginning of your spiritual regeneration. I can see that. But can we make Sushila see it? I have had many conversations with her. I think she is gradually changing, but I want to prepare her before you meet her."

We were silent for a while. Suddenly, a thought struck me. "I wonder if you can do this for me," I said. "During my time in prison, I put down my thoughts and feeling about my life on paper, an intimate account of my past. Nothing has been hidden; nothing has been whiter washed including my encounter with Sushila. Can you persuade her to read it?"

"Is it legible?"

"Yes, I have had enough time to rewrite it neatly."

"It is not a bad idea," Thirumalai mused. "One of Sushila's problems has been that there are no books in the old people's home. She is fond of reading, as you probably know."

"Yes, I know. I used to see her come home with books and magazines."

We talked about old times. He brought me up-to-date with what had been happening in India and the world. It was a pleasure to talk to someone like him, but I could see that he was sad at the way things were going. "We, the older generation have had our day. It is for the people to set things right. But what saddens me is that some of the values which we considered eternal are no longer observed or respected," he said.

After a while, he took my notebooks and left, promising to get in touch with me soon. He was going to be in the city until he had sorted out my problems.

My manager gave me a detailed account of the running of the estate and brought me the accounts to inspect. I was not particularly interested in them. In the mornings and evenings, I wandered over the estate, among the flowers and sat and contemplated my future by Meena's I was glad to see it had been well kept and neatly tended. What she would think of me if she were alive, I wondered. Would she forgive me, as she forgave me my other trespasses?

I waited eagerly for Thirumalai next visit. I was also worried if I had done the right thing in sending my manuscript to Sushila. When I started it, I had no intention that anyone else would read it, particularly anyone as close or as concerned as Sushila. What would she think of me now? For I had laid bare my soul in all its nakedness. Would she be sympathetic or would she condemn me without mercy? I realised I had no claim on her of any sort, except perhaps for being the father of her child.

I was also eager to see my child. I was sure it was mine. But my eagerness was tempered by my anxiety. To be a father for the first time at the age of sixty! I realised I had never heard children's laughter in my house, only occasional women's tears. It would certainly be very awkward for me to deal with a child, even if was my own. If Meena's child had lived, he or she would have been older than Sushila. How would I fare as a father? Even if Sushila did not come to me, would she not at least let me see the child occasionally?

About a week later, Thirumalai telephoned me. "I want you to come to my rooms at about four p.m today," he said.

I hesitated. I had not been out anywhere or seen anyone since my release from prison. It scared me to go out and meet people. "Will there be anyone else there?" I enquired.

"I am hoping Sushila will be here," he said. "She does not want you to go to where she lives at present, but she does not mind meeting you here, in my presence."

"I will be there," I told him.

He had a nice suite of rooms in the government guest house. As I drove towards it, I was nervous and anxious, like a prisoner waiting for the verdict. My heart pounded and I wondered what to say to Sushila when I met her. It had never bothered me before, but now I was sure we would both be awkward and embarrassed. I certainly would feel ashamed. What would I say to her? I did not know. It reminded me of the meeting of prospective brides and grooms in some Indian families now-a-days, before they decide to get married. It was just as well Thirumalai would be there.

When I went in, she was already there. She stood up as I entered, but averted her eyes and did not greet me in any way. Dressed in a faded cotton sari and blouse, she was pale and thin. The vitality of youth, the vivacity of her nature seemed to have gone. I would not have recognized her if I had suddenly come across her in the street.

“Hullo Raju!” Thirumalai got up and greeted me. He put his arm round my shoulders and took me to the chair on his right. Sushila was on his left so that we almost faced each other. There was silence for a few seconds. Then, Thirumalai rang the bell and ordered some tea.

“Sushila has read your account and so have I,” began Thirumalai. “I am glad you have been honest and forthright with yourself and with us. You have not tried to hide anything or justify anything. But the question is, what are you going to do in the future? How are you going to behave?”

I took the plunge. “Last time we met, Sushila told me she would be my cook, washer or even a slave. In my foolishness, I rejected her. Now I want her to be my friend, my honoured guest my wife if she is willing. Now that we have a child, she will be a common bond between us.”

“I am not sure whose child it is uncle,” she too addressed Thirumalai. We were like two advocates pleading our case before the judge, but not addressing each other. “Understandably so, I suppose. But if he so desires, he can have a blood test performed to make sure the child is his.”

I was aghast but I did not hesitate for a second. “I don’t want a blood test!” I nearly shouted. “I don’t care who the father is; I want to adopt her and bring her up as my own daughter.”

Sushila looked at me for the first time. There were tears in her eyes, but I saw also the hint of a smile.

“He has passed the test you set him my dear,” remarked Thirumalai. “In fact, he has come out with flying colours. I told you he was a good man at heart but with a weak will. Prison life seems to have strengthened his resolution.”

The tea arrived. Sushila poured. ‘One lump or two?’ she asked me. I realised those were the first words she had voluntarily said to me. By such mundane words are emotional tensions broken.

“One is enough.”

As she handed me the cup, her hand was shaking. We drank our tea in silence.

“Where is the baby” I enquired.

“She is not a baby,” remarked Sushila. “She is nearly two and a half years old. I did not bring her today.”

She evidently did not want me to see child until she had approved of me. “But I want to see her, what is her name?”

Sushila did not answer. It was Thirumalai who said, “She has been named Meenakshi; I hope you approve.”

She had named the child after my wife! I was deeply touched. I tried to control my emotions before I spoke.

“Sushila, I don’t know if you will believe me, but there have been many times when I wanted to come and fall at your feet and ask for forgiveness. But I was not in a position to do so. And when I got your letter.....”

“Please!” Sushila interrupted me. “The time for apologies, for recriminations, is long past. Do not talk about them.”

“Very well, if you had read the account of my life, you know what I was, what I am likely to be. You must have read the last paragraph I wrote before leaving prison. I think this is what I said and what I believe. ‘Our ties cannot be broken by any earthly power. There is no future for me without you and none for you without me. To find you, to project you, to love you, that is my penance and that is my absolution. That will also be my supreme happiness. There is no other life for me in this world or the next.’

“You have always been very good at persuading women,” she remarked, half in bitterness and half with a smile.

“But I promise.....”

Again she interrupted me. ‘Let us have no promises,” she said. “You see, I know all about you, thanks to the account you have written. You know only my body, but not me as a person.

Therefore, let us accept each other as we are, making allowance for our weaknesses, forgiving each others’ follies, adjusting to each other as we go along. That is the only way open to us.”

“Sushila,” Thirumalai interrupted. “I do think you ought to have some kind of permanent arrangement.”

“Uncle, I once had a lawfully wedded husband,” she spoke with bitterness. “He deserted me when I most needed him. So, what use is marriage? But unfortunately, I am still his wife. I do not want to go through the agony of a divorce proceeding with all my past dragged into the court.” There were tears in her eyes and her voice trembled. “It is true I once told Raju I would be his cook, washer woman or slave. But I hope he will treat me a little better now that he has also suffered for what he did.”

“But still, there ought to be some legal protection for you Sushila,” Thirumalai persisted. “I have every faith in Raju, but you should never again be left in the lurch. When there are no ties recognized by the world, a woman has to hold her man only through love, and she is in constant danger of losing him. Don’t you see?”

“I have lost my faith in legal protection,” she asserted.

“Look Thirumalai,” I intervened. “I have already promised to adopt Meena legally as my daughter. In addition, I will do whatever you think I ought to do.”

“Are you willing to settle half your property on Sushila?” Thirumalai asked me.

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

“No!” shouted Sushila. “I would rather have the uncertain and dubious role of a loving mistress than that of a scheming money grabber. If he adopts Meena, that is enough for me.”

“Then there is nothing more to be said,” announced Thirumalai.

I thanked him profusely for what he had done for me, for us, “You have at long last found a gem of a woman. See that you deserve her.” Then he turned to Sushila. “You know Sushila In spite of our divergent ways, he has been my best friend, almost like a younger brother. Look after him.”

We said goodbye to him and left together. “I cannot leave the old people’s home they have found a substitute for me,” Sushila said. It might take a few days.”

“Meanwhile, can I come and see you there? I asked.

“That won’t be nice. But you can drop me there now and see Meena if you like,” she said.

As I was driving, Sushila enquired, “Can I ask you for a favour?”

“Of course!”

“I would like you to give a donation to the old people’s home. They have been so good to me when I had nowhere to go.”

“How much would you like me to give them?’

“Is a thousand rupees too much?”

“I will give them ten thousand.”

“Oh, no! That would be too much.”

As I sat in the rather dirty waiting room, Sushila went in and brought Meena. “Meena, this is your daddy. He has been away, but now he has come back. Say hullo to him.”

The child looked at me curiously. “Where were you all these days?” she asked.

“Come to me my dear,” I held out my hands. She came all these days?” she asked.

“Come to me my dear,” I held out my hands. She came to me with some hesitation. Then she saw the car. Can I go in the car?” she asked.

“Not today darling; but the next time he comes, he will take us home with him,” said Sushila.

A week later, I went and brought Sushila Meena home. I sat in the front along with the driver while Sushila and Meena sat at the back.

When Meena asked, "Daddy, can't I sit with you in the front?" I knew that in spite of all my transgressions, I was truly blessed.