

THE BEST IS YET TO BE

By
C.K.Mathew

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Author:

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All characters in this book have been created out of the imagination of the author. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

It has been about three years since I brought out my first novel, *The Mustard Flower*. For me it was a labour of love, the fulfillment of a long cherished dream. Along with the other coordinates on my visiting card, I can now legitimately title myself as Author.

I have less than eight years to retire from active service in the Government. I sometimes wonder whether I would prefer to be remembered as a bureaucrat or as an author. There is no doubt that my official work has been the central driving force in my life. Today, I cannot believe that I have been at it now for almost three decades. It has kept me fully engaged, heart, soul and body, in the thousand and one things of governance, from the petty to the grand, from the ridiculous to the sublime. I would not have it any other way.

But the joy I have derived from the writing of my first book has been incomparable. It has done well, comparatively speaking. The 750 books printed and published have been sold out and I have made a tiny profit in the first of my literary ventures. As for the book itself, it did generate interest amongst colleagues as well as literary buffs here and there.

The story line of *The Mustard Flower* was unique, but perhaps not as much as the literary quality of my writing. There were poor patches scattered throughout the length and breadth of the book including small, easily avoidable, printer's devils. But, there were also, a few paragraphs, the reading of which makes me, even now, proud of myself. Friends were critical and the common point of their asperity was that all the characters in the book, including Sarasu, are good souls; in fact, too good to be true, with hearts of such pure gold. How could every character be of such sterling virtue, they asked me? It's not a real world your characters live in, Mathew!

This, the second of my books, is, therefore, and perhaps deliberately, more complex in story line and characterization. The main protagonist, Manjooran, has eccentricities that alienate him from his family. There is also a black-hearted evil genius that would preside over the early life of the other main character, Rekha. Several of those who people this book have oddities in personality that make them different from the pure gold protagonists of "*The Mustard Flower*." The other difference is that where there were three milieus in my first book - Kerala, Rajasthan and England - here in this oeuvre, though Brighton and Mumbai have their moments, there is mainly only one, my native State of Kerala. It is almost as if to accommodate the comparative complexities of its characters, the locale has been limited in this work. I guess this reflects my limitations too: the choice before me was, either simple characters and varying locales, or complex characters and one locale.

I have too an observation about the literary processes involved. In the writing of my first book, the Muse sang like a nightingale in my ear. I could write as fast as my fingers moved on the keyboard. The words flowed like a mountain stream. In this book, however, the Muse was reluctant, hesitant, at times completely drying up for weeks on end. The last six or seven chapters took me more than two years. I wondered whether I was futilely straining to write and whether my talent had been exhausted. I hope not, for I do intend to write many more books in the days to come, when I am no longer a bureaucrat, knowing that there is no retirement age for authors.

As to the story-line, it arises from my contemplation of the function of age in relation to the enjoyment of life. Is one entitled to drink deep from the cup of life only when one is young? And, as one grows older, why does the conscious search for happiness diminish, especially for a lonely man, or for that matter, a lonely woman. In its simple manifestation the question is, why should only the young, teenagers or youthful adults, seek romance for themselves? But in its deeper expression, the question I asked was why should the lonely people of the world resign themselves to their fate and grow old alone. Why should the joy of love be denied those who have loneliness thrust upon them? Do they not have an inalienable right to search for bliss for themselves?

And thus the thought grew and grew, until this book was finally ready. Of course, in the writing of “*The Best is yet to be*”, other complex trains of thoughts and emotions, as also the troubled characterization, may finally have disguised the original essence of the idea of this novel. In its writing, the central theme shifted from mere loneliness, to the constant and unique human quality of striving for happiness even in the face of utter desolation and the extinguishing light of hope. The manner in which we do this, surely, is what distinguishes us from the other species who roam this planet.

As to those who have helped me with the book, as always, Geeta, my wife’s name leads the rest. The staff of the Rajasthan Co-operative Printing Press has, as earlier, brought out a polished product. There have also been friends who have glanced through its pages and offered comments. I am glad that I have followed their suggestions; the book has thus become better than it once was.

And so, I offer this book to the reader, who may condemn or admire; in either case his words are invaluable. Nevertheless, irrespective of what he may say, this is one book where both praise and criticism is redundant; my joy in the creative process alone is enough to sustain me.

I do promise that I shall continue to write, as much as possible, and as often as I can. Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be.

Jaipur
March 2007

C.K.Mathew

List of main characters

Manjooran, *the main protagonist*
Sosha, *his dear departed wife*
Alice, *his first born*
George, *the middling son*
Teresa, *the youngest*

Subash, *Alice's first husband*
Rohan and Mohan, *their twin sons*

Hari, *Alice's second husband*

Sheeba, *George's wife*
Mon, *their son*

Rekha, *the other main character*
Vakil Kurien, *her lawyer father*
Amma, *her mother*
Chetan, *her brother*

Simon, *Rekha's first husband*
Brigadier, *her father-in-law*

Abha, *her friend*
Mini, *her friend*

Daniel, *her old retainer*

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PROLOGUE

Who knows what ghosts walk through the mind of a lonely man? Or what cold fears slither through the empty soul of a loveless woman?

To he who has known love and felt its passionate embrace, the death of the one loved brings an indefinable longing; it is not a harsh pain in the chest or a knife in the bowels, though at the beginning it may so disguise itself. Really, it is an empty scattering of the windy mists of aloneness whistling through the mind. There are grieving friends and family who yearn to comfort him, and surely, they do bring some measure of calm. But when the night brings its own brand of gibbering, yawning terror or when the light of the day rips away the fleeting comforts of remembered dreams, who then can touch the heart of loneliness and quell its pumping, fearful beat?

And she who has loved and then seen the flight of love, and in its flight the diminishing of the soul; she who, as the hair grew white and the lines appeared on the face, had turned bitter and hard; who can possibly plumb her breathless fear, as love, having turned a distant stranger for so long, strays back into her path again? Can she hope to breathe free and full once more?

This is the tale of two embattled souls who refuse to let the spirit of battle die within them. Who are willing to let the future shine its bright rays of possibility into their baffled eyes. They are broken again and again, but they grit their teeth and let the spirit rise once more to fill their lungs with the unsullied air of sparkling hope.

But wait, they are not unique in the strength they demonstrate; really, they are not unlike any of us. They are, indeed, like every one of us. It is our uniqueness that makes us cling to the last straw, even as we are sinking. We will not go down, without the momentary splutter from the candle. Even as we drown, the light will flicker. No, we are not as flies to wanton boys, we have our own matchless spirit. We float as we sink.

The story of Manjooran and Rekha, aging strangers turned lovers, is my tribute to the heroism of the hopeless, an accolade for the ever undefeated, a paean for indestructible hope. Whatever the odds, and however high the insurmountable mountains in the distance, there is always a path that takes us forward. It is our elemental duty to follow it into the iridescent future, indistinct and blurred as it may seem from here and now. Through aching body and grieving spirit, we must move on. Surely, there is something out there calling to our indomitable selves. That hope alone keeps the blood pounding in our hearts.

PART I

This is the state of man: today he puts forth
The tender leaves of hopes; tomorrow blossoms,
And bears his blushing honours thick upon him;
The third day comes a frost, a killing frost,
And when he thinks, good easy man, full surely
His greatness is a-ripening, nips his roots
And then he falls, as I do.

King Henry VIII, Act iii, Sc. 2

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

Two years after his retirement, almost to the day, in the anonymity of an ordinary but unforgiving night, John Manjooran's wife of forty years left him; left him without even a word of farewell. Finally and forever.

At the age of sixty-two, there are not many things to look forward to, except the holidays of children on their annual duty visits or the prattling of grandchildren who come to steal your heart and are then gone without a backward glance. At the age of sixty-two, the home and the hearth are the solid foundations of life, when all other things around you are changing shape and shifting and slipping away from under your feet. All that he and she had wanted was the predictability of each day of the rest of their lives together. The quiet unchanging ritual of the morning, the newspaper, the long leisurely walks, the smells from the kitchen, the magic of twilight and the lamps coming on in the house, the presence of each other on the beds. Their deep breathing in the quiet of the night. What more could one ask for.

The silence in the room had woken him up. It was 2.30 in the early hours of the morning; he knew that for an undisputable fact, for he had glanced at his wristwatch. The absolute stillness in Sosha's body had sent a chill into his own. For a moment, his vision had blurred. He had lain back heavily on to the bed and had felt his mind freeze in a blind stasis. Then, with a brief prayer to the God he believed in, Who to this day had not let him down, Who had listened to all his prayers and Who had granted him more than his share of happiness, he got up painfully to his feet and headed for the telephone.

This final betrayal by Sosha was more than he could bear on his own. He needed someone to take the burden off his hands. Someone young and clear headed, who would not turn befuddled and confused as he was now. Who would know where the telephone numbers were written, who would know what to say to relatives and friends, who would be firm and soft spoken. In whose safe hands he could leave the task of calling over the priest for the final unction and the ordering of the coffin and the vehicle to take the body to the cemetery. And the thousand and one things that had to be done before one was allowed to go on in peace to one's Maker.

That she had a chronic cardiac problem had been acceptable. Her health was suspect for some time now and the doctor had warned him about the weakening of the muscles of the heart. But what he was not prepared for was this sudden flight in the middle of the night. Indeed, of the fact that Sosha was dead, he had no doubts by now. He would, of course, call for Dr. Zachariah who lived nearby, to confirm that prognosis. So the first telephone call was to him. When he had said what he had wanted, he cut the line, not wanting to hear the mumbled words and the shocked silence at the other end.

There were three other calls he had to make, to each of his, their, children. In series, in the order of their seniority and their arrival into his, their, world, he rang them up, one by one. To Alice, their first born, who lived at the other end of the city just twenty minutes away, in fact at this time of the traffic-less night, just ten minutes away, he could not utter his thoughts clearly. He was garbled and confused, his inarticulate gasps were caught harshly in his explanations: but she knew, immediately and indubitably she knew, and she was asking him to be calm and wait, that she would be with him soon, as soon as she could get there. And the years of rancour was suddenly gone from her voice.

To George in Mumbai, who kept him waiting as the phone rang and rang forever, his voice was calmer and he told him, ordered him – what else is a son for - to catch the first plane and get home as soon as possible. Of course, said George, whose sleep had fled and who was staggering back in shock; of course, he would be there – for what else is a son for? And finally, Teresa in her small apartment off the campus in the University of Sussex, where it was still late evening, who divined the harsh truth coming her way the moment she heard her father's voice. She had slipped down to the floor and could not reply in her silent grief. Her father spoke

sharply and she was diverted from her anguish. She muttered her response and made plans for the journey home.

One more thing: the neighbours on either side of the house had to be informed, or else they would frown and complain forever that they had not been told when it was their responsibility, their duty to help him out. He had to do this, he told himself, even if it meant he would have to leave behind the silent, still body that lay curled like a question mark on their bed. So he dragged himself up from the armchair and walked out into the cool night and down the pathway to the gate. The stars overhead glittered like unyielding diamonds. Kochi city lay like a quietly beating heart below them. Orion glared at him, its bright pinpoints of light challenging him from above with their matchless symmetry. Is she winging her way up there, he idly wondered? In the distant harbour, a huge cargo ship hooted into the night, its sound carried faintly over the wind to him. Under his feet, a mangy dog, startled at his presence, whined at him and fled into the darkness. At this time the stillness of the night was like a tomb over his head.

He went first to the right where Srikumaran Nair lived, with his indecently young wife. He had to wait, the doorbell clanging loud and long in the quiet night, before he got a response. Mrs. Nair in her flowery nightdress peered out and tremulously called to him. His identity was revealed and she opened the door. He refused to go in, but in two sentences conveyed what he had to say and left, not bothering to respond to her shock and her fumbling commiserations.

And then to the left where lived Mohammed Koya, the joyful widower who exulted in the freedom that his single existence bestowed on him, whose unnamed club of suddenly single men, he, John Manjooran, had just joined. Mohammed peered out, wrapped untidily in his lungi. This time there was genuine concern and sorrow as the man embraced him and pulled on his shirt and accompanied him back to his silent, occupant less house. Then and only then did he allow himself the luxury of going back to the waiting bedroom and the still, silent body of the one who had been his wife, his lover, his friend for these past forty years.

With Mohammed as wordless witness, he fell to the floor and in a single roar of fury and impotent wrath, he released his grief and his anger. It spread like a sluggish wave of turbid oil, slowly filling the house with a murky misery, a thick glumness that would take days, months to blow away, to wash itself out. His anger was at his God Who had, this once, failed him and had heeded not his lifelong prayers. His anger was too at his now departed wife, who had not waited for him to accompany her on the journey that she was now performing alone. Mohammed lifted him up, took him to the guest room and laid him out on the bed. He rubbed his forehead and brought him a glass of water to drink.

Srikumaran and his wife were in the house by then, the latter suitably dressed in a pale salwar and kurta. They peeped into the bedroom where Sosha lay, oblivious to the confusion around her. They did not have the awesome audacity to touch her or set her limbs in order. For that, they would wait for Alice. However, in the way that only women know, Mrs. Nair busied herself in the kitchen and in the house, removing the chairs and the peg tables from the main room and leaving a large open space where Sosha would be later laid out for the final darshan.

The car bringing Alice with the two children, the twins, was at the gate and she rushed in, in complete disarray. The children, in their teens, quiet and subdued, their faces carefully masked of emotions, stood about in some confusion, not knowing how to deal with their stricken mother. Alice glanced at her father on the armchair in the guest room. There was someone attending to him; so she rushed into the bedroom where Sosha, her mother, the one who had brought her into the world, was lying curled up, turning to her right, her left arm extended, an unerased smile on her face. Alice did not realise that it was the living that needed more of her attention and not the now departed. Be that as it may, the wordless call of one who had just passed away was more compelling than the groans she could now hear from her father. The subject that needed to be addressed, and would now perhaps be ignored forever, was that she was now visiting the house in the middle of the night after an absence of more than two years. Her strangeness to the contours of the furniture and the placement of the carpets was apparent for she almost tripped on them as she ran headlong into the room.

It was thus left to Alice to straighten out her mother's body, to arrange her clothes into some form of order, and then usher in the doctor who went through the perfunctory formalities that had to be completed. It was now final and official: Sosha, 60 years old, was dead. Dead of creeping arteriosclerosis, having lived her life in the shadow of her husband, a completely devoted and dedicated wife who had experienced exquisite joy and untold bliss as partner to this big, bluff and foolhardy man who had loved her, and whom she had loved, more than life itself.

By daylight, the house was full of people: neighbours, friends and relatives, acquaintances, erstwhile colleagues from his old office, the colony society members, even complete strangers who claimed to be sons and daughters of well loved people who had passed on earlier. Everyone wanted to help, to be of assistance. Alice was at the center of the milling crowd and she conducted the mournful business of a funeral with a quiet, somber grace. She deputed somebody to make the necessary telephone calls to people who had to be informed. Others were sent for the flowers, the white cloth, the candles and the coffin. Manjooran was not consulted at all. The unwritten rule of the day was that he was not to be bothered with any of the details: he was to be left alone with his grief and to nod his head at the ones who came to see him and offer their condolences. Alice may have realised, but did not acknowledge, that keeping oneself busy was the best antidote to the overpowering stupor of tragedy. But today she would brook no interference, from nobody, not even her father.

The priest had come too. He was young and still learning the awesome truths of life and death, of tragedies that shatter existence and leave families torn asunder. He could find no explanations for the pain that was all around him, in accidents, in deaths, in disease and in the souring of relationships. He felt ignorant and foolish when he could not perform his appointed tasks of comforting souls and bringing peace to those in his flock who needed consolation. At times, he was perplexed at the unnecessary pain and sorrow he found all around him, to which he had no answers or explanations. But, he had to soldier on, that he knew, for without the solace of faith and prayer, where would he be. He was awkward and ill at ease and he muttered his prayers, said a few words to the ones gathered and hugged the grieving man and was then on his way to the church to make the arrangements for the funeral to be held later in the evening.

George and Sheeba, with their pale-faced five-year-old boy flew in from Mumbai and were brought to the house by a kindly friend who picked them up from the airport. The sudden spasm of grief that moved in George's chest when he saw the body of his mother laid out, washed and serene on the mat on the floor, was so powerful that he gasped and clung to his father in a soundless, breathless anguish that wet his cheeks and burnt his eyes. His wife and son had never ever seen anything destroy the complacency of his face and the awfulness of it was as disturbing as the grief itself. Sheeba's eyes prickled with tears and the child tugged at her sari to ask what was wrong. He was hushed and taken away by another relative to the kitchen. Teresa from London would reach only by the evening of the next day, but there was no way that the funeral could have been delayed for so long.

At three in the evening, the cortege left the house for the little chapel in the cemetery next to the imposing cathedral, a couple of kilometers away, in a long motorcade of at least a dozen vehicles. It inched past the pier on the harbour road where traffic was heavy. But in unspoken courtesy, the milling cars gave way to the cortege and allowed it to pass on smoothly. Everything had been arranged and John Manjooran had to do nothing but be led about by concerned people, who pointed him in the right direction and told him what to do. He was touched by a certain aura that made him special, privileged as it were, where all that he said was listened to with utmost politeness and courtesy and his slightest wish was a command to obey. The rituals were mercifully short. Friends and family, who had gathered around, lowered the body down into the grave. He felt his knees briefly give way but Alice was by his side, strong and indestructible. She held him up and made him sit down on a chair that had magically appeared from out of nowhere. He stared unblinkingly at the slowly filling grave as the diggers shoveled the earth back into the small hole in the ground. The trees around the cemetery swayed in the breeze like a brooding crowd of ghosts, whose corporeal bodies lay under the skin of the earth below his feet. John Manjooran knew that he was now all alone in this world.

By late evening, it was all over: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The short trip back home was a long journey that stretched out interminably, the seconds seeming to prolong into endless minutes and hours in a manner that made him tired and irritable. Manjooran lay back in his car seat, his eyes closed, the little drama of the funeral being played out repeatedly in his mind. The sound of the earth falling on the wooden coffin had been like an irregular drum beat, surprisingly loud and grating. He knew he would hear it in his head, in his dreams and his nightmares, for the rest of the days of the life he had to now lead alone. He pushed away the picture that kept arising to his mind over and over again, of the wet moist earth and the waiting maggots, the decay of flesh. The inexorable passage of time.

Back home, he only wanted to sleep, but he knew that would be impossible and begged for the indulgence of sleeping pills that, again, arrived as if from nowhere. Perhaps there was someone there in the house -was it Alice? -who had anticipated his failings, his bodily weaknesses and had kept things in readiness for these eventualities. With just that kind of foresight, somebody who had taken over the kitchen had prepared rice gruel, and some kind of coconut chutney, that was hot and filling and he was glad he had accepted Alice's advice to take some into his stomach before he slept. There were others too in the house, some relatives, who had come from afar and who would be staying the night before they left the next day, to catch up on their own briefly interrupted lives. They left him largely alone; his circle of grief was not to be trespassed upon.

The night came into his mind, suddenly in a rush, aided by the drugs. Before he was knocked out, he knew that next day there was much to be done, much to be thought about. He was aware he could not hear the breathing of his wife beside him for the simple reason that she was not there, she was just not there, and, in all certainty, would not be there ever. He knew in some deep part of his unconscious mind that the comforting sounds he had heard every night of his life for the past forty years were gone. Irretrievably gone were the sounds of breath drawn in and released. The resonance in a room where there is another person is different in tonal quality from one where you are alone. He would need to think about that simple fact too.

He woke up several hours later. By a strange coincidence it was again 2.30 in the early morning. He knew, despite having wakened from a dreamless, befuddled sleep, he knew with an aching desperation and a startling clarity that the empty space beside him on the bed would not be filled up, ever. In the room, on mattresses laid out on the floor, were Alice and the children: how and when they had come in, he did not know. Alice was not asleep, but hearing his movements, she raised herself up and asked, "Papa, what is it? Do you need anything?" Alice, his first born, whom he had rejected, as it were, for she was hardly a part of his recent life, and who, despite the long and endless pleas and entreaties of Sosha, had remained barred outside the periphery of his circle of love. Against whom he had built a fortress in his heart, a huge structure with no doors and windows, with an iron gate where none could go through, especially Alice, who now lay awake, watching over him, this old man who had been afflicted by the singular disease of loneliness just a few short hours ago.

Without a word, he stretched out his arms to her and, in the wonder of unplumbed love, in the harsh cleansing of unimpeded tears, she rushed to him and they clung to each other. They wept on each other's shoulders with loud and unimpeded sobs. The tears brought forgiveness and acceptance of things gone by; there was sorrow at precious time lost that would never come back. And there was mourning for the loss of a loved one who had filled their small lives with serenity and love, who had asked for nothing but the togetherness of family. They wept with gasps and cries that went on and on until the whole grieving house, with its sundry visitors and shocked relatives, came awake quietly and, in the hushed stillness of the night, listened in a watchful, awed silence, heads bowed and eyes wet, to the unchecked sounds of endless grief.

THE PAST IN A SNAPSHOT

Nobody had heard of love marriages in those days: who could have had that kind of gumption. There were tales in the family, of course, of the light-eyed Saramma who had fallen head over heels with a paying guest and had eloped to faraway Calcutta. And of Mohankutty who had whisked away a pariah girl to the civil court in Cochin for a registered marriage and had then fled, never to come back to these parts. But those were events a good half-century ago. Such transgressions were not easily forgiven in the heart of the rubber estates of Kerala. So, in the year 1960, when John Manjooran's father, the wealthy plantation owner with two children born out of his and Elikutty's loins, arranged for the alliance of his first born son with the daughter of a High Court judge, there was wide spread approval. The family was distinguished, the girl was of a suitably fair colour and the dowry was appropriate.

For the Manjoorans, the Church loomed large and dominant over the family and every aspect of their life. From birth and baptism, right up to the moment of death, through adulthood and marriage, the Church held sway over the lives of the parish members, and especially of the aristocratic Manjoorans. Attending church on Sundays was a ritual that would never be put off. Every single Sunday of their lives, the men and the women of the family would get up in the early mornings, have a bath in cold water and without taking their breakfast would arrive at church and sit through the holy service, paying uninterrupted attention to the liturgy and the sermon of the parish priest. The priest was almost a member of the family; he would be consulted on all family issues and problems. The Church towered over their lives like a giant totem, governing every aspect of life under the sun. But we know, don't we, that life is not always determined by the rules of God. It is a lesson that the church does not teach, but one that each one of us learns in due course, even if we learn nothing much else.

When the young groom brought home Sosha from the church, it soon became clear she was taking time to adjust to the life of the large family in the country home it was her fate to marry into. Appachen, her father-in-law had a powerful personality and his presence was everywhere, from the estates he managed with such efficiency to the personal life of his many retainers and even to the details of the monthly kitchen accounts. Ammachy was a stern figure who did not find it a contradiction to make huge differences between the new daughter-in-law and her own daughter. Their daughter, Sosha's sister-in-law, did not know much better herself, for she was a child of a home where these issues were never discussed or debated. A woman's lot was to be accepted, not chafed about.

Sosha shrank into herself and moved about the house as quietly as a mouse, doing what she was told without demur or question. True to say, she found comfort only in the bedroom, in the arms of a largely helpless husband, who understood the worries disturbing his little wife's mind, but who could not, dared not, break the age-old interrelationships of the household. Had he had the temerity to venture to do so, the storm that would have inevitably resulted would have torn the family apart. So, with a great weight in their hearts, they maintained silence on the subject. After nine in the late evening, after their bedroom door was closed, none came to disturb them. Their nights were filled with a wide-eyed wonder as the young couple together learnt the definition of love and its many ecstasies.

When he finally got a job, six months after the marriage, as Manager in a financial company in Cochin, made possible, no doubt by the dropping of a few names by his father, both of them were relieved. The country home at Kottayam had been stifling; the integration of the daughter-in-law into the family rhythm had not been smooth and the freedom that now beckoned from Cochin was irresistibly intoxicating. When they shifted base, they took along furniture, utensils and some essentials with a handsome endowment from Appachan to enable them to start life on their own. It was then and only then, that they really started life together, not as son and daughter-in-law, but as man and wife. The spaces within the walls of their small new

home seemed larger and warmer and more homely, filled with an undiluted love that did not lessen when the morning sun rose. The sea breeze that blew in through the windows of their small company flat was liberating and filled with a magic that lasted through the rest of their much-blessed lives together.

Success came to John Manjooran easily: he was a fine figure of a man, handsome and tall and with an easy articulation that revealed deep honesty and integrity. He had a barrel chest and a proud brow that spoke of character and commitment as also a fierce temper, should one cross him. He stood out in a party, or a group photo, where his height and his personality made people look at him more than once. He worked hard and long and proved that competence and commitment came, not merely from family lineage, but through personal application and industry. His rise up the ladder of corporate hierarchy was quick and without controversy. The Chairman and the Board of Directors knew that in him they had found a jewel, one they would do well to treasure and nurture for the good of the Company. As he progressed upwards, he was given larger houses and his own car and servants and finally a huge bungalow, from where he ultimately retired, after serving on the exalted post of Managing Director. When he left it, the Company was worth several hundred times more than when he had joined it as a young novice. He began his retirement as - to put it in a nutshell - a respected citizen, a loving husband and father and a good man. He was looking forward to a life of cheerful happiness and good health.

Sosha was by his side throughout this long journey of almost forty years, in the early days of stress and strain, through the middle plateau when life was steady as a rock, and in the final ascent as age, the growing up of children, clogged arteries and a strained back made her restless and distracted. Her husband stood by her through doctors' prescriptions and countless laboratory tests and a costly angioplasty some years ago. The children were all gone away by then, having sprouted wings that carried them far and wide, within the country and abroad. Thus, it was that when the final moment came, John Manjooran had been all alone.

Indeed, the children had all come within the first six years after life in Cochin had begun: they had popped out with metronome regularity within two years of each other. Twenty-four months after the marriage, Alice was born; twenty-four months separated Alice from George and another twenty-four months stood between George and Teresa. The Chairman of his Company had once joked that Manjooran managed his love life with the same efficiency as his office matters. Manjooran replied that three is a nice number to stop at and that he had no further plans to expand the production capacity of their joint venture. Sosha had blushed, for this comment was made during a Company dinner, accompanied by loud laughter and backslapping. Sometimes she was aghast as to how her husband could say such things in public.

Alice was the first born, a plump and happy baby, smiling all the time with never a sour face or a puckered lip. In the hospital, she had popped out nice and easy, with hardly a whimper or a cry; a small, wet, slippery bundle of joy. Years later, when Sosha remembered the easy birth of her daughter, she would become confused: she would ask "what matters joy when pain follows?" Those thoughts, of course, came much later. But in those early, wonderful years of her childhood, Manjooran and Sosha spent hours just watching her as she grew, as she suckled, as she was bathed, as she slept. She was bright and picked up nursery rhymes and singsong jingles from her mother. When irritated, or when she did not get the chocolates she wanted, she would cry sharply and throw her rattles at the wall until someone came in and succumbed to her threats. Between the ages of three and nine, she went through a series of medical problems; whooping cough, measles, and a mild bout of chicken pox. At school she was intelligent, within the first five ranks in class. Sometimes her father exhorted her to do better, to be right at the top, because he felt John Manjooran's daughter could be the best in the world, provided she wanted, really wanted, to be so.

When she was in her Pre-degree college, her ranking fell to somewhere near the middle of the class causing much despair in her disappointed father's mind. And on a particular day, when she brought home the class grades, Manjooran probably said something to the effect that she was not putting in the desired effort, that it was not the number of hours that mattered, but the way in which she deployed her mental faculties. The sharpness in her father's tongue was enough to start the fire in her. The challenge worked; Alice put in the

required effort and her grades improved considerably. In college too she flowered, this daughter of Manjooran and Sosha, and she rose in the eyes of her teachers and, indeed, the Principal of the College, as a model student, most likely to succeed in the life ahead.

She would have liked to study beyond her graduation, but John Manjooran felt that it was time for her to find a life partner. There were some harsh words over it, between father and daughter, and for a long while, Alice was full of a sharp resentment. Then, when it was decided she would have no choice in the matter, she put on an indifference to demonstrate that she couldn't care less. Sosha was once again a silent witness to the tensions in the house, but being Sosha, she did not have the right words to calm the distress.

Manjooran had assumed naively that Alice's marriage would be as perfect as her parents'. He did not realise, did not appreciate it as much as he should have, that the world had turned on its axis too many times between 1960 and 1984. So, when the proposal for the alliance came, he did not find it necessary to ponder too much before accepting it. Subash Thomas, the son of the well-known cashew king had his father's empire to inherit when his time came. Family wealth was assured and Alice would be happy and contented. There was no better gift he could give her than an assured future. Alice and Subash: it seemed such a perfect match then to the proud families. The twins came a few years later. What more could one ask for?

But Time has its own devices to trip up happiness when you least expect it. Of course, Sosha would learn that particular lesson in due course of time, learn to expect it and suffer it. Manjooran, however, resisted and fought against things over which he had no control, finding pain and bitterness in the course of his struggles and not understanding that it was he, more than anyone else, who was responsible for the agony that he spread around him and his loved ones.

In the meanwhile, there was George, the middling child. George was made much of, as a son, as the heir to the family and though both of them were not very much concerned about the primacy of the male (the normal Kerala Christian's adoration of the first born son borders on worship), Manjooran was indeed overjoyed. Even more so were the grandparents, Appachan and Ammachy, who gifted a thick, gold girdle for the infant to wear. Sosha's father was more restrained. As a High Court judge, perhaps he had seen more of the travails the human race was prey to and understood that joy and sorrow have very similar faces. He was happy, though his delight was muted: he had lost his wife just a couple of months ago. The loss had been traumatic for him and for Sosha and for sometime there had been concern as to how she would face up to the untimely death, for she herself was going through a rather difficult pregnancy.

George grew in the Manjooran household placid and temperate in everything that he did. It was the one distinguishing feature of his personality. He was never excited, never upset; nor was he especially curious, as children are wont to be. His performance was average in his class. Neither did he want to do any better. He was not slow, no, because he was not at the bottom of his class. He was constantly smiling and his face revealed a silent equanimity, a peace and a calmness that was born, not of deep understanding and compassion, but of a gentle self-sufficient satisfaction, a deliberate tardiness of comprehension. His moods never varied or changed with the time of the day or the rotation of the earth around the sun. He ate what was placed before him and never complained. His placidity worried his parents, especially his father, who at times provoked him, wishing to see some response, some sharp word that may rise to his tongue. But there was nothing. He learnt his multiplication tables, his science books and his history lessons, all with the same quiet application, the same leveled interest that got him his perfectly average marks in a class where the extremes of brilliance and stupidity were high. The perfect, average student.

Manjooran tended to be critical while George was patient and long-suffering. The jibes became sharp and often hurtful. From being bruised and raw inside, George soon learnt that a blank face and a pretended indifference was the best armour against his father's sarcasm. He held his breath and did not exhale. He walked gingerly around the house, speaking but a few words when required to, keeping his sisters at a distance carefully measured out, neither too cold, nor too close. His mother worried about him and it was only to her that he would, in oblique hints and suggestions, reveal the hurt he nursed inside. She would clasp him to her bosom and remind him that his father loved him as much as he did the others. He should not mind

his impatience, for he only wanted George to do well in life. Nestled against his mother's heart, he felt some peace returning to his troubled soul.

Manjooran knew he would have to use his influence to settle him in some job or the other. It would have to be at a sufficiently adequate level in the management hierarchy. It would not do to have Manjooran's son employed as a low level functionary. And, he argued to himself, it would be better he is away from here, some place where his presence would not raise questions. When the father enjoyed such a high social status, wouldn't people ask what the son was doing in so ordinary a career? He had to call in a few favours for this particular task; and though he was averse to doing that, he had no choice. After all, he was the heir and all. Thus, he had managed to get him a job in the personnel wing of a company in Bombay, which provided him with a small flat and a reasonable salary.

And then there was the question of his marriage. The proposal came from a distant acquaintance from Bombay itself, one Thomas Chacko, an Accounts Officer in a private company, who had heard about the job George had procured for himself and had suggested that his daughter Sheeba, already at Bombay, could be considered for the alliance. To him, it was an ideal choice: to have his daughter married off to the scion of a fine family and to still have his much loved and pampered daughter around even after the marriage. Manjooran had hemmed and hawed for a while but then had acquiesced because he knew that the mediocrity of his son's calibre could not demand an exalted lineage or the influence of a powerful family business. And so it was settled. In many ways it was not the best choice, but Manjooran was not in a mood to dally any longer. It was almost as if he wanted the matter finally disposed off, and off his hands.

Sheeba was a lighthearted, flighty girl, coy in demeanor and full of giggles. She brought with her a fresh breeze of simple delight that swept George off his feet. Manjooran and Sosha were initially thrilled to see her in the house, but as time passed, her continuous prattle and her constant need to be entertained began to tell on their patience. One cannot, Manjooran whispered to Sosha, have only dimples and jokes the whole day through. To him, Sheeba, was all shining surfaces and it was difficult to know if the opaque shell held substance or merely reflected the light falling on it. She had smiles for everybody, with small, even teeth and little dimpled cheeks. She showed not a care for the morrow or for a long-term future or for saving for a rainy day. Not that she was extravagant: in fact, she was determined she would manage the household within the money allotted to her and she gave not a bit of trouble to George in matters of household finances. She charmed Sosha with her small talk and her ceaseless patter, stories of her childhood and her friends and even displayed her knowledge of recipes learnt from her mother. Her jams and bakes and relishes adorned the table during the two weeks the young couple spent at home before they left for Bombay. In reading her letters, Sosha got the feeling that she was pushing her hands through a mass of cotton wool, trying to reach the core inside, and finding nothing but unending bales of more cotton wool within.

When George had left, it was as if his going created no vacuum. The space left by his departure was filled up by the presence of the others, just as water fills the space in a trough from where a goblet had been removed. Nobody missed him too much. There was only a satisfied sense of relief that he was now settled in life. Manjooran was not unhappy to see the young couple go off to set up home in Bombay.

There were letters and phone calls from Sheeba full of news of her attempts to set up home and turn their flat into a beautiful little love nest. In Bombay, George finally found the simple, domestic bliss he had yearned for, but had never realised. Sheeba's presence was soothing. No longer were there the recriminations and the sneering disdain he had lived with for more than a decade in his father's house. Here in the flat in the high-rise apartment, looking down at the swarming roads and the milling crowds of the mega city, he hoped he could ease the bursting tension in his chest. He could exhale. He could take in deep breaths of Bombay's not-too-clean air and feel the thrill of being alive. He was his own master in a 700 sq. feet flat, with Sheeba by his side. There, the little flat the company provided was sufficient for the needs of the new couple: they spent their time together in the contemplation of each other and in exploring the exciting sights and sounds of the big city. Not too far away were her parents and on some weekends they would go across and stay for

lunch and get back home late in the evening, living the unsullied life of ordinary people. It gave him such joy and contentment.

George's work in office was not heavy and he was normally free by six in the evening. Sheeba spent her time in the course of the day in gossip with the neighbours and joined a lovely, cozy kitty party, which did not believe in extravagant do's, or other pranks that some of these groups were tempted to. So she was kept busy with her friends in the day and she kept George busy in the evening and in the night. It was a close secluded relationship that they had and they delighted in the many joys it brought to them. On summer holidays when she visited her husband's home back in Kerala, she took some bright glitzy toys for the twins and they loved it. They demonstrated to her the affection that children have for those who give them lavish gifts and there was a lot of playful laughter and teasing between the three of them. John Manjooran watched in bemused consternation: to him it was as if George and Sheeba lived in a different planet on a different orbit. He wondered whether there was only the exterior to them and whether they felt emotion or any strong feeling, or had any moments of deep contemplation when the mysteries of life appeared overwhelming and inexplicable. How could life only be all chatter and smiles?

And then there was Teresa who, at birth, coming into this world through the loins of her mother, caused her so much pain that she almost died in the process. Sosha had struggled for two days, finally forcing the worried doctor into performing the caesarian section that had exhausted her, leaving her with a backache that stayed with her till the very end of her days. This child was different and Manjooran noticed it from the very first days after she was brought home from the hospital. She used to lie quiet and watchful, suckling at her bottle while her eyes quietly gazed at the wonderful world all about her.

As she grew up, she was carefully observant in everything she did, as if she were noting down things in her diary for future reference. She didn't speak much, but when she did, her words appeared to have layers of meaning, almost philosophical utterances that perhaps a sage would have made. When she rose from class to class, she showed a complete ignorance of things scientific, of numbers, of angles and theorems, of biology and physics. Her science and math teachers despaired of her, but her comprehension of the arts, of the abstract, was phenomenal. She spent much of her time in reading books far beyond her age: at the age of fourteen, she was found one day in her father's room with a copy of Thomas à Kempis that even Manjooran had never glanced through. She easily turned to books on religion and philosophy, but discarded them soon enough for Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. And then on to Russell and Toynbee and books of historical interpretation, of great intellectual movements of the world. She did not reveal much in conversation and Sosha was both proud and unhappy for her. Proud because finally her college teachers admitted of the superior intelligence that she had demonstrated in her term paper on the subject of the impact of the Renaissance on the Catholic Church. And unhappy, because she was made so very different, as if her unrecognized genes turned her into a stranger in her own home and hearth.

At College, she was largely left to her own devices. The boys condemned her as standoffish while she found them uninteresting and intellectually dull. They, in turn, voted her the most boring student of the year. She didn't care to bother with the verdict. Also, she refused to be drawn into the mindless gossip that the girls continuously engaged themselves with. She found the odour of their oiled hair and their jasmine flowers cloying and diverting. There were just a couple of them who were tolerable and with whom she could chat and spend time with. Lekha and Pavitra would meet her often in the library and they would spend time together preparing their class notes and reading copiously from the reference books.

As a daughter, she was kind and loving in a complicated kind of way. Of the three children, it was she who would slip into the kitchen and help her mother in making the dishes her father loved so very much; the fish coconut curry and the red meat dishes. And she would also not hesitate to sit down with her father for a chat on any subject, which caught her fancy, expressing her views in no uncertain terms. She would, however, have nothing to do with marriage for the moment and she had no problem in deflecting Manjooran whenever he raised the subject. Sosha wondered how Alice had fought the idea and had to finally bow her head to his

dictates and how easily Teresa had turned away the proposal of an early marriage with such ease, bordering on contempt.

Teresa was growing like an exotic plant that did not yield to discipline. She was moving into horizons over which her parents had no control. The day she completed her graduation, she got an offer from the University of Sussex in UK, which agreed to pay for all her expenses simply on the strength of a paper she had sent them some months ago, on native influences on British writing in India during the pre-Mutiny period. The paper was full of new insights that bordered on genius and it had the University academia go out of its way to invite her over. Manjooran was shocked that his daughter could have entered into correspondence with a foreign University without him even knowing about it. But something in Teresa's eyes kept him from taking up cudgels on the issue. Sosha, as usual, advised that it would be more prudent to accept what was coming their way, rather than to fight it. Teresa's trump card was that she would not seek a penny from her father for this flight from the green rice fields of Kerala. Grudgingly, Manjooran had no choice but to accept the inevitable.

Once she had decided her future course and obtained for herself the necessary wherewithal to finance her education in London, once she had made it clear that this is indeed what she wanted to do, then there was no stopping her. One day she was there and the next she was gone. There was a quiet determination somewhere within that small frame and Manjooran realised with alarm, and indeed some pride, that here was a person who would do precisely what she wanted and that neither he nor anyone would be tolerated if her path was obstructed. Once this basic rule was understood, there was no problem at all: the relationship soon settled on to an even keel and there was genuine love and affection between her and her parents. Her letters from London were newsy and full of thoughts of home and family. She was doing her best in the extremely competitive atmosphere the University imposed on her and it was a matter of great happiness for Manjooran and Sosha to accept that their youngest daughter's decision was indeed the right one for her and for her future.

In her annual holidays, too brief and swiftly passing, she expressed her hesitant love of her home and her desire to come back some day with sufficient qualifications under her belt to enable her to do something productive and useful for her country. She said something once that Sosha found very interesting: that whenever she saw the Indian flag, either on TV or in some magazine or book, she felt proud and deeply moved and that the emotion really shook her up. Teresa confessed that she herself found this strange, as she was not easily moved by sentiments. But perhaps it would be her destiny to come back to India, doing whatever she can for the country, for her people, for her homeland, though she did confess she felt quite pompous as she said the words.

It was Sosha's fate to be the pleader, the interlocutor, the mediator in the small disputes that at times troubled her home. But her pleas were often in vain. When Alice had wanted to study further, Sosha had tugged at her husband's sleeve as she saw the words between father and daughter turning too acerbic for her liking. But Manjooran had only kept on shouting till the evening turned to night. Alice's demeanor had turned from anger to defiance to sullen submission and finally to a careless nonchalance that was insulting and intended to hurt. That particular storm had taken all her skills to subdue, through her long conversations with Alice in the early mornings and her quiet interventions in the sanctuary of the bedroom when she could speak her mind out to her husband.

George's bland indifference had also raised the ire in Manjooran who, in exasperation compared him to his Alice, where at least there was some kind of response, where one could argue and try to convince, if not browbeat. Sosha had to get in the way again, and risk her husband's wrath, to support her son, though he just didn't seem to care if he were doing well or badly. Neither his father's outburst, nor his mother's intercession had any impact on him. But that was all right, for it was a mother's lot to stand by her children, come what may, whether her love was returned or not. Sosha had demurred in her gentle way at the job offer from

Bombay wanting to have her son somewhere nearby, but Manjooran's views on the subject were inflexible. About George's marriage to Sheeba too, she had her views, something complicated about family antecedents and the Christian genealogy, but she was unable to express it in a comprehensible fashion and again it was Manjooran who won the day.

It was only where Teresa was concerned that, in a fashion, Sosha managed to get her way. She realised the strong sense of determination, even obduracy, which underlay every action and word that her youngest child did or uttered. There was a curtain, an iron wall so to say, beneath the girl's apparent personality, hidden from view until it was tested. And once it was, then she would brook no nonsense, tolerate no interference and finally get her way by simply wearing down all opposition. Sosha advocated moderation and pleaded long with Manjooran: but the confrontation was won by Teresa not because of the mother's intervention but because the daughter could not be vanquished by bullies like her father. Alice watched the unfolding drama of her sister's battle and wished she had had the conviction and the strength of mind to emulate her when the chips were down for her. Her chance would come, later; but by then things would have gone too far for any reconciliation.

So Sosha went along, taking the bad times with the good times, the bitter with the sweet. But more often than not, she was victim and prey; she was the one left injured and cowering, buffeted by the family storms that came her way, to which she could only bow her head and pray. It was her fate to stand in the shadow of her man. She would herself have not had it any other way. At times she protested and argued in her subdued, muted manner and, at rare moments, she was able to touch the big, bluff heart of the man she loved with every fibre of her body, every muscle of her heart. At those exquisite moments she felt the grace, the blessing of the love and generosity of her fine family, blowing over her like a strong wind, lifting her spirits and making her sing. In the tearful ecstasy that such moments brought to her, she felt fulfilled and complete.

Through all the days of her existence, Sosha had borne the travails and joys of her life next to Manjooran with strength and courage. At times when misfortune threatened to capsize her home, she had prayed with a complete faith and devotion to her Christ, Whose presence filled her home in every nook and corner. There were crucifixes and icons and paintings and prints everywhere. It was clear that every little thing that happened, every thought expressed or left unspoken, was under the beatific smile of the Christ, who stood like a watchful guardian over the fortunes of the Manjooran household. And Sosha surrendered to that smile with a devotion that was complete, unquestioning and unequalled.

Thus it was that by the time Manjooran was nearing retirement, his children had fled from them in all directions and the graceful gray-haired couple was alone once again. It was almost as if they were starting life together once more. But for the fact that there were worry lines and wrinkles on their faces, and it was sometimes difficult to get up from their bed on cold mornings and Manjooran's knees ached and Sosha's back gave her endless trouble. All in all, it was a good life, the children were more or less settled, but for Teresa, and Manjooran had not yet given up hope that she would come back and finally agree to get married and settle down in Kerala. The year was 1997 and a new century would be soon ushered in. Life was more than tolerable and it was time now to spend it in joyful retirement watching the children and the grand children grow up and grasp their dreams.

THE END OF A MARRIAGE AND BEYOND

The sense of unease that had troubled Sosha before the marriage of Alice and Subash, was washed away a few weeks after the event when the couple returned from an extended honeymoon to Mysore and Bangalore. The joy with which the young, handsome couple looked at each other, as they lingered in their room before joining the relatives and friends for the innumerable lunches and dinners, the late morning appearances as if they were replete and satiated and needed no food; all these and more made it abundantly clear that the marriage was a certified, indisputably roaring success. Alice was radiant. On visits to the Manjooran household, she sought every opportunity to rush back to the bedroom where Subash would be waiting. There was an unabashed sensuality in her every movement that embarrassed the gentle Sosha and made Manjooran turn away. But she hardly noticed their discomfort for she was flying on a different orbit. Subash, on his part, appeared nonchalant and at ease; he was the contented groom and his contentment was complete and unalloyed.

In a Christian household, especially one such as that of the Manjooran family, it was mandatory for the new groom to be around only when the man of the house was in. So, in the week they stayed with Alice's parents at Cochin, each day before Manjooran went off to his office, Subash would be up and waiting and there would be conversations at the breakfast table and broad smiles at jokes told and family secrets revealed. There was much ribbing, usually about Alice's pranks in school when she was a child, her excessive fondness for toast and butter which she used to pile up on her plate, her craze for listening to music on the radio, the stray cat she had tried to fondle before getting scratched and thoroughly frightened. Alice was both embarrassed and amused at the kind of things being revealed to her new husband, but did not raise serious objections. She hoped the honors would be reversed when she went back to stay at his parents' home at Kottayam the next week.

Life with Subash was exhilarating in those days. He was a strong built man, as handsome as the devil himself. Alice, who had had her share of devouring Mills and Boon romances, saw herself being swept away in a tide of passionate sensuality she did not know she was capable of. Those heady days made her want to swoon and fly away on the wings of desire to some enchanted island in the ocean, where they would spend the rest of their days in delicious, spectacular isolation. Every waking moment of their early years of marriage was spent in each other's company. The bountiful wealth of the family was at Subash's command and he was willing to spread it under her feet for her to tread on. The twins came in the third year of the marriage; a trifle late as her mother-in-law was once heard to mention; but, in fact, their arrival had been deliberately delayed by the couple who did not wish their feet to be shackled by the responsibilities of bringing up infants.

There was a fascinating trip abroad in the interval, when the sights and sounds of Europe and the grass covered hills and dales of England so fascinated them that they decided to stay on for a couple of weeks more than originally scheduled. It must have been on that trip that Rohan and Mohan had been conceived, for Alice had felt her heart beat loud with the passion of her love for her husband who lived as if he had no other desire but to make her happy. Her cup of joy was running over.

There was the small matter of getting a job for Subash, for he was now living off his father's wealth. His father had no objections to the present arrangement, for he had a surfeit of money and he did not know what to do with it. Alice, however, felt a man ought to have his own independence, his own source of income. She had a certain delicate sense of embarrassment at being so very dependent. The financial arrangements they currently enjoyed made her a parasite and that was galling to her sense of identity, her pride, her awareness of freedom. She did mention it once or twice to Subash, but he brushed her aside saying there was enough time for that later. The present was to be enjoyed as much as was possible. It was a point of view that had its own merit as they stood on the banks of the Seine under the bridges of Paris; but back in the family home,

when one morning she found herself feeling nauseous in the first months of her pregnancy, the charms of the bohemian life seemed to have suddenly fled.

The arrival of the twins (ask for one and get another free!) was an unexpected bonus. Or was it an unwanted headache; that was a question she would smilingly ask the two little brats as they grew up. It was the beginning of a new phase of their lives together. Manjooran and Soshamma were thrilled, of course, and so were Subash's parents: it was proven from both sides of the family that the genes had combined in such a fashion as to produce the best that Kerala Catholic tradition could possibly engender. Twins! Both boys! What more could one want?

The grandparents preened themselves in the proud contemplation of the infants while Subash spread out his chest and nodded his head vigorously, as if to receive the applause; like a magician who had pulled a rabbit, in fact, two rabbits, from his hat. When wife becomes mother, the wild enchantment of woman's attractions is dulled and the tough day-to-day rigors of everyday life take over. The hard work involved, of getting up at odd hours, of re-filling baby bottles, of washing wet nappies, of seeing the children were warm in the night and well fed during regular intervals; well, these were tasks that a woman was biologically designed for. Hadn't evolution made her supremely competent for the task? The net result was that it was Alice who took the load on to her strong shoulders. It was also Alice who was wrung out by nightfall, so exhausted she could hear her bones creak as she finally plopped down on to the bed at the end of each endless day. Subash smiled proudly at his wife's capabilities, but did little to ease her burden.

The matter of an independent source of income for Subash still remained the other unresolved issue. Alice began to feel, with each passing day, the need for financial freedom. The thought that they were feeding off the gratuitous benevolence of her husband's father made her feel insufficient, with a gradual fall in her self-respect. It was obvious that her father-in-law was wealthy and extremely well off. His estates were large and the export business was doing very well indeed. He could have easily made his son a Director on the Board or given him some important assignment somewhere in the large empire. But that was somehow not to be. There was a system by which their financial requirements were given to them in the first week of each month, which was indeed quite sufficient for their needs, and, for the occasional luxuries. About the quantum of the largesse there was no complaint. It was the very thought of the dispensation of this stipend, or grant as it were, that was particularly exasperating. Subash felt there was no need to make a fuss about it: the colour of the money was the same irrespective of whether it was earned or gifted. But to Alice, it made a world of a difference: it was the difference between her dependence and her self-esteem.

On the first birthday of the twins, they had the most serious quarrel of the four years of their lives together. At the grand party organized by her father-in-law for the occasion, the need to present a happy face to the world outside was of paramount importance and it seemed to everybody else that the day passed off very well indeed. The bland, smiling masks they wore for the occasion was sufficient for this subterfuge. Once the guests had gone and the plates and saucers washed and stored away and the bedroom door closed behind them, there was an ugly explosion that ruined everything, the joy of the first birthday, the good cheer and the happiness spread about on the occasion, as also the tenuous bliss of the previous four years of their marriage: every thing blown away in the space of an hour of bitter recriminations and accusations.

Alice wept hot, angry tears: after all she was a woman and her tears could not be checked, even though she knew they would give her an undue benefit in a mutual difference of opinion where, on the basis of the sheer merit of the case, she had the clear advantage. After all, which wife would not like her husband to be independent, standing proudly on his own two feet? And why was it that Subash did not see the matter with the same gravity as she did; why was he just going along as if these things were of no concern to him? Did he want to live his entire life holding on to his father's hand?

Subash, who was normally lackadaisical and easy-going, underwent a furious change of personality as she flung these words at him in an unending litany of woes. His nonchalance was ripped away. A dark, vicious

Hyde lay under his Jekyll's face. For the first time, he shouted back at her, harshly, bitterly, in words that were vicious and brutal. He talked of changes observed in her after the twins were born, changes that made her seem indifferent to her duties as a wife and that she had neglected him and his needs for this past one year.

It was enough to make her charge at him with such fury that for a moment he was stunned into silence. She raged at him for his complete lack of concern in bringing up the children; that he did not lend a helping hand in the myriad tasks involved in feeding and bathing and cleaning the two energetic infants. That she was left to fend for herself in the care of the babies, leaving her drained and exhausted at the end of the day. That in such a state of mental and physical fatigue, Subash should not expect to find a wife who would be eager and excited about the prospect of making love before going off to sleep. And he himself was certainly no Don Juan who could bring her to the point of ecstasy. This last comment was, in more ways than one, a blow below the belt and Subash replied with the same vigour and harshness.

The end of all the haranguing and argument was a sleepless night and the start of a bitterness that would wax and wane over the next few years, never refusing to disappear, always lying simmering until the very end. And when it was all over, a good seven years after the marriage, Alice found it difficult to believe that for all this time, she had actually tolerated Subash and his gripe, his complaints, his lack of concern and ultimately his rejection of her as a woman. What does 'till death do us part' really mean, she wondered?

The twins were the only things that had had held them together. Also perhaps the Catholic Church's diktats that refused to acknowledge the possibility of serious differences between a man and wife. It came to pass that their togetherness was restricted to formal occasions and family functions, where anything else would have become immediately noticeable and a subject of frenzied speculation. At first, within the home, with her parents-in-law around, there had been an attempt to hide their incompatibility, to appear as normal as possible. But that was soon given up. Their differences came up too often and in situations where it became increasingly difficult to hide their acrimony. Soon enough they were exchanging insults right out in the open, with not a care for Subash's shocked and aggrieved parents watching on.

By that time, the kids were fairly able to look after themselves in most of their daily requirements. The end came one day when Alice suspected Subash was up to some activities that brought the bile into her mouth. There were clear indications of philandering and the presence of a handkerchief bearing the scent of flowery, unfamiliar perfume, finally sealed the fate of a marriage that had already outlived its romance, its need, and indeed, its utility. At about this time, Alice started having recurring dreams that brought her out in a cold sweat in the middle of the night. She dreamed of walking in a cavernous vault, the walls lined with the coffins of her forefathers, holding on for dear life to her children. She was praying that she would not have to leave the security and comfort the vault offered, for the outside was lit by a brilliant, harsh sunlight that blinded her, scalded her in its blazing heat. She tried to analyse the dream, and felt that it revealed her reluctance to leave the comfort of the present for an uncertain future, even though she knew that the present was intolerable and may eventually take her life.

The end of the relationship came swiftly, relentlessly, prodded on by her mother-in-law who was by now completely tired of the daily routine of harsh words and endless jibing. When she saw that there was no way the marriage could be salvaged, she saw no reason to prolong the agony endlessly. A tense meeting was held between the two families: Sosha, nervous and on the point of tears, bit her finger nails to the quick and sat hunchbacked and irresolute while Manjooran, strong, proud and undefeatable, bore the brunt of the combined assault of both the parents of the opposing side. His heart was broken inside and he knew that he would move heaven and earth to see his daughter did not suffer from the break up. She would be looked after with all the financial resources at his command. But he would be damned if he would bow and cringe before these two, who made all sorts of insinuations and complaints about their soon-not-to-be daughter-in-law.

The papers were filed in the civil court for the termination of the marriage, something that would not be approved of by their Parish priest, whose Catholic doctrine would not allow him to contemplate a situation that merited the annulment of matrimony. How could mere humans consider the sundering of a holy bond joined by God? The priest finally pronounced that God would certainly not grant his consent to the divorce. And hence it was left to a young judge in the district civil court to formally sever the relationship in a briefly worded decree that sent shock waves throughout the Christendom of Kerala.

Thus, Alice came home, the twins in tow. There was to be some complicated visiting arrangements that Subash was entitled to, but he was rather casual about it. His view was that with the wife out of the picture, he did not need to waste any precious tears over the children. Alice was aghast at how Subash's loathing for her could include their children too. But sometimes the ways of man are incomprehensible to God Himself. On the day she did come home, John Manjooran made it a point to be present at the door, the bewildered and lost Sosha at his side, with a welcoming hug that embraced all of Alice and the twins and encompassed her sorrows and her miseries and her fears for the future. His heart ached and he was, behind the big smile painted on his face, more broken and destroyed than he ever was. But he would not let it show and the sorrow was, with iron will, dammed behind his eyes. He promised himself it would never ever spill over.

Sosha, cut from a gentler fabric, could not exercise the same kind of control and had to cover her face and wipe her eyes with the end of her pallu. She collapsed in the sudden onslaught of tears, which made her seem ugly and old. She ran away to the sanctuary of her bedroom and refused to come out until considerable time had elapsed. Within the walls of the home that evening, Alice was bright-eyed and full of a phony joy that did not reach the irises of her eyes. She was clumsy and uncoordinated, her thoughts scattering like dry leaves in the winter winds. She was polite and patient and spoke softly through clenched teeth to the twins who moved as if on eggshells around her. They knew that if they made one wrong move, they would have to face her boundless ire. Their grandparents kept them busy, distracting their attention with toys and trinkets and chocolates. The night fell swiftly, like the fall of a curtain at the end of a one-act stage play.

In time she learnt to live again. Sosha was lost and bewildered but then, Alice was home: the three words had so much meaning, both a sorrowful joy and a joyful sorrow. It was nice to have her back on a permanent basis once more, a friend and partner for Sosha, a daughter to talk to, to go out for shopping expeditions, to help her wash out her hair, to dry and iron the clothes. If the ever present despair of the divorce could be kept out of the reckoning, could be erased from the memories like a delete command from a computer keyboard, how glorious life would be again. But it was, of course, not all joy, for the agony below the surface was bleeding her dry. Alice of the deep thought and the serious mien; the quietly introspective Alice, a diffident, querulous wounded doe that crashed with uncertain steps from thicket to tree and left blood stains on the leaves and the mud. She lived in a world below the skin where only she could go. Where normal everyday conversation and the give and take of domestic life sustained her in the course of the day, but which left her to her nightmares and other terrors when darkness fell.

The children delighted in being pampered again under the loving, extravagant care of the grandparents. They knew they were being spoilt and they reveled in it. They kept a careful distance from their mother and stayed close to their Appachan and Ammachy, who watched them with caring, troubled eyes and worried about their future, their education and the rest of the days of their lives. Rohan and Mohan, with the instinctive cunning of young children, realised it would be better to keep out of range of their mother's arms for she could, without warning, swing at them, sometimes catching them on their ears, or their shoulders and stinging their skin for hours thereafter. Their tears and sniffing would continue until the grieving, generous-hearted Sosha took them to the snack bar in the market for an ice cream or a special treat.

In time, the sharpness of the grief passed and left a dull, weary ache in the pit of her belly. It lay like a heavy stone, weighing Alice down, slowing her steps, engraving wavy, wrinkle lines at the edges of her eyes and on her neck. There was a stoop to her shoulders and a grimness in the corners of her lips that spoke of a pain that refused to be confessed, a longing for some imaginary world where she would be whole and happy again. Where there would be a man by her side who would care for her, who would lie awake at night as she

slept, just to watch her sleeping face and hear her breathing. She wondered often as to the apportionment of guilt, between her and Subash. Who was responsible for the slow-motion cascading of accusations and raised voices, the great enormous moving mountain of recriminations and insults that had swept them both away under the weight of the avalanche? She wondered too, about her fate as a daughter who becomes a burden once again for her parents. They had seen her off as a young bride just a few years ago, but would still not hesitate to grant her refuge forever and ever.

Teresa came rarely for her holidays from England. When she did, there was much to discuss with each other. Alice was filled with the wonder that Teresa conveyed of a world where the freedom to do what one desired was a given. Life at a foreign University was certainly not what Alice desired, but the attendant freedom of thought and action it entailed made her realise what she had lost in the aftermath of a broken marriage and in the restrained quietness of her father's home. One late evening, on one of her holidays to Kerala, Teresa took her aside for a long heart-to-heart talk. She was appalled at what Alice had gone through, but rightly argued that the past was over and done with; there was nothing she could do to amend that particular set of circumstances. In her quietly persuasive way, she urged Alice to find some activity, some work, some employment for herself which would not merely divert her mind from the fate that sometimes seemed to overwhelm her, but would also make her independent and give her something to do to make her feel wanted, to make her stand on her own two feet and earn her own living. From Alice's complete initial rejection of the idea, Teresa converted her, bit by bit, to an acceptance of the principle of the thing. Finally, she elicited a promise from Alice that she would soon start looking for a job. By the time Teresa left, there was a sense of the worst having passed and Sosha saw once more the smile return to Alice's face. She was more positive now. There was a bounce in her steps and she lost that vacant, brooding look that clouded her face from time to time.

In due course, Alice perked herself up, applied for a job in the nearby Pre-Degree College. As chance would have it, Manjooran knew the Principal and a word dropped to him was more than enough to elicit the right response. Manjooran's standing in the parish helped. She was offered a job, teaching history to pre-graduate students in this college that had been recently set up with the active support of the Catholic Church of Kerala. The move made a world of a difference between despair and hope, between mooning about the house and walking out with her head held high. There was a quiet celebration in the house the day the appointment letter arrived. Alice was filled with the prospect of a new beginning, of an independent life, an unlonely life, free from the wrenching memories of the past that had very nearly destroyed her peace of mind and equanimity.

Once again, after the past few years of domestic strife and turmoil, it seemed to Manjooran that life was getting back on to an even keel. The painful wound that had burnt like a seeping lesion on his heart, the problem that Alice presented to both Sosha and he remained, but was now manageable and did not, whenever they happened to look at her, produce the agony that it once had. The twins in the house gave them joy and satisfaction. They were a source of endless mischief and laughter as they enthralled them with stories of school and friends and teachers and funny incidents of the day. Everyone except Sosha seemed to be on a new direction towards hope and optimism. It was only the constantly worrying Sosha who still agonized about what the future held for Alice and what she would do without a real man to look after her in the days to come.

Alice's days were once again filled with activity and bustle. After she got the two boys ready for their school and bundled them into the school bus, which fortunately came right up to the gates of the house, she would herself get dressed, wolf down a couple of bread slices and then rush off to college. She wore starched saris and matching blouses of pastel hues, with pretty earrings and large, coloured bindis. The overall impression was one of a smart and eager young teacher, dedicated to her profession and her students. Her days at the college were filled with continuous challenges: from understanding the syllabus and the preparation of her own notes for the classes to the management of the time allotted to her; from ensuring that the students did their work and were attentive in class to keeping the few inevitably rowdy boys, the backbenchers, on a tight leash.

In the first few days in class she tried to confront the backbenchers who were lounging against the wall and staring at her unblinkingly, trying to disconcert her, to make her trip up and commit errors, for then that would be cause enough to set them all smirking and snorting. When her back was turned, there would be a rhythmic shuffling of feet and the sound of coughs enough to jumble the words in her mouth and make her a little unsteady on her feet. In the first couple of days she fell into every trap set by them. The studious, earnest youngsters sitting right up at the front of the class despaired once again. Here was another apparently fine teacher who would soon be bait for the rowdy, gangling bullies. Ultimately it would be the students who would suffer.

One day, in a free period, sitting with her head clutched in her hands in the staff room and very close to tears, she felt the presence of one of the other lecturers next to her. She raised her head and saw a kindly concerned face peering anxiously at her: “Anything the matter? Can I be of help?” It was Hari Das Panikker, the history teacher, the tall, bespectacled, smiling man who sat two tables away in the room. He was courteous and amiable and presented the kindly face of a friendly spirit who would be sure to help you gain your good mood back again. She smiled a little tremulously at him, her mind torn between her problems and the need to be polite to an obviously concerned colleague.

“Oh, its fine. I was thinking of silly things, nothing important.” She gave him a wan little smile and was rewarded by one of his. It seemed natural to order for tea from the college canteen and spend the next fifteen minutes, before the bell rang again, introducing themselves to each other. Alice was guarded in her words, in her responses to his queries. She observed his gentle expression, the crinkles around his eyes, the strong jaw and noticed, as if by a thought from out of nowhere, the irrelevant fact that there were no rings on his fingers. Neither did she; she had removed the single band a day after the papers had come through from the civil court.

So she spoke of her experiences in class and it seemed natural to tell him a little of her problems in maintaining discipline and the demeanor of some of the students who insisted she should be pulled down a notch each day. Hari Das listened patiently and told her of the problems he had had himself to suffer during his first days in the college. He spoke of the patience and the courage required to get these problems sorted out and the little tricks of the trade to get the students to listen to her. They would soon respect her for her knowledge of the subject and her sincerity and earnestness in the teaching of it. His voice carried the confidence of an experienced teacher and his manner clearly stated he would help her as much as she wanted, not more, not less. Not more, for there are fences when friendships are new, not less because he was a helpful person and he would really like to see her stand on her own two feet and be a good teacher.

The first couple of weeks were rough, but Alice was learning to be smart, to think on her feet and to learn the pitfalls she had to avoid. The tips that Hari Das gave her were helpful. Soon enough she was in full command of her class. She had to spend late hours at home everyday mugging up for her lectures and taking extensive notes from reference books from the library. She worked hard and within a few months she earned the grudging respect of her students and even her more senior colleagues.

Hari Das Panikkar was the single son of his mother, the son who had forgotten for some time that like other sons of other mothers, he too had the right, the need, to get married, for to procreate is the primary biological reason we are born. In the ailment that had stricken the old lady and had laid her on the invalid’s bed for over a decade now, there was no one who could have taken care of her as Hari had. And so this single son had taken care of the invalid, re-ordering his life in such a manner that there were but two parts to it: the one at home, where amidst blankets and medicines and the heartbreaking sorrow of a painful existence, he cared for the old woman with all the energy and love that he possessed; and the other, in the college, where from nine in the morning till four in the afternoon, he lived amidst his books and his students, where he found solace from the perpetual grief that the presence of his ailing mother in his house engendered.

The tea that Alice and Hari shared was an innocuous beginning to what would turn out to be a great love story. One that would alienate father from daughter and gouge a bleeding sore within poor Soshamma's tired heart that would never heal in the few years left for her to live. The passage from friendship to affection to admiration and then to love took all of one full year. It was destined to be and there was no power on earth that could have stalled the momentum of that headlong fall into the ecstatic state of bliss that Love fashions in the hearts of its subjects.

This is not the tale of their growing affection for each other; perhaps on some other day, when the mood should be right, it would be a nice diversion to tell their story and enchant young spirits with the saga of their love. As propinquity grew to closeness, there were whispers and stirrings in the close and narrow circumference of the college campus. The college authorities frowned upon the blooming of love even amongst the students. Well, one may say that there was some justification for this policy. The college had to be wary of illicit student pairings that may have raised the ire of agitated parents and caused all kinds of tensions and worries for everyone around. But when it came to the matter of the staff, there were no rules, for none had been needed. The staff members were all married or confirmed bachelors and spinsters. It was for the first time that a divorcee had been granted appointment as a lecturer and it was a coincidence of rare significance that she should come into contact with the only young bachelor available on the staff of the college.

One had written off Hari as a prospective candidate for marriage. Everyone knew of his ailing mother and the fact that he had devoted his life to the care of the old lady. It was assumed that he would not consider the not-so-certain bliss of matrimony, at least at this stage of his life, when devotion to his mother was the one thing uppermost in his life. How could one burden a young bride, waiting expectantly for the joys of marriage, with the task of nursing an old woman who lay comatose the whole day in acute distress? So Hari's name was stricken off the list of available and eligible bachelors. Fathers with daughters, and even marriage brokers, had not bothered to give him a second glance.

So when Alice Thomas, née Manjooran, met and fell in love in a quiet and confident manner with the soft-spoken and gentle Hari, there was surprise and disbelief all around. "Look at the odds against the marriage," whispered Mrs. Cherian, the Biology lecturer to Mr. Latif Ahmed, the assistant professor in Botany. "I am sure Hari knows that she is a divorcee, with two children in tow. So what kind of wife is he looking for? Does he have a fondness for extra baggage? Or does he want to prove himself a noble soul making a great sacrifice for this girl? Should she be burdened with the housework, including caring for his old mother. Can she do all that and keep working? Or will she be forced to resign and give up her career? All for the sake of 'love'?"

Latif smiled laconically, "And why are you bothered, Mrs. Cherian? Surely they are not going to stay in your house if they get married? And surely you are not expected to look after Hari's mother after the marriage? Let them sort out their problems on their own."

Mrs. Cherian huffed and puffed and turned her face away from the unsympathetic Latif and determined to take up the issue with the Principal of the College. And so she did. The Principal, a wise, old, wrinkled priest, looking as if he had been poured into his long white habit, stared at her and said something about the Indian Constitution protecting individual freedom to choose one's spouse and that so long as the two conducted themselves with propriety in the college campus, he would be the last one to interfere. Indeed, Mrs. Cherian did get a handful of supporters who grumbled along with her about the sorry state of affairs in the world and the falling standards of morality and ethics. But apart from a few interested stares from some of the students in the college, Alice and Hari were largely left alone.

Alice knew the future that lay ahead was pregnant with possibilities and threats. She did not have a clue as to where she was being led. Her chaotic dreams at night alternated between the ecstasy of good things coming her way and the awfulness of a dark, hopeless tomorrow. She knew she must learn to live with the possibility of either finally landing like a bird with sheathed talons on her shoulders.

My name is Alice. My surname is still in a state of flux: I abhor the surname that I had worn for a few years, as much as I abhor the name of the man with whom I had entered into holy matrimony, until death do us part. The question I asked myself over and over again was, am I ready for this? Ready for what? For marriage again? For companionship? To blunt the edge of the terrible loneliness that each night rules over the still, sleepless moments of my restive nights? To smell once again in my nostrils the sweat of another, to feel my tongue taste the salt on someone else's skin? I pondered the questions one early morning as I went through my ablutions in my father's house. I saw myself for a moment, reflected in the pale morning light in the mirror over the washbasin. There I was, thirty-two years old, still firm in body and strong in spirit, left on a loose limb after my divorce, without the support of a strong man's arms to hold me should I momentarily tire of the daily battles that a single woman is heir to, exhausted by the countless petty worries that assault me every day of my life, feeling the shoulders sag for no reason at all in the late evenings as I sit and pore over my class notes in my room, tempted to run my fingers over my body as I lie alone in the bed at night, waiting for sleep to come. A million nightmares entice me, mock me, jeer my singleness when the rest of the world is married and has a man to stand next to and lean on in times of troubles. I was assailed by doubts now as to the utter finality of my ended marriage, when even life with Subash seemed a better option than the incontrovertible fact of being alone in a largely brutal and uncaring world.

I peered at my lips; they were dry and flaky. It was as if the life-giving moisture of my body had been sucked out by the everyday task of living a spinster's life in my father's house. The bounce in my hair had fallen flat. It was some days since I had shampooed my hair. The nails on my toes needed to be pared. At times, I wondered whether I needed to go through that ritual at all. Why did I need to look good on the outside, if I didn't feel so good within? I agonised whether I should seek to live in an independent house and spare my mother the daily torment of seeing me grow old and miserable, knowing that life had just about passed me by, had left me discarded on the shelf, had found me unsuitable for a normal family life, where a Papa and a Mama and the children could eat and pray and live life together, laughing, crying, frowning, arguing and knowing that God's in His Heaven and all's right with the world.

The watch on my wrist reads the date and the time. I look at it a thousand times a day, nudging the hands further on their course. It is seven in the evening. If I go up to the terrace of the house and look out into the road, I would see families going out to town for the evening, for a cup of coffee or for dinner, for a night out; on scooters with the wives clinging on to the husbands from the pillion seat, or in cars, that swept by the gate with fat, contented wives, and handsome husbands willing to spend money on them, to demonstrate, to prove, that they are loved and adored. I used to go up to the terrace and do just that in the first few days after I shifted back into my parents' house. But the ghosts of a thousand battles fought in the past would swirl around me and the night air would make my eyes prickle and I would feel the breath in my lungs start to swell and stifle me. I would return lonesome and forlorn to my room, avoiding the worried glances of my mother and my children.

Over the last few months there is a new sweet complication that fill my thoughts every moment of my waking life. Like a friendly face or an amiable spirit, I found myself turning more and more to the gentle, wonderful Hari, who watches over me in college like a guardian angel, who does not hesitate to sit down and talk to me about my problems, who frets that I was not looking well that day or that I have some untold worry etched on my forehead. I used to order tea for both of us during the break and we talk long about this and that and the ordinary things of everyday life. I find myself revealing everything, the truth and the whole truth, about my family, my life, my marriage, my children, the years of anger and resentment building up like scalding steam within me until everything had exploded. When the sound and the fury had come to end, it was I who had been left humiliated, discarded, expelled and alone.

And Subash? Looking martyred, Subash had walked off the scene with no burdens, no baggage to weigh him down. Really, he was as free as a bird with the liberty to do what he wished in the manner and fashion he wanted. The very thought was galling to me, I who still bore the bleeding wounds he had inflicted and who was left with the responsibility of bringing up my, our, two sons. And thus the long wearisome ride back to my parent's home, back to a kind of second childhood, where the protective umbrella unfurled over my head

was warm and gentle, but where I was once again a daughter, and not an independent woman in my own right. A divorced woman, a burden to my parents.

And I am alone. With the watchful, grieving eyes of my mother following me at every step, with the proud, undefeated strength of my father telling me to be brave and not to worry even for a moment, with my two sons, knowing that everything was terribly wrong, but doing their very best to cheer me up, to not be a bother to me. With all that, I was still alone; lonely, bereft, and bitter like a widow. With not even a death in the family that I could hold on to in my heart and mourn about, not even one good memory of a departed husband with whom I had shared a life. It was all acid and bitter inside me and I could find no reason why I had lingered on with a relationship when it had died so long ago.

It was into this desert of my life that Hari had come in like a cooling rain into the desert. He had made the grass grow again, made the rain drop from up on heaven to my parched patch of earth once more. I could see again some future beyond the dull fugue in my mind. Somewhere there would be flowers that would bloom again. Somewhere there would be again the comfort of getting up in the morning and feeling the glow of the start of a good day. To see once again next to me, a breathing, deeply sleeping man who is part of me, part of my life. Forever. Who would be there, and not run off one day with wild accusations hurled at me.

And so it was that on the evening of the day I stared at the mirror, I came to a decision. The question was already in the air at every moment of the time that we, Hari and I, spent together. He would never ask me, of that I was sure, it was for me to lead him, us, to the momentous moment. In college the next day, out of the blue, I asked him to take me to his house, where I could meet his mother. Hari Das was taken aback. He knew that I knew his plight, his mother's medical problems, the difficult times that he had gone through in the past many years in the care and treatment of what was a lost case. He hesitated, not knowing if he should expose me to the grossness and shame of a body whose functions could no longer be controlled. But he agreed and in the evening, he collected me from the college and took me in his old Fiat car to his house, a good five kilometers from the college.

There, as I stepped into the old, tiled house situated on a lane branching off from the main road, I felt the calming of my heart. An old maid servant looked curiously at me as I entered. In the cool interior of the house, with the windows thrown wide open so the breeze could blow through, I came to a quiet realisation that this was where I could learn to be, learn to exhale, learn to spread the wings of my spirit and fly. I sat at the foot of the bed where the tired body of his mother lay, unmoving and apparently lifeless, with nothing but a gentle rising and falling of the flat, thin chest to belie that truth. I caressed the old woman's feet and felt the throb of the blood within her veins and then turned to Hari Das who stood nearby, deeply moved by my gesture.

My eyes were moist and I had no words to utter. There at the foot of the unconscious old woman, who, I prayed would bless the act I was about to perform, I held out my hands to him and let him come into them, slowly, gently and in retrospect, inevitably. I do not know whether there was deliberation, a plan, a strategy that I had consciously worked out as I stood there. I know there was the surge of a fine strength and courage in me and a rare tremulousness, a trembling in my spare, strong body as he took me into his arms and felt the sorrow of my own self seep into his own. And he, with his goodness and his love, his need and his generosity, gave to me all that I had yearned for in the months I had wrestled with my own self before coming to this moment in my life. I felt whole again, I felt revived, rejuvenated, and the start of a healing begin in the balm that his presence spread in me.

There was no blinding light of ecstasy, no clashing of cymbals or the flashing of fire. But there was an inevitability, a rightness, an intimation of the perfect future waiting for us. We stood for a moment, embracing in a tenderness that overpowered us both and brought us to tearful joy, till we parted and stood staring at each other. There were worlds yet to explore, mountains to climb, rivers to cross before our decision would finally take shape; but at that moment the die was cast, when the unspoken words were expressed out of the new realisation of the inevitability of our conjoint lives.

CONFRONTATION

It was on a quiet Saturday evening, before the start of the mid-summer monsoons that Alice called aside her mother for a long heart-to-heart chat, a confession that would transform and irrevocably alter forever, the placidity of life in the Manjooran household. She had returned from College and had a long quiet sleep in her room, almost as if she were steeling herself before venturing to sit on the verandah and call out to Amma in the kitchen. Her father was out to the Club and would be back only a couple of hours later. After his retirement he felt bored and hemmed in inside the house all day. He needed to be out on his own for some time so as to reconnect with old friends and keep the gray cells working. So Alice had a good two hours to try and explain, to justify her conduct and win the support of her patient, troubled and ever-worrying mother, in the battle that she was sure she would have to face very soon.

And so she began, faltering often, halting for moments when she turned speechless and inarticulate, her hands gesticulating without words, her eyes filling but not spilling over. She spoke of the rigours of life without a man by her side, of the growing children she had to bring up. Though she was grateful to God for the abundant grace bestowed on her in having such unflinchingly supportive parents, she was struck dumb by the irreducible, unchallengeable truth that she was alone, utterly, completely alone. She spoke of the buttress and support that Papa and Amma had given her in her darkest hour, but she knew, and so did they, that she had to find her own path to salvation. She spoke of the shame and agony that Subash had put her through. That she was now very often on the point of despair, when she had even contemplated the unimaginable act of self-destruction. She needed some one to stand by her, hold her hand and care for her and her children and help her through the long years of her life ahead.

And then she spoke – it was for the first time she spoke to her Amma on the subject, though she later used to wonder why she had kept it a secret from her, for her mother would never have thought ill of her - of Hari Das Panikker and his gentleness, of the admiration and respect she had for him and the growing fondness and love they had expressed for each other. And that, in the firm and faultless foundation of their love, they had decided they would spend the rest of their lives together. She revealed, for it was not in Alice's nature to conceal, that Hari was not a Catholic, not even a Christian, that he was a Hindu and that as far as she or Hari were concerned, this fact was of little importance to both of them. And that she would need the blessings of Papa and Amma for the marriage they were planning in the days ahead.

Sosha could only let the words flow over her like a harsh rain. As she heard the torrent of Alice's anguish and her tremulous hope for a brighter future, she felt her heart shiver in her chest. And when she revealed the religious persuasion of the man her daughter had chosen, she knew, without a shadow of doubt she knew, that there was no chance whatsoever that this union would be blessed by her husband. She could already read the thoughts that would flow like acid through his head. John Manjooran, upright citizen and pillar of the Church, the proud son of the Manjooran family, tracing its origins over several centuries, whose ancient lineage had boasted of men of high Christian virtue and even a bishop, how could he grant his consent to this ridiculous idea of his daughter getting married to a pagan, a heathen. Alice had caused no end of grief and sorrow in the years when she was married and through the long agony of her divorce. All right, the Manjoorans had stuck through the crisis, and stood by their daughter through thick and thin. They had thumbed their nose at the offending husband and stood solidly behind their daughter. But this was different. This was sacrilege; this was the betrayal of the very foundation on which they stood. Sosha could see, without any hint of doubt or uncertainty, she could see, as clearly as she could see her daughter sitting before her, that this was the start of a titanic struggle which would never end, this was a tragedy over which countless tears would be wept, which would sweep like a violent thunder storm through her home and leave wreckage of the kind she had never witnessed.

She bowed her head. "Mol, I do not know what to say, I do not know what your father will do when he comes to learn of this. I fear for you and our family for I see that your father would be angry and horrified at your words. If only we had been able to do this task for you and find you a second husband, how much more acceptable that would have been. But you have chosen for yourself and you have chosen outside the boundaries of our religion. I do not know what to say."

And then Sosha, the quiet and gentle Sosha, the circumspect and cautious Sosha, made the greatest mistake of her life. Without any clear plan or strategy in her mind, without thinking out the complexities of the problem at hand, she turned to Alice, and with worry writ large on her face, said, "why don't you invite him over now, at least he can meet Papa and they will get to know each other. I am sure you'll agree that Papa must get to know him before he gives his nod."

It was a simple suggestion, made off the cuff as it were, but with such dramatic consequences, that Sosha would regret it every single moment of the remaining days of her life. She had not taken into account the fact, the well-known and manifest fact, that John Manjooran, her strong-willed husband, would never brook any suggestion, any proposal, which did not have his specific and unequivocal consent. He could be brought around by discussion and persuasion and Sosha had, on innumerable occasions in the past, extracted unheard of concessions for her children by her patience and her tact, her pleas and even her tears. But throwing the problem abruptly at him, with no prior notice or warning, with no attempt at explanation or persuasion, this was like waving a red rag at a raging bull. She had a moment of premonition and worry, briefly and suddenly, but the die was cast by then. Alice had already rushed to the telephone and was calling over Hari to her house to meet her father. Even Alice, the once bruised Alice, in her eagerness to be happy again, had not thought over the consequences of the action she had just set into motion.

Hari was both worried and excited at the prospect of meeting Alice's parents. He was not really confident about the outcome, but the call he received from Alice had raised his optimism and made him hopeful. The momentous telephone call came to him that evening as he had just come into his house and completed the daily routine of tending to his invalid mother, feeding her through the tube. He left her in charge of the old maid, dressed in a hurry and was soon on his way to the Manjooran home in his old Fiat. He reached there just as John Manjooran himself was entering the house from his visit to the Club. They met at the gate of the house and Hari curtsied and introduced himself. He was greeted by a friendly smile from Manjooran who invited him in. The first drops of the monsoon rains were filling the sky as they both stepped in. The latter did not have a clue about the identity of the caller, nor his intentions. Nor were any explanations offered or given. The catastrophe was well on its way to becoming a terrifying explosion.

It was after Hari had sat down on the sofa in the drawing room that Alice and her mother were even aware of the fact that he was in the house. There was no way in which the ground could have been prepared so that Manjooran was informed in advance about the momentous matter that lay awaiting resolution. There was a whispered consultation between mother and daughter. It was left to Alice to come into the room and tell her father that the visitor was Mr. Hari Das and that he was a colleague and that they had come to know each other very well during the last year or so and that she wished to marry him and spend the rest of her life with him. Of course, it was not as baldly stated as that, but it appeared so to Sosha waiting behind her, biting her nails to the quick. Hari had so far not offered a word. After Alice had finished, however, he added that it would be a matter of pride and honour for him to accept Alice as his wife, and that he would take care of her and the children forever and ever.

There was a long moment of silence. Manjooran had listened to his daughter's short speech and the postscript added on at the end by this personable young man. His thoughts were in a whirl. He felt the slow, burning rise of a senseless, blind rage through his stomach and up his chest and into the muscles of his face, turning them a flushed red that suffused his cheeks and his neck. He felt his eyes burn and the breath in his chest suddenly seemed to catch fire. It was flaming within him and he had to spit out the flames before he could find some semblance of peace again. He was aghast at his daughter's arrogance and her temerity to live under his roof and commit the crime of loving another man. He felt betrayed that Alice had never

mentioned or discussed the matter with him. And how could she have had the effrontery to summon up the fellow all of a sudden and think that he, her father, without batting an eyelid, would give his consent to the marriage. He knew Hari was a Hindu and he did not need to verify the fact: the name itself revealed that the scoundrel was not of the Christian faith. Alice, oh Alice, what have you done, what calamity are you bringing on to your own head, and on mine, and to the respected name of the Manjooran family. He closed his eyes for a moment and then looked straight at Hari. And then slowly, deliberately, he spat out his judgment, one word by bitter word.

“This is the worst day of my life and I cannot for even a moment think how you could have had the audacity to come into my house and demand the hand of my daughter in marriage. Do you not know the standing and position of my family? Are you not aware of the respect and courtesy extended to me by all the people of this place? Do you think I would ever let my daughter wed a Hindu and bring upon myself the shame and ignominy I will have to face in society? Do you think I am mad? Or that I am so careless about my daughter’s future? I do not know who you are or where your family comes from and what your standing is. And you expect me to give you my blessings. Alice, I am ashamed you have taken this course of action. You could have at least told me before taking the path you did. I would have advised you and made you see reason well in time. You would have not been put to this sorry plight. Now young man, I must ask you to leave this house, before I throw you out.”

Hari blanched. The knuckles on his hand turned white. His hands trembled and the words came with difficulty to his lips. But he looked straight at John Manjooran and said, “Sir, I love and honour your daughter more than my life itself. I have come to seek your consent in the proposed marriage. I do not know what you think of my family, or me, but the fact remains that we would like to get married and live a good life together. I am aware of Alice’s earlier marriage and the problems she had been going through all this while. But these are no obstacles for me. I would be grateful if you give us your consent”

It was then the Manjooran could no longer control himself. It seemed that a cloud of black dust whirled all around. He felt all decency and humanity stripping away from him. He stood up and bellowed at the trembling young man. His voice was like the roar of a lion and the muscles in his neck stood out like angry whipcords that grew and swelled as if they would burst. Sosha behind him in the corner of the room flinched at the sound of his voice and covered her face in shame and terror. Alice stood stone-faced and cold as the words tumbled out of the suddenly enraged stranger that her father had turned into.

“You bastard, have you not heard what I said. Get out of my house and leave us in peace. Don’t ever dare to dream dreams of marrying my daughter. Get out, before I call the police and have you jailed for disturbing the peace and trying to harass my daughter. Get out, get out now.”

Hari’s face turned white. He stepped back a few feet, but he did not appear to be terrified of this bull of a man who had lost all control of his self, shouting at him in a mad rage.

“I am sorry, sir, if that is your response. But, it is for Alice to make the decision, whether she would wish to be with me or be denied happiness by her hard-hearted father.” He turned to Alice, “If you have the conviction and the courage to leave this home and come to mine, I will be waiting for you, Alice, at any time of the day or night. But I will not stand here a moment longer and let myself be insulted by your father.”

He turned on his heels and walked out into the late evening without a backward glance. A moment later they heard his car start up and move away. There were several long moments of shocked silence as Manjooran sat down heavily in his chair, breathing hard and looking about him angrily, seeking approbation for what he had just done. He did not know that he had just destroyed the peace and harmony of the Manjooran family for two whole years yet to roll by.

Alice gave a stifled sob and ran to her room while Sosha watched the little piece of heaven she called home crumble all around her. She could not breathe and the air in the room had turned hot and stuffy and she was gasping for breath. She felt the room spinning around her and she knew that her husband, the big, bluff man

she had loved all these years, had lost his reason, and had gone completely insane and that there was nothing that could be done now to prevent the horrendous catastrophe rising like a storm within the walls of her home. She pleaded in a small voice to her husband to call the young man back, to talk to Alice, to calm down and not let himself be washed away in anger. She wanted him to do something, anything, that would set things right again. But John Manjooran did not say a word and sat like a stone pillar, completely unable to comprehend the enormity of what he had just done.

But it was not over yet. There was in store one other dramatic event that would finally shatter the remnants of the little pieces of what had once been the domestic calm in the Manjooran household. In the next half an hour, when Manjooran and Sosha had gone into their bedroom and Sosha was weeping and pleading and falling into a well of despair, Alice went to her room and packed a bag with her things and the essentials of her children. Manjooran and Sosha had not a clue what was in her mind and the hideous awkwardness of the situation prevented them from going to her room and talking to her. Alice was icily calm for she knew exactly what she was doing. She ordered her twins to get dressed in a voice that would brook no defiance. The twins obeyed, knowing this was no occasion for negotiation. She dialed the Taxi service in the meanwhile and ordered a cab. By the time it arrived, she and the children were ready. She marched up to the bedroom of her parents and banged on the door. When the teary-eyed Sosha peeped out, she saw only the resolute iron face of Alice and the suitcase and the bag she was holding in her hands and indubitably, without a shadow of doubt, knew that the situation was now beyond salvage. She turned helplessly to her husband and muttered something inaudible. Manjooran himself came out. He too saw his daughter and understood precisely, exactly, what was on her mind.

“Papa and Amma, I am leaving this home for good. I go to seek my own destiny. You have denied me my right to happiness and I will not have you do that. The children will come with me. Goodbye. May heaven grant you pardon for the crime you have committed on me today.”

And Manjooran, the strong, inflexible Manjooran, lost even that last and final chance to put the pieces together, to set their world right once more. He only stared at her and said, a harsh coldness creeping into his voice, “Go, and do not come back. If you think I will be put off by this threat of yours to leave the house, you do not know your father. Go, get out. You are no daughter of mine! And take these brats of yours with you too!”

Alice looked back at him; her eyes were strangely calm. She saw too the shivering, trembling pale figure of her mother biting at the end of her pallu. “Goodbye Amma, I must now go”. She turned around, glared at her boys and ordered them into the taxi, while they cringed and looked back at their grandparents. But they had no will to cross their mother. They followed her out of the Manjooran household, leaving it shattered, broken and with no hope of repair.

The stillness, the utter silence, left a humming in the ears. Now and then there was Sosha’s groan, that of a woman who had lost her reason. The lights in the house were doused and the only lamp left on was in the bedroom, where Sosha, the gentle, defeated woman lay in a stunned daze, tears streaming down her cheeks while her husband, the victorious warrior, proud of mien and adamantine in heart, sat unmoving on his armchair and stared out of the window into the blackness of the night.

TERESA UNBOUND

Teresa's mid-night flight from Mumbai brought her back to Heathrow some nine terribly tedious hours after she took off from Bombay. The economy seat she had been sitting on all this while had gradually transformed itself from a comfortable cushion to a hard rock under her thighs. By the time she was over Europe, it was clear she was no intercontinental traveler of much experience. The food had tasted pasty and bland and the long stretches of the darkness when she had, in vain, tried to sleep had made a black void in her conscious self. Her brains were frazzled and worn out with too much of thinking. She had hardly glanced out of the window at the featureless skies and tried to spend her time reading a book or mulling over the events of the last fortnight. Now, emerging from the plane at Heathrow, she moved through Immigration and found for herself a seat in the Underground. She thought of calling up Paul on the cell and informing him she was back. At Victoria Terminus, the train to Brighton was about to leave and she threw in her bags and settled down for the hour-long journey. She dozed a bit, the jet lag finally claiming her tired body. Images of Papa flitted through her mind and for a moment she wondered if she were still at home.

At Brighton, the railway station was bright and welcoming. Voices of people echoed off the high ceiling as trains slid in and out. Though Teresa had been here many times before, the strangeness of the place never ceased to astonish her. During her weekend visits from the University to Brighton, her Asian acquaintances had warned her that Brighton was something of a white town. It would be wise not to wander around the street later than nine in the evening. There had been some incidents recently of black and brown skinned students being roughed up by unknown rednecks. It was a troubling thought and try as she might, she knew she would never feel at home here. She wolfed down a sandwich and a cola while waiting for the train to Falmer, the stop for the University. She looked forward to reaching her flat near the campus and throwing herself down on the bed for a long, long nap.

The journey was short and as she neared Falmer, she found herself eager to get back to her routine, her books, her studies. This time, though, there were troubling tremors below the surface of her equanimity. Something had pulled at the roots of her consciousness. Her self-sufficiency had been challenged by the emotions she had seen during the funeral. The trip home had been an unexpected, but puzzling, hiatus in the steady flow of her life. The sight of her grieving father had shortened the distances in her heart. She felt the loss of things once loved as she had grown up and grown away. She did not know if she had gained anything by her visit back home though. She felt guilty in her lack of emotion, in her inability to cry at the passing away of the gentle and troubled woman who was her mother. She was too, mildly shocked at her eagerness to rush back once again to this foreign place she had been staying in for some years now. In the days before her recent flight across the oceans to mourn for her mother, her daily thoughts had all been about her University life and some unformed, unclear plans of a life with Paul, this white-skinned Anglo-Saxon Protestant, so far removed from the green backwaters of Kerala. Now there were other disconcerting thoughts crying out to her, like bird calls in the twilight, sometimes raucous, sometimes soothing, but always quietly insistent. She needed to think about this transformation within.

She was the first to alight from the train at the brief stop. As she moved across the overbridge spanning the road and into the rear of the University campus, she walked faster, her feet skimming the earth as she rushed back to the safety of her flat. There was so much to think about now; perhaps she would have a warm bath and a long snooze before she got down to the task before her, the task of wondering what to do with her own life. She slipped the key into the keyhole and clicked open the flat door. Her small two-roomed shelter was waiting for her. She threw her bags onto the bed and started filling the bathtub with water. She peeled off her clothes and slipped into its hot comfort, closing her eyes. She could feel herself slipping away into a quiet slumber. But she shook her head and roused herself up. She swept her wet hair over her neck and stepped out, dripping water on to the floor.

Her two weeks away from this haven was already sliding away out of her mind. The warm and wet bathroom had relaxed her into an easy mood and she fell into her bed. Back in her bed, she could think clearer now. A slow, shifting metamorphosis was transforming her; she knew that because she could feel it rise within like a growing embryo. The thought of Amma's death had jolted her and her self-sufficient complacency. Suddenly the prospect of a life of academia in a foreign land was fraught with misgivings. The sudden bereavement, the knife of loss in her heart, the loneliness flooding every moment of her father's life; they signified something deeper than their apparent meaning. And where did Paul fit into all that, she mused? She would have to consider that deeply now. Then, her exhaustion overpowered her. The last thing she thought of was the singsong chanting of the mournful hymns in the church just before Amma's body was lowered into the moist, red, newly dug earth in the graveyard next to the church. How could that be, she wondered, when she was herself not witness to her burial. That was her last thought before she floated away into a dreamless sleep.

Next morning, Sussex was wet and dripping. She had to rush to her class, first to meet her professor to explain she was back after the trip and then to catch up on what she had missed in class during her absence. Paul was delighted to have her back, though the smile on his face was tenuous. He did not know how much of commiseration he had to demonstrate for the bereavement in her family and how much of gladness for having her back again. He looked at her as she sat next to him in the cafe, sipping her coffee and biting into a biscuit.

How could he even begin to describe the confusing obsession he had for this girl. Was he in love with her? This serious-faced, mysterious girl who knew more of him than he of her. He had observed a reticence within her to talk about her own family, though he knew the bare essentials. But he was getting somewhere, he knew, somewhere very close to the silent, secretive core of her self, the core that she was beginning, just beginning to reveal to him. He looked at her again. He loved the smooth complexion of her skin, which this morning looked wan and pale. The strain of the last fortnight and the long journey just performed across the oceans must have taken its toll on her sleep and her equanimity, leaving her drained and exhausted. Doesn't matter, she would be all right in a day or two. He had asked her about things at home and how her father was coping with the sudden tragedy suddenly fallen his way. He let her speak. She told him about her folks at home and how her elder sister Alice was doing her very best to keep her father sheltered from the unceasing loneliness the death had let loose.

He gave her a big hug when she was through and she wiped away the few tears that had sprung into her eyes unexpectedly. What sweet sorcery is this, she wondered? Tears and she had been strangers for long; now they were just around the corner. Paul bid her a quick goodbye at the end of the day and walked away. He sensed she wanted to be alone today so that she could mull over, think about and finally digest the import of the tragedy that had befallen her family so recently. And so Teresa walked back to the flat in the late afternoon, burdened by books and notes her classmates had lent her. She needed to catch up on what had been taught in her absence from the University. Paul did not know that Teresa was not, in fact, troubled only over the loss of her mother. For all purposes, Teresa felt that all that was behind her. The sharpness of the grief was over and she had placed her thoughts on that particular matter in the correct pigeonholes in her mind. Now she was going into uncharted territory, trying to mark out the route her life should follow. There were some vague and unclear fears that demanded to be studied and dissected, understood and absorbed before she felt she was on surer grounds.

Back at her flat, she changed into something comfortable, placed an old CD on her player and then lay back on the sofa. She closed her eyes and allowed the music to seep into her mind. And then she let her mind wander over the many things troubling her in the past year or so. Now it was time to come to a better understanding of what she wanted. She wished to trace her fingers over the pattern she hoped her life would take.

My name is Teresa Manjooran. I am twenty-something years old. I am a research student of History at the University of Sussex, Falmer very close to Brighton, an hour's drive south of London. I have come here on the strength of a scholarship obtained by me, by my very own efforts and without the help of my family. I am entirely self-made, very independent, fully-grown with all my mental faculties finely tuned. I tend to think too much. I tend to cogitate, if not to worry. I believe that when I was born, I was as old as this. The past is of no import or consequence to my consciousness. I only look forward to the future, but even more, I live in the present. Until now, that is.

This visit home to bid my mother farewell, did not go off too well with me, I guess. I reached late, for even the earliest plane could not get me home in time to be there at the church where Amma was buried. I went alone, the evening of the next day, to be there where the freshly turned soil marked the place of her sleep. The mourner who came late. There were fading flowers lying scattered on the grave. The evening sun slanted through the thick trees at the edges of the graveyard and the sky was filled with the sounds of birds. A crow cawed ominously just above my head. It was an isolated spot, this cemetery, next door to the church that had dominated the lives of Papa and Amma these many years of their lives together. Not a soul was in sight and the driver of the car who had brought me stood far away, leaving me the space I required that moment. It was as it should be, quiet and splendidly isolated. Where one can think of eternity and not be terrified.

I closed my eyes and sat on my knees, my legs folded under me. The shade from the tree over the grave covered my face and my hands with a coolness that was welcome. And I thought of Amma and her quiet goodness, the gentle benevolence she had exercised in the home where it had been our lot to live these past many years. She had brought up her children as best as she could, trying to resist the brash arrogance, the blindness that Papa sometimes exhibited. But always failing, always unable to take a stand that would contradict him, always unable to make him see things in a new light, to make him learn there were things he did not know about, that there was always another viewpoint, and that sometimes, that other viewpoint could be a better alternative to the one he so vigorously espoused. In the end, it was she who had been the one vanquished, the loser, the meek supplicant, the timid, worried soul, the lesser-half who gave in, who surrendered, who had no aim in life but to align her thoughts with those of her husband, the bread giver of the house, the master of her life.

It was she who absorbed the sharp comments that Papa made about George and his inability to act like a man, the frequent gibes right on poor George's face or behind his back. Amma had bit her lips, shushed her husband and choked back the sympathetic words that may have sprung to her mind. Sometimes I would tell her that it's not a good thing to make George feel small all the time. But Amma had no reply; she would not have been able to tell her husband to desist from doing that. Papa did exactly what he wanted and damn the consequences. So too, she had been the one whose heart had been broken at the painful divorce of Alice and Subash, when it tore the Manjooran household apart. It was her grief that made Papa swear that she should not cry. It was her grief too that made Papa hard and obdurate, with a forced cheerfulness that belied his despair and sorrow. And it was her poor old heart that bled everyday, seeing the angle of Alice's shoulders droop, her face turn old, the gray start to appear in her hair and the skin turn dry. That bleeding heart was Amma's. I clenched my fist and ground my teeth at the meekness she so unnecessarily displayed.

And all to no avail, for the day she had flown away, Papa had welcomed Alice back into his home again. Amma's supreme sacrifice; that was the exchange. Amma's life for the restoration of love in the Manjooran family. And then it was Alice, and Alice alone, who stood like a shield between him and the harsh reality of life as a widower, as a lonely old man. He now had no meek, patient woman to stand by his side in his old age. And I thought too of George and Sheeba and the little boy, and how hard they were trying to show, in their own way, their affection, their love, their undying loyalty for Papa. Though it seemed the message was not coming through. Papa seemed to take for granted the obligations a son had to bear for his father. It was as if I could read Papa's mind: he seemed to be saying, there is no need for me to feel thankful for it, to feel gratitude for the obvious responsibility of son for father.

After Amma's passing away, my father seemed to have gone to pieces with no sense of past, present or future. Sometimes he would stare into space with unblinking eyes, living out some distant moment of the past when he had been happy, exquisitely happy. I am sure he realised full well now that he had never understood the meaning of the ecstasy that all these years had filled his heart. Until the moment when he had fallen from that exalted state. I had to turn my eyes away as I saw him disintegrate from the strong powerful persona he had once been, to this disoriented, helpless child he now was. Alice had hung around him, carefully tending to his needs, his food, his bath, his pills. His little grandson, George and Sheeba's boy had run around him and danced for him; his dimpled face had brought back the smile to his face now and then. The twins did their best too, sometimes too loudly and boisterously. Their Kochuaccha, Harichetan, came around in the evening and sat with Papa, though he did not have much to say to him. Still it was comforting to see that. I myself would everyday bring him the morning newspapers and talk about other things, safe inconsequential subjects, that would cause no grief; local politics, the share market, book reviews and the like. He had tried to pay attention and had indeed engaged me in intelligent conversation. But it was clear his mind was elsewhere, was nowhere.

I could see Alice was the guiding light, the beacon and the tower that sustained home and hearth and kept things from falling apart. She was the very center of the family, quietly taking charge, directing, even ordering things into harmony, smoothening uneven edges into place, unraveling the mysterious workings of her father's mind, knowing instinctively what he wanted, what he would like to eat or drink, and often seeing he was left to himself as much as he wanted. And to ensure with unrelenting vigil that he would not fall into the depths of despair. Papa turned to her when he wanted something, anything, asking for her by name, even when George or I were present. I was thrilled. I welcomed this sudden change in my father, from wrathful despot who had banished a wicked daughter from his home to this now gentle, forgiving, helpless man, who welcomed her back. I knew it was wonderful to have my older sister once more in the family, knowing too that it would be Alice who would be there for Papa, when the rest of us had flown off to where we had come from.

Alice, the first born, this dutiful daughter, now that was another matter altogether. She who with unyielding mind and clear of eye, had left home and hearth to enter into forbidden wedlock, despite threats of eternal damnation from the Catholic Church. She had not been broken by her broken marriage. Despite paternal banishment, she had sought happiness and found it in her Hari, a heathen unrecognized by sceptre and mitre. And now, the prodigal daughter, unapologetic for the sin committed, was embraced back into the home, all past crimes exonerated. Alice, like her mother, had tolerated the burden that life imposed so unfairly on her for so long. But Alice had broken loose. She had cut the throttling reins around her neck with the knife of her determination to fly like a bird in the air. Now there's someone I could admire.

I wondered how George, the son and heir, the one who should have been the traditional mainstay of the family, would take Papa's dependence on Alice, his preference for the daughter over the son. But it was always difficult to divine what George was thinking.

As for me, I felt disoriented, detached, even disconnected, as if I were an observer, a cynical voyeur who did not belong to the Manjooran family, a stranger who could, with dispassionate judgment, find fault, criticize and pass remarks over the events of the last few weeks. When I had left home some years ago, it seemed I had cut loose the bonds of family and bloodline. I had lost my roots and was not moved by any strong emotion to restore the ties. Here in Sussex, with the impersonal life of academics and classrooms swirling around me like an amniotic fluid, I was in a self-sustaining world nourished by my own worth and the life of the University. I needed no one from far-off Kerala to complicate my life, to bind me down, to make me conscious of obligations and responsibilities, to swelter in the emotions of guilt and family love. I owed nothing to anybody. I felt free, though unsatisfied. I was excited at the intoxicating liberty, yet missing something I couldn't define, did not wish to define, and hence was pushed to the back of my mind.

And then there was Paul Murray. My classmate and only real friend. Sure, I was warm and friendly with most of the other students in my class, but Paul was the only one I could open up to, talk to and relax with. In

a way it was inevitable, because of his distant Indian connection. His mother had been one of the original British Council exchange programme workers Her Majesty's Government had released into India, a quarter of a century ago. Dedicated, conscientious, idealistic young men and women filled with the dreams of changing life for the better in uncivilized, poverty-stricken India. Though this was part of the western world's game plan in the larger strategy of making the world safe for democracy, a good Samaritan's work is one that reaps rich rewards. Paul's early memories were of the long conversations his parents would have with each other when the main topic was the life his mother had spent in India so many, many years ago. There was still a certain magic, a silver-hued mystic edge to the clouds of memories that were forever moving around her.

That Paul was attracted to me was obvious. His mother's memories still lived in him. In the seventies, on her many visits to the sub-continent, she had been hypnotized, entranced, and indeed befuddled by this indefinable image of India. The romance of the rough gravel roads and the tinkling of cowbells in the evening light, the second-class train journeys into the heartland of a country too large to comprehend, too complex or too simple to understand. She had been stunned by the opulence of the mega cities just as she had been broken by the utter poverty of the villages. She had seen governments come and go without causing a ripple in the lives of the poor. In a tiny hamlet, without electricity, in the light of a flickering kerosene lamp, she had held a feeble, dying child in her arms and had wept as its mother went out to gather firewood to cremate the tender body. She had exulted too as young men and women, with undying optimism and unimaginable courage, confronted corrupt politicians and bureaucrats and managed to change the very paradigm of governance. An era was swept away in the deluge of '77. But small men with smaller vision frittered away the great opportunity. She had smiled wryly then, knowing that the more it changes, the more it remains the same.

When she left India for her marriage and found a job in London with a multinational giant, she knew that she too had been consumed in the fires of opportunism. She tried to console herself; no, she told herself, she had not been defeated by the vanishing of ideals, merely diminished by it. And the tales she told captivated her husband and her son. Paul thus had a second-hand knowledge of India, as it was twenty-five years ago, and knew hardly anything about the India of today. I had undertaken to educate him, about changes, possibilities, untapped potential and dreams. I am proud to be an Indian, of that I am assured. I only needed to know what I hoped to gain from my life in England.

And thus Paul learnt about India and its cities and villages and Hinduism and the many-layered levels of consciousness of our wondrous people. It was but natural for him to move towards the only Indian girl in his class and strike up a friendship with me. We talked. We talked long and late into the night about things interesting, things that moved us. I filled in the large gaps in his appreciation of my country with my own fairly extensive knowledge about the history of my land. He had helped me buy the air tickets for my long trip back home and had seen me off from the airport when the news of Amma's death reached me from Papa some two weeks ago. He had held me in his arms and wiped away my tears and smiled at me and told me the trite, inevitable facts of the passage of time and the passing away of loved ones. They were meaningless to me, but had yet brought me back to a reality I knew I had no option but to face squarely.

I smiled now, knowing that that occasion had indeed been the very first time Paul had touched me in any kind of intimate way. Through the many months of us knowing each other in the University, and the exciting feeling of appreciating each other's company, our intimacy had been restricted to long walks through the University campus and the unending conversations in the cafes and the pubs around. We had taken extended strolls through the wooded hills to the east of the University Buildings behind the Institute of Development Studies and often stopped for a bowl of warm broth in the tiny village bars around the place. The conversations we had each day brought us together in an ever-increasing bond of affection and appreciation. Dare I yet use the word, love?

I know that one day I will have to confront the issue of my life. It was no longer so simple, etched in black and white. I know that I am temporarily bereft of the bonds that should tie me to the rich, rain-soaked paddy-

fields of my Kerala, God's own country. I hope it should be my own country too, one day. Soon, soon, I would need to know. I would need to take a stand and not slip-slide my life away.

GEORGE'S DILEMMA

The trip by train from home back to Mumbai and the silent journey from the railway station by taxi to their flat had been enervating, exhausting. The journey from Kochi was a day and a half long and had been endlessly relaxing, but as if purposeless. George felt he was on a journey with no end. He was glad to leave the suddenly desolate home and though there were some moist eyes as they bid goodbye, it was clear that yet again he had not been given his rightful place in the family. His position remained that of a son barely recognized or acknowledged.

Each time he went home for his brief holidays, he had felt the bitter bile rise within his mouth. His chest would feel constricted, his breath shallow. He kept his face bland, smiling like an automated puppet when that was the right thing to do, nodding his head at most things. He waited for the odd passing remark that would yet again show him in a poor light, comparing him with his siblings, making him feel small once again. This time though, it was different, for Amma was not there to smile at him. Sometimes he had felt that Amma had known everything that had to be known, all about him and his dreadful fears, his littleness in the presence of his father, the trapped breath in his lungs. With her in the room, he could just about bear to sit and make conversation. Now that she was gone, he could not, for the life of him, comprehend how he would fulfill that obligation, to talk with his father about this and that, about cabbages and kings, about today and tomorrow. He could not master the awful, terrifying art of simple conversation.

As the train chugged its way up through the green, picturesque landscape along the coast, he felt he could fall forever under the spell of the wheels' rhythm. Throughout the day, he lay on his berth eyes closed, or bought needless snacks for Sheeba and Mon, or leafed through books and magazines, hardly talking or looking out of the window. At a short stop at a nameless station in the middle of the night, he stepped out of the bogie and sipped a cup of warm, excessively sweet tea at a tiny stall. Sheeba and the child were sound asleep. For a moment, he wondered what it would be like to not climb back on board, to let the train move on. He would squat on the platform for some moments and then walk away into the small town near the station. Or he could slip off the road and disappear forever into the dark, green, rain-drenched night. There would be no responsibilities, no worries, just a simple life with no great purpose or ambition. He would work in the local grain market or serve tea to the travelers in the bus stop. He shook his head; these formless desires were idle thoughts and would remain unfulfilled, he knew that. He had neither the strength of mind nor the cowardice to do just that. He climbed back in, surprised at the sudden gladness flooding him as he saw again the sleeping figures of his wife and son in the dim night-light in the compartment.

It was in the dead of night that the train reached Mumbai station, unnecessarily delayed by the monsoon floods. The streets were deserted, lit by the harsh night-lights of the city. They hardly spoke, yearning to get back to their flat after the long exhausting trip. This journey had yielded nothing but grief. Physically, George and Sheeba were drained out; but the effect on his psychological well-being had been even more disastrous. Sorrow had stripped away the layers of self-contained armour he had acquired over the years. The days they had stayed at his father's home had been, in a way, revelation as also confirmation, of truths he had known for so long now. Some old prejudices had been laid bare and the feeling that he was once again overlooked, or taken for granted, had been strengthened.

Their little son was fast asleep as George carried him up to the flat. With bags in hand, they went up in the elevators and finally reached the doors of their eighth floor flat. Sheeba turned the key, opened the door and they trooped in, glad to be back once again to the one place where they could be themselves, without worries on how to wear their expressions on their faces. This was home, this small flat almost in the southern heart of Mumbai. Pushing open the doors, they rushed in, threw their bags to the floor and collapsed onto their beds. It would be a good five or six hours later that he would awake and attempt to resume life again, his ordinary every-day life, without the presence of Amma as a gentle guardian angel hovering above his shoulders.

My name is George Manjooran, the only son to my father, and brother to two sisters, one older, the other younger. I lie now on my back on the hard bed in my Mumbai flat, staring at the ceiling, seeing the noisy, slowly whirling fan stir up the dust in the room lain closed these past three weeks. I had my favourite dream again today; of flying like Superman through the air, over the cities and the seas, my arms stretched over my head, fists clenched. I can twist and turn and swoop and plunge into the eddies and draughts of air under the magnificent sky. I catch a thermal on one of my circling sweeps over Mumbai and I soar like an eagle, unconquered, proud and defiant. I am blessed by this dream very often; I love the peace that it brings me when I awake in the mornings.

Sheeba lies next to me; she is gradually awakening as the morning sun finds its way through the gaps in the curtains across the glass windows of the room. Mon is on the mattress on the floor. Normally he sleeps in the next room, but this once, after the long trip back from home, he had asked, and had been permitted, to lie in the same room with us. He would not stir for a good couple of hours yet. The one thing you can't find fault in these multistoried buildings, is the view: it is simply incredible. Even from the eighth floor, Mumbai looks certainly less frightening than it is from ground level.

I told you, I am the middle child, neither here nor there. It has been my destiny to be forgotten for the other two. If it's some job to be done which requires maturity and responsibility, it was always Alice who would do it. After all, she is the eldest, George; she'll do it well enough. If there was something special, something extra that was being given out, some gift or present, it would always be Teresa, the youngest who would get it. After all, she is young and small, you can do without it, George, we'll get one for you the next time. It has been my destiny to be average, perhaps Papa's strong genes had all been apportioned out to Alice and Teresa. Anyway, Papa always thought that I didn't inherit any of them. He would, of course, jokingly, and sometimes hurtlingly, say that I got them all from Amma's side. As if Amma were the weak one with all the defective genes. Amma would smile and overlook the jibe, knowing that it was but in jest, and knowing that this was not an issue to stir up a fuss with her husband. But then, when had you ever muttered a protest, Amma?

How does it feel to be walked upon, ignored or looked through? How does it feel to know that your very own father takes you for a wimp and that the opinion he holds seeps into the minds of the others in the household? How can the intellectual ability that you possess, transmitted through the very genes passed on to you by him, be held against you, as you are derided time and time again for your dullness, for your averageness, for the ordinariness that is part of your very defining characteristics.

"Alice is doing very well in school, you know, she is sure to top the class". "Teresa's paper received the first prize in the inter-school competition: she is sure to try for the Civil Services examination, you know". "George will pass in the exams surely, he is not so dumb that he would fail."

"Sosha, that letter to the bank has to be sent today, ask Alice to draft it for me, ok?" "Tell Teresa that she can go out with her friends for the class party, right?" "If the servant has not come, send George out to buy the milk!"

"Sosha, do ask if Alice wants to be dropped at the school." "And as for Teresa, please ensure that the report she has prepared in class is circulated to the other teachers too." "George got 60% in his maths, that's quite an achievement for him!"

Bit by bit, one comment after another, in slow movements like the deliberate development of a story line, in ways too complicated to describe, I was ignored, shoved to the background, trodden over, taken for granted and finally humiliated beyond insult. My marriage to Sheeba was, to the great relief of the Manjooran family, the grand disposal of unwanted property. There were some unspoken questions as to how I would handle matrimony, would I be mature enough to manage a family on my own. Papa would be looking over my shoulder, advising me, holding my hand, coaxing me, telling me things I should know, thinking I was a six-year old all over again. Amma had that worried frown on her forehead most of the time whenever Papa spoke to me. There were too some unspoken comments, some side-glances at Sheeba: they thought her too

shallow, too full of a light jollity that indicated a hollow mental growth. I overheard Papa say that we suit each other extremely well, like peas in a pod.

And that was why it was so wonderful to flee from home and the balmy house at Cochin, to far away Mumbai, where nobody knew anyone else and where everybody was a stranger. To breathe the foul, salty smog of the city, to know that here I am my own master and that Sheeba would be there for me to touch and love and own, as much as I wanted, whenever I wanted, without the upraised eyebrow, the questioning look, the snide remark just about to spill over from Papa's sneering lips. What sort of familial love is it when what someone, anyone, says only serves to twist the knife and hurt as only words can hurt. Why had I stood and taken it all on the point of my jaw and still had not the courage to show my hurt on my face, in my actions, in my looks, perhaps even in the sudden flaying of fists and the shouts of ire and anger? That question is easy to answer. Because I could do no better. I had stood and bowed my head and drunk the bitter vinegar.

I knew I must get myself out of this poisonous mood before I warp and twist my soul till I can no longer recognize myself. The trip home was more of a disaster than I could have predicted. Amma was gone, that was bad enough as it was, and I knew I would miss her gentle smile and the unspoken worries she had had for me. I would never forget the way in which she would cuddle me to sleep when I was a little boy. She had expressive eyes, which showered me with sympathy and kindness. She never made those hurtful statements that Papa was so often wont to. I have seen her wince when he did so. Farewell, Amma, I have no quarrel with you. Rest in peace.

I was disconcerted when I saw Alice in the house when we landed up at home. We had reached there after rushing to catch the earliest plane, so we could see Amma before she was buried under the earth. The same Alice who had betrayed her family and her religion and forsaken all the duties and responsibilities a daughter should own up to, with her incongruous union with a friend and colleague from college, a heathen, a pagan, unblessed by her kith and kin, away from the baleful eyes of her father and the unchecked tears of her mother, to the bewilderment of all relatives and friends. That same Alice, now in charge of the house, ordering the servants about, making arrangements for the funeral, telling people what to do, and, wonder of wonders, people deferring to her, asking her, consulting with her. And how do you think I felt when I saw Papa calling her to his side, for the slightest thing, depending on her, leaning heavily on her, preferring her to his only son. My averageness is not of my making, Papa, I was born with it. You gave me the genes that make me average. But Alice's act of rejection of the family was deliberate and unpardonable. I had agreed with Papa's decision, when he had refused to accept her within the four walls of the family home. Now tell me: who should be condemned more, me with my mediocrity and the genetic stupidity with which I am born, or Alice's deliberate betrayal of all that's noble in family tradition?

And Teresa? The haughty, superior Teresa who thinks no end of herself, who considers herself the cat's whiskers? Who found for herself the route to liberation by opting out of the family, flying abroad, where no prying relatives or family values would hinder her winged feet. To whom Papa could utter no deprecations or abuses, because she could talk back, stand up to him and not let herself be bullied. She had been the first to leave after Amma's funeral, as if she had no further cause to stay on and comfort Papa, as if she were too superior to feel common emotions. How could she feel emotion, this hardened, supercilious, distant, disconnected sister of mine? And so she had run off from home for the airport, with just a little wave of her hand, lost in the crowd, eager to get back to her foreign University, where there were no requirements of love and family responsibilities, no need to feel the harsh sting of guilt and inadequacy.

So here I am, waking up from a fitful night with just a few hours of sleep and knowing I would have to be up on my feet now, to get ready for my office and my work and attend to the endless, routine, boring regularity of life in Mumbai. There was much happiness in such routine, the regularity of life on a steady keel. No tremors under your feet, no unexpected obstacles, no sudden capsizing on rocks hidden under the water. Sheeba was up and yawning her way to the bathroom. I watched her body move under her nightdress and recognized the one joy of my life, my joy of possession of this woman who had stood by me through life's

little twists and turns, through the buffeting of sudden crises of confidence and the worries engendered by the largely indifferent family, by the world spinning around us.

Sheeba. The name rings with a sense of Biblical majesty, of myths and apocrypha, the legendary beauty standing by Solomon the Great in the ages before history was recorded. My Sheeba is no such queen. But she is my life itself, for she is the wind beneath my small petty wings that now struggle to fly. I rely on her strength, her wisdom, her unerring instinct to know what is right, and the constant hand on my shoulders telling me to be patient, to be strong, to have the wisdom to know oneself and be content with what I am, with what I have. She has told me, so often, with such serenity and fortitude, that I must learn to acknowledge, to accept what I really am, and not challenge and oppose and be in constant stress, not to fret and worry, not to fuss over what cannot be changed. I wonder how Papa and the others regard her. Do they think she is shallow and insignificant, for the whispers I have heard, and the kind of glances I have seen Papa or Teresa give her, have persuaded me to that kind of a thought. How little they know her. Do they know she knows them and their thoughts so well and with such understanding, that she can predict how they feel or what they shall utter on any subject that may arise. She has opened my eyes to the person I am and how the others regard me and what I have to do to restore my sense of self-esteem. But the fool that I am, I can do nothing but bear the shame and the agony of worthlessness, the loss of self-respect and the constant knowledge that I am but an extra accessory in the house, an appendix with no value, rendering less than normal familial duty, much derided by Papa and the others.

And thus I am blown from pain to pain. We go often to the house of Chackochayan, Sheeba's parents, and they come over too. On holidays we go for long shopping expeditions together. As their only daughter, Chackochayan and Kochamma give her all the love she can ever want. But enough of my babbling. It is time to get up and start the day. Mon will require his sandwiches and Sheeba will need the milk for her morning tea. I stand next to her in the kitchen and help in her duties, before the maidservant comes over for the swabbing and the sweeping. Then I am off for my morning bath. I get ready for the day. I am happy, indeed I am.

FACE TO FACE WITH GRIEF

Within two weeks of Sosha's funeral, everybody had left. George, family in tow, had taken the afternoon train from the railway station after bidding a quiet, controlled farewell to his father at the house itself. Manjooran declined to go to the station to see him off. Teresa had left two days earlier, catching the plane to Mumbai in the morning and from there to London on the first available British Airways flight. Alice stayed on for some days more with the twins and then shifted back to her home. The children and Hari could not be left to their own devices for too long. A suggestion that rose to Alice's mind to invite Papa into her own home was not voiced. She needed Hari's clearance before that idea was mooted. Nevertheless, she made sure of taking time off each day to come over in the evening and check up on her father or to talk to him on the telephone as often as was possible.

John Manjooran was, therefore, alone; for the first time in his hitherto happily wedded life, he was completely and undeniably alone. His days began with the insistent beep on his alarm clock that woke him at six in the morning from a deep and dreamless sleep. Why he needed to get up at six, or seven, or for that matter, at any time at all in the morning, baffled him. There was no reason for him to do anything, anything at all. There was no need for any daily schedule or timetable now, was there? But Alice had decreed so and he did not have the will to contradict her, this new-found, self-willed daughter of his who took up the reins of his life with undisguised love and much remorse.

As the beep sounded, he felt himself rising up from the dark caverns of his slumber, through miles of black water, which each moment slowly turned from dark to lighter gray until the water's hue matched the tint of the light streaming in through the curtains of the open window next to his bed. He lay, eyes half closed and felt the life in his body throbbing with each beat of his heart. As he turned to the glow at the window, he could feel the thump, thump of the blood in his veins: incontrovertible proof of the life within. My heart beats and I feel the blood blow like a blustery rain through my body. Hence, I am alive. Hence, I must go through the motions required of me to demonstrate that I am indeed, irrefutably, alive.

So he gets up from his bed, shuffles his feet for his slippers on the floor and then walks up to the bathroom. When a body is removed from its surroundings, when a body ceases to be, what happens to the air surrounding it? Does it silently, effortlessly, slip into the empty space left behind? Surely that is possible. That premise must be correct, but then he was not sure if there was nothing of that person left behind. Despite the precision of that formula, he knew it was factually wrong, demonstrably incorrect. The theorem was erroneous. The undeniable fact was that Sosha had ceased to be; it was also undeniable that she was all around him, every moment of his waking hours, every single second of the single life that it was his singular sorrow to live. She was in his mind, behind his eyelids, in the corners of his temples, in the five senses he possessed, in the space between his skin and his consciousness. Sometimes he was startled by the closeness of her presence, for as he lay dozing in the afternoons, he could distinctly feel her near; he knew she was next to him, in their bed and he woke startled, puzzled and excited at the impossible probability that she may have decided to return.

In the bathroom, clutching the toothbrush in his hand, he looks at the window curtains, the bucket, the tumbler, the little bowl of flowers. Every little item that she had selected and arranged and placed just so, so it would appear good to both of them and they would know that things are good in their world. After his retirement, when he had finally taken deep breaths of life and knew with certainty that Sosha was the best thing that could have happened to him, he had decided with all the determination that he had, with all the commitment that he possessed, that henceforth his life would be dedicated to understanding the meaning of family and love. And he had, God knew that he had, until this great and final betrayal by Sosha who had left him for good, for forever; thereby disrupting the best laid plans of mice and men. And John Manjooran.

His ablutions over, he waits for the doorbell to ring. It is six-thirty now and Kamala, the maid comes in, with the milk bottle in her hand. She proceeds to the kitchen to prepare his breakfast and his morning tea. He walks up to the porch and bends down to pick up the morning papers lying out there. Then he walks back to the sofa and plumps himself down. The headlines glare, but his eyes skim over them and are unmoved at the endless details of death and violence and corruption in high places. Kamala places his plate on the table with a deliberate rustle; it is the unspoken message for him that breakfast is ready. He moves to the table, wolfs down his omelet and his toast and drinks the milky tea that Kamala makes with such careless perfection. He is glad his morning chores are over. Now he can go back to his room and do things, anything, something, any mental exercise, any physical act to spend his time as best as he can. There is none to admonish him not to mourn. Why should he not, was it not his right to mourn? At the age of sixty-two, there is none to tell him what to do, no laws to follow, nothing that can be forced upon him. There are no adverse consequences for his declining to follow commands. What further punishment could one impose on him, beyond the utter finality of being rendered single?

Back in his room, he closes the door behind him. Alice had warned Kamala to make sure that he was kept moving around, that the door was not bolted from inside, that he was frequently asked about whether he needed something to drink, some snack, something to be bought from the market store. Today, he did not need to be pestered. Today he would try and exhaust the list of things that can be done when one is alone.

For example, he mused to himself, he could sit in front of the clock and watch the moving second hand. He could see it sweep past the digits on its face. If he peered carefully, he would be rewarded with the sight of the movement in the minute hand too, as every now and then, it jerked a little and moved forward. As for the hour hand, try as he might, he could not observe any movement. It was too slow for him to detect any motion. The seconds ticked by, the minutes jerked forward, the hour refused to move. The slow hour. That was the three-word definition of his life. As slow as this heavy torpid life he was living, when all things around him had wound down to a sluggish crawl, until the very voices he heard, of those who came to condone, were like a low growl, the separate words disappearing into the stagnant pool of turgid water surrounding his face and his hands and his eyes. He found no solace in the ocean of time he was now owner of. Well, he had finished with staring at the clock; now it is time to try something else.

All right, let me try to remember the many moods of Sosha, the gentle, helpless Sosha, who stood between me and my present fate and without whose presence, I am so very perilously close to finally understanding that at the end of your life, Sosha, there was but senselessness and chaos assigned to me. When the purpose of life is no longer discernable, when the breath in your lungs is all the only difference between living and dying. He could well do without knowledge of that distinction.

First, there was the mother Sosha who worried about Teresa away in London and waited for her weekly letters like a restless hen, whose hands trembled in excitement as she ripped open the envelope and read out the precious words to him. There was so little in there to make her feel blessed as a mother, as a parent. The words were a bald recital of Teresa's weekly activities and what she intended to do in the coming days. Now and then there were queries about Sosha's aching back or her myriad health problems. But Sosha had everything she wanted in that little white envelope, to keep her going till another week was done.

Then there was the joyous Sosha, who when George would ring up, would go into raptures, admonishing him to look after her little grandson and whispering, so that Mon would not hear, that she had something special for him when they came home next for their holidays. Who did not care about the lack of reciprocal sentiments and wished only the best for the children- the foolish, sentimental Sosha who refused to frown and complain.

There was too the worried and sorrowful Sosha who would utter not a word about the rebellious Alice, knowing it would surely irritate him, turning him into a sulking monster in the house. The Sosha who would keep her abundant love for her first born from showing, fully knowing that what her husband had done in the

banishment of Alice was wrong, morally and ethically indefensible. But John Manjooran took time to learn, and indeed learnt too late, that the lives of other people are to be lived by those other people themselves, that he had no right to live their lives for them. And whether that truth came to him or not in the still night after Sosha's death, was irrelevant, for Sosha, the wise Sosha had proven by her death that forgiveness washed away all regrets and anger. Alice was back in his house, in his heart, in his life and he could clearly discern that in her homecoming, in her return to her own house, he had been rendered wiser and better.

And then there was the woman Sosha, the one who had shared his bed and his life for the many years they had together strode the face of the earth. From childlike bride to young mother and woman of the house, to grandmother, and now to bodiless spirit haunting every moment of the remaining days of his life. He shivered as he thought of her closeness, of the smooth warmth of her skin against his, the ecstasy of the night when giving was more important to her than taking, the inexhaustible wealth of her love for him that never faltered, through adversity or fortune, whose goodness tasted sweet and fulfilling in good times and bad, through his many moods of transient pique or meanness or gentle joy and bliss. The memories were all there, stored away in his mind, to be taken out, one by one, when he felt the need for them. But they were poor recompense for the living, breathing flesh and blood, the Sosha who had left her home and come to his, the wife that stood by his side, the other one that was, in fact, almost he himself.

All right, move on, next subject. Let us now try deep breathing exercises; it is good for the heart and the suppleness of the body, to keep the mind from falling off into the depths of despair, to remain in the exalted state of consciousness that denies the existence of sorrow, that reaches for divine rapture. Take a deep breath in, take it slow and easy, do not jerk the lungs, fill in the lower stomach first, then the upper stomach, then the top of the lungs until you feel yourself bursting with air. Then hold your chest still for as long as you can. Then, quietly, slowly, release it until you feel yourself being drained out. Repeat again and again until you lose all sense of time and thought, until you are but a breathing, sentient being, with no other desire than to breathe in and out and feel yourself alive. The sages said you should not let your thoughts wander when you do this divine exercise. He smiles: what a terribly foolish thing to do. If you do not let your thoughts flow, you cannot think of Sosha. Sages who live in splendid isolation at the foothills of the Himalayas do not know the joy of home and hearth, of love, of ecstasy, of a woman to hold you in the cold of the night when the rain beats an irregular, wild rhythm on the roof. When he had had the time, he should have told her he loved her more than she could imagine, infinitely more than she may have suspected. But now that she was gone, it meant nothing to her and caused him all the more agony for the truths untold, the things unspoken, the words he had not uttered simply because he thought that she knew. He now knew how wrong he had been.

Let me now take an account of myself, he said. I am, surely, an old man, sixty-two is not the age of a young lad. I am a widower. There is no in-between ground. And I am in reasonably good health. Alice is the light of my life, my days are strung together around her; but at every moment, both she and I know, there is the depth of that yawning chasm that lies between me and her family, whom I had rejected in no uncertain terms some two years ago. When Sosha was alive. Why had she not chastised me then; with some persuasion I may have acknowledged the wisdom of her words. And so, Alice my daughter will not love me as a daughter should, for a daughter has her own world which I have proscribed and banned. My son is a lifeless wimp, who lives far away and will not be a part of my life. My other daughter, Teresa is away in a foreign land. She lives in a world only she inhabits and where all others are strangers whose admittance is strictly monitored. So where does that leave me, this old man who is their father.

When Sosha had slipped away from me, I wondered how she would have felt, what would have passed through her mind in the last few moments of her life. Did she feel pain, did she gasp for the last breath in her lungs, did she reach out to me, and did she whisper my name? What was that singular moment like, this step from life to death, from being alive to being dead? Where was she gone now, was she hovering somewhere above his head, watching his loneliness, wishing she could be there to console him, to let him know that everything was all right and would be fine and that he should let the moments pass and then one day they would be together again? Did he really believe in all that crap? That the soul lives on and would not die and that some day they could be together?

And how could that be achieved. Could he snuff his life out and then rush to meet his Sosha, as simply as that? How many ways are there to commit the unthinkable? To take one's life. Let us now count the ways to draw the shutters across one's eyes, to pull down the curtain. Jump off a chair with the rope around your neck, the other end tied to the ceiling fan. Consume poison. Drown. Slit the arteries on your wrist. Kerosene doused on your clothes and the flicker of a match. It would be easy; in the mindless, drifting grief that he is floating in, it would be certainly easy. Dare he do it?

He gets up from his bed and walks to the bathroom. The shaving razor stands upright in the tumbler next to the washbasin. He slowly screws open the holder and lifts out the gleaming blade. There are fragments of bristles from yesterday still sticking to the gleaming silver-edged steel. He washes it again until the blade shines spotless and pure. Like a knife for the sacrificial lamb. He walks back to the bedroom and sits on the bed, this time on Sosha's side. He lifts the blade again and looks at the wrist of his left hand. He brings the blade down until it nestles on the tender, blue-veined, pale skinned wrist. He lets it lie there. He can almost see it move, pushed in a slow rhythm by the tiny throbbing pulse under it. He lifts the blade again in the fingers of his right hand and sights the veins on his left. Then he lowers it once more. Slowly, gently, with the delicate grace of a surgeon, he draws the sharp edge of the blade, in a clean languid movement, perfectly across the line of the veins. But he is a coward. There is no pressure on the blade, the skin does not cut, the blood does not throb out. He stares long at his wrist, cursing himself for not having the courage, the raw decisive grit, that would have stiffened his hand, to force down down the blade and cut swiftly, cleanly through the pale green lines on his wrists. All he could do was to draw a thin wavy line that brushed the epidermis and left it unstained.

He feels himself slowly slide into the waters of grief once more, the floor slipping beneath him, the ground tilting and tumbling him into the black waters that rise high and threaten to drown him again and again and again. Huge black bats rise ponderously around him, heavy leather wings beating in the air. There is a smell of sulphur in his nostrils and he imagines he is at the very gates of Hell. A darkness falls over his lids. And thus, once more, he weeps. Salt tears grow from out of the corners of his eyelids and trickle down his cheeks. He is an inconsolable child again, living in a grown man's body. He tries to choke back the gasps and the groans, but he has no power over them. He lets out a wail that rises from his lower stomach and tears through his body. Kamala, the worried and fretting Kamala, has no option but to enter his room and stare in shock and awe at the unabashed manifestation of grief that does not know friends or strangers and will reach no conclusion until the well of tears are dry.

She fetches him water, which he refuses with wildly flaying arms. She has no clue what has brought on this sudden, overwhelming grief. She rushes to the telephone and seeks out the number written out in bold black digits on the diary by Alice, for just such an eventuality. Her fingers shaking, she dials and is glad to hear the telephone at the other end ringing. A bored telephone attendant at Alice's college answers and there is a long wait as the extension phone is buzzed. Then, blessedly there is Alice on the other end; she is terrified, her voice trembling in panic. It is no complicated message that Kamala has to convey except to say that she should get home fast, and that Appachan is weeping and that she can do nothing much to quieten him.

BACK FROM NEAR DEATH

The curtains were drawn and the hospital room quite dark and cosy when John Manjooran opened his weary eyes. The fabric across the windows was blue. Bright sunlight filtered in through the thick curtains lending a heavenly aura to the room. He smiled in disbelief for a moment; he could remember nothing of what had happened to him in the immediate past. He was not dead, of that he was reasonably sure, for he felt faintly nauseous, his mouth salty and bitter. He had difficulty swallowing; his throat was raw and hurt in a dull throbbing way. He wished he could keep his eyes shut forever and drift between consciousness and sleep for the rest of his life. He had no clue how he had reached this quiet hospital room, no idea how or when the saline drip began flowing into his veins. The mattress was soft. He was covered with a sheet that left his shoulders exposed to the cold blast from the air-conditioner in his room.

For the first time he felt lighter, the constriction in his chest had lessened. He was alert, no longer steeped in a daze of blunted grief that refused to go away. He could now see clearer, brighter. The fall from the edge of the abyss had not been calamitous: he had landed softly. He had, in his falling, shed behind him the keen knife of his sorrow. He was no longer walking on shattered glass, no longer breathing icy air that hurt his lungs. He no longer heard the buzzing of bees in the spaces between his ears. The grief that had overpowered him briefly had left him washed clean as it were. Not that he was happy: far from it, but he could now see he had to finally reconcile himself to a life without his Sosa. The years would stretch interminably ahead, but he now would have to traverse that stretch as best as he could.

He felt cold. He cleared his throat and looked around. Rohan, his gangly grandson, one of a pair, was sitting on a chair at the foot of his bed. He seemed determined to do his duty as best as he could and smiled a little apprehensively at him. "Appacha, do you need some water?" His voice was high-pitched and worried. He had not expected his Appachan to come out of his long slumber on his watch. His mother had stepped out for an hour to get back home and have a wash and gather the stuff for the evening dinner, some gruel for the patient and some medicines the doctor ordered. She had been hoping for the last two days that her Papa would come out of his drug induced sleep and be ready to eat something to fill his stomach, to bring back the strength into his body. And when he finally did come awake, she was not there.

He nodded and smiled a little feebly as Rohan ran to the small peg table in the corner of the room to fetch the water. Eager to do more, he slowly tilted the glass tumbler and poured the water into the open mouth, slowly, carefully so that not a drop should spill on his grandfather's face. Appachan nodded and smiled again, a little wearily, but that was enough for Rohan who beamed back a great smile at him.

Slowly, as through a dense fog, he recalled the morning some two days ago, when he had sat in his bedroom and let his mind wander into a seething chaos where logic failed, reason disappeared and the darkness came crashing in like an angry sea all around him; where everything he had loved and cherished had grown claws and wings and flapped away, leaving him amidst the treacherous rocks slipping and sliding away from under his feet. He recalled nothing else but for some faint memories flickering somewhere within him, of voices raised high in fear and anxiety, of the cooling hand across his forehead, the wetness of water splashed onto his face and its drip into his collar. There was a quiet voice in his ear. The torch had flashed into his eyes and his pupils had dilated at the harshness of the light. He had quietened again after that; then he knew no more. There was a great gap in his consciousness; he wondered where the hours and days had fled.

"Where's Alice?" he asked, his voice a gruff croak and Rohan, bright-smiling Rohan, said importantly, "Mama has gone home for a bath and to get your food for the evening. She was here these last two days, Appacha, and asked me to sit here for a while till she gets back. She will bring Kochuaccha also when she gets back."

Kochuaccha. The little father. A child's appellation for a surrogate parent, not the biological father, but one who performs the function by virtue of his presence. Kochuaccha, Hari, whom he must now face with humility and courage. And plead for expiation, for new beginnings, a new understanding of complex relationships. He was weary, weary and tired of anger and recriminations and unshed bad blood. Weary of his wrath at the intransigent daughter who had not obeyed and subdued herself to his unilateral command, tired of all the guilt and the pain he had caused, she had caused, they had caused each other and the ones dearest to them. Alice he had forgiven, for it was time to do so when his Sosha had died. He had not wanted to let Sosha go into the good earth with an unsettled rancor lying like black smog around her. Alice who had quietly brought order and serenity in the house once again in the days she had stayed there, as the house flowed and ebbed with the coming and going of visitors. Who had seen to his morning coffee and his medicines, his lunch and his dinner. She knew that, for the everyday routine was the only thing that would anchor his sanity to the life he had left to live. Yes, Alice had been forgiven all her sins. He hoped he had washed away his crimes too, in the act of that atonement.

Now there was this Kochuaccha, this stranger in his daughter's life, he had to contend with. The one he had driven out of his house. The one he had insulted in the harshest language he had ever spoken in the sixty odd years of his life. And who had taken his daughter away from him for two whole years, with no wave of the hand, no letter, no phone call. She had, that very night, flown away, suitcase in her tightly clutched hand, on a wave of tears and anguish; she who had hardened her heart for she could not live without her Hari, her children's Kochuaccha. She would, if she must, live without her Papa and her Amma, but she certainly could not live without her Hari. If she had stayed on at home after this great storm, she would have choked in her throat on the sharp bone of her angst and surely died in a slow rage. To live in her father's house a minute longer was sure death, to run away was freedom, freedom at a terrible cost. But that freedom was the very essence of life to her. Kochuaccha was now coming to meet him. He had stayed away all this while, even after Alice had been welcomed back at her father's house. He had not wanted to anger Manjooran, for the anger of an old man can be acid and corrosive, breeding guilt forever and ever, never forgotten.

And so John Manjooran readied himself to meet this new son he must now learn to embrace, to forgive him for the crime he had committed of loving his first-born. He must forgive him his honesty and his courage, his implacable strength in the face of Manjooran's anger and the terrible crime of being a heathen in love with his daughter, the little girl he had once carried on his shoulder after she had been baptized by the rituals of the church. Did it matter at all now, he wondered. John Manjooran had hardened his heart against his daughter, not because she had chosen the right to exercise her freedom of choice to find her own brand of happiness, but really because she had chosen outside the social periphery, the circle of reasonable action, the radius of acceptability sanctioned by society and religion. She had chosen to stray beyond the lines drawn by him and his family, by his society and by his church. He had been overwhelmed by the thought, what would the people say? John Manjooran's daughter marrying a Hindu? The daughter of one of the oldest Catholic families in Kerala, marrying a pagan who had no family worth his name, with no thought for the pride and honour the Manjooran family was known for. After all, his family had been the toast of Kottayam and Kochi for centuries now. What would happen to all that ancestry and glorious tradition, when the seed of an ordinary Hindu would sully his bloodline?

And John Manjooran's anger had turned his blood to hot bubbling acid. Reason and courtesy had suddenly fled and he had ranted and raged at the trembling Hari. Until Hari, white and pallid, with trembling lip and shaking hand, had turned on his heels and walked away, with a single backward glance at the weeping Alice. He would wait for her, no matter what, his doors would be open for her any time of the day and night and if she chose to come, he would accept her with all his heart and all his love. And that he and she could together face the anger and the fury of the world. But the choice had to be hers, Alice's; she would have to take the first step towards him. The consequent flight from home of Alice and children and suitcase would be long recounted in the annals of family history.

It is to this quiet Hari, this simple, determined man who had defeated him by his transparent, steadfast love, that he must now make amends. After his Sосha's death had come the great change and he wondered why he had made all this fuss; what matters church and society, what matters the babbling tongues and furious whispers behind his back, when all he wanted now was to be sane and peaceful, not to be forever on the precipice looking down and fearing again the fall to madness and the loss of reason. This change in him was not gradual, but sudden and electric. It shook him up to know that Alice had forgotten the two years of rancour and had flown in from banishment at the dead of night to be with him, with no thought to the protocol of reconciliation.

Of course, Sосha had been pleading with him these past several months, feebly, patiently, slowly, working on him, wearing down his resistance, melting his obduracy, importuning him to let bygones be bygones, that she needed her daughter to be with her, now that the other two, George and Teresa were far away, that she did not wish to spend the autumn of her days in anger and discord with her first born. Had he really lost two years of Alice and Hari and the two grandchildren because he had feared to accept her choice, because that choice was made without his consent? Could he have been so blind, so callous, so insensitive? Lying in his hospital bed, it all now seemed such useless expending of ire and wrath, such waste of precious time, such deliberate and irrational forgoing of love. Now he dimly understood Alice's desire for happiness and why that happiness was greater than her duty, if not her love, towards her father. Do not worry, Hari, do not tremble Alice, I will not again be the fool that I once was.

There was a knock on the door, and Rohan sprang to open it, thinking it was his mother and his Kochuaccha. But it was not. It was the attending doctor and she stepped in with her white coat and the stethoscope and smiled at him.

"Mr. Manjooran, glad to see you are awake. I am Dr. Rekha Kurien. How do you feel now?"

"I am ok, I think. Doctor, could you tell me how I got here? And what was wrong with me?"

"Well, that will have to wait for now. Perhaps some other time, sir, when you are better. Suffice it to say that you seem to have recovered completely. Let me give you a check up and then maybe we can release you tomorrow."

She moved up to the bed and Manjooran got a quick look at her as she bent over him. The shining steel knob on the stethoscope was cold on his body as she checked him thoroughly, on his chest, the sides of his body and then on his back. She wore the mandatory white coat with a thin-bordered light green sari, a white blouse lying hidden within. Her hair was coiffeured with distinguished streaks of grey hidden within. She must have been about fifty-two. She wore thin-framed glasses that did not hide the black irises in her eyes.

Manjooran found himself closing his eyelids, with a delicate embarrassment; he did not wish to meet her eyes. He knew he looked a sight, with his unshaven chin and haggard face. It was for the first time in his life that a lady doctor was examining him and he found it quite disconcerting, that she should see him in his moment of weakness, should peer into his eyes, should feel his pulse, should look into his throat and ask him awkward questions. There was a perfume she wore that wafted along with her and it made him uneasy. Her hands were cool on his body and suddenly a memory was awakened within him; her voice and touch reminded him of the one who had tended to him in his distress. Was she the one who had cared for him, when he was lost in the violence of his emotions, in the push and pull of the tides sweeping through his body, his mind, his spirit, when he had slithered down the treacherous slope to the gaping jaws of hell, where he had almost lost himself to the demons of his soul.

"According to me, you seem to be quite ok. Perhaps you need some rest and good food within you. Then you can be sent on your way. I'd suggest you give us all some prior notice before you decide to fly off again into another planet". Her voice was sympathetic and there was a hint of genuine concern and wry humour in the

tone of her comments. But Manjooran was not amused: he had not wanted the seriousness of his nervous collapse turned into the subject of amusement for anybody.

“Perhaps you do not know the name of the planet I visited, and that is why you make light of my problems”. There was a slow burn of some bitterness within him. While one part of him wondered why he should feel resentful at some obviously well-meaning, light-hearted comment made by this handsome woman doctor, the other part, the one that hearkened to the void in his heart, felt the rise of an annoyance that would soon make him lose his cool.

Dr. Rekha Kurien could see a shadowy ire grow within him. The long years of experience as physician let her know immediately that he was not prepared enough for the cleansing that comes with the humorous appreciation of one’s own condition. It is the essence of restorative physiology, an appreciation that what has happened has happened and not all the fretting and fuming one indulges in will improve the state of your predicament. She had a fairly detailed knowledge of Mr. Manjooran’s personal tragedy. The time she had spent with the worried Alice in the waiting room and the years of trudging the hospital corridors had been enough to give her all she required to know about his treatment. It was not yet time for him to leave the tragedy behind. He would have to worry about it, play with it, fret and fume about it, before the inevitable dawning of wisdom would come; one day he would have to decide to get on with his life and move ahead.

“I am sorry if I have offended you, Mr. Manjooran, I did not wish to cause you any hurt. Anyway, I am sure you are on your way to a full recovery. I wish you all the best. I’ll see you when you are discharged tomorrow morning.” And then she was bustling out of the room with a swift smile at Rohan. John Manjooran watched her as she moved out of the room. Okay, that’s ok, I can live with that. Maybe next time, I’ll give you the coordinates of the specific hell where I have resided this past month.

As Rohan sat down again, he smiled a little wearily at him and said, “I think I have not really sat down and talked to you for quite some time now, Rohan. You are growing as fast as you possibly can. And I don’t want to miss any moment of it. Where is Mohan, or have you been talking turns sitting here, waiting for me to wake up?”

Rohan was as inarticulate as any young fellow could be, and tried his best not to convey his difficult thoughts for this grandfather of his. For two years the twins had not met him, any mention of his name or his grandmother’s was not very welcome at home, well, not unwelcome, but it always resulted in a sense of awkwardness and discomfort, the sudden fall of silence in the room in the midst of conversation. In time, the children had learnt the art of avoiding all mention of Appachan. It was more diplomatic to leave all talk of their grandfather from their discussions, even though they knew only too well that they were but twenty minutes away by car, at the other end of the town.

“Mohan will be here only tomorrow morning: he had some work at school and could not be here today. He was here all day yesterday.” The last was to explain to the grandfather that Mohan was not remiss in his responsibilities and duties. Mohan was as dutiful as Rohan. Both his grandsons were obedient and willing to help out their Appachan in any way. The loyal twins, watching out for each other’s back. Then he turned towards the door and said, “I think Kochuaccha and Mama are here”. Alice opened the door and peered in. She carried a plastic bag with a tiffin-carrier and a flask. She gave a cry of delight on seeing her father, with his eyes open wide and looking much more cheerful, obviously waiting for her arrival. For a moment then a frown appeared on her face and she seemed to waver, to halt in her tracks and look back at someone just outside the door, out of view from her father’s view.

“Alice, do invite Hari in. I am not going to eat him up.” Alice turned once more to her Papa and the radiant smile that lit up her face was glorious to behold. There was too tremulous worry, but the import of her father’s words washed away her fears, her long suppressed resentment. Through the days after her return to her father’s home, during these past four weeks when she had been welcomed back, the joy she had known had only been marred by the constant worry, the overriding thought that erased everything else; how to make her husband a part of this joyous reunion. Her children had been accepted; there was nothing objectionable in

them. They were of a marriage to which her father had had given his approval, and although the marriage had turned sour, they were of his bloodline; he could easily make his peace with them. But Hari, the heathen Hari, who had stolen his daughter and ruined the peace of his household; how could Manjooran summon the courage to welcome him back, to embrace him, to say let bygones be bygones.

She looked back and whispered to Hari, waiting just outside the door, out of Manjooran's sight. Hari paused; he had assumed Manjooran would still be in drugged slumber and had only accompanied Alice to the hospital to pick up Rohan. Now, caught unawares, he steeled himself and stepped in cautiously. He looked at the man who had, one rainy evening, some two years ago, viciously insulted him in a manner that he would never forget. This mortal enemy of his now lay on the bed, feeble and tired, the unshaven cheek and the sunken eyes turning him into a haggard old man. Hari walked up to the bed with his folded hands in a respectful namaste; but on his face there was no flinching, no giving in, no surrender. He remained aloof, circumspect, wary. Lying prone on the bed, John Manjooran raised his hand towards the younger man. "Will you forgive an old man his horrible crimes of pride and blindness?"

It took untold strength for him to say these words. From righteous anger that had once burst the dam of his patience to this abject plea for forgiveness: in these two years he had traveled a long and weary road. He wondered how far he had come, at which crossroads he stood now, what new planet was he now inhabitant of. There was the sudden springing of tears in his eyes and Hari faltered for a moment, astounded at the piteous prayer for forgiveness. Could this be the proud patrician, the doyen of the Church, the strong-headed patriarch who had kicked him out of his house that fateful day, not so long ago? What wonder had been wrought to bring about such a change? Did it require the death of a kindly woman to bring him down to his knees? Despite himself, Hari felt his own eyes moisten. He said to himself, with more maturity and wisdom than he would have credited himself with, that this is no time to stand on formalities. This is not the moment to let past bitterness sour the sweet moment of present forgiveness. This is the moment that should not be forfeited, should not be lost. He would be a fool to step back in indifference now.

Hari had no words, for words are designed for the business of everyday life. This was a still, quiet moment that defied the use of words: how could words encompass the poignancy of the moment? So he stepped forward and clutched the old man's hand and bowed low over it. The fragile moment lay cupped in the grasp of their hands and in the overflowing eyes of the invalid, in the thousand and one words unsaid. A high granite wall had been breached; the fortification around the Manjooran household had ceased to be impenetrable. Perhaps there would be still some place for him there. Where without surrender he would be accepted for himself.

The dread of that moment, two years ago, was still bleeding fresh in his mind. On that fateful evening, he had, in astounded silence, in a muddled haze, walked out of the house and into his car and driven slowly all the way back home. The rain was falling across the windscreen in long slanting streaks, flickering in the passing street lights, sliding upwards against gravity as it were, oozing away in the wind blowing against the car. The movement of the drops against the glass mesmerized him; as if it were the first time he had seen such a sight. His mind was struggling to accommodate, to comprehend, the horrifying meaning of the insults he had just heard. For a few minutes he had to stop the car and wait for the trembling in his hands to stop. He took a deep breath and calmed himself, consoling himself with the thought that if his love were true there would be a resolution to this problem soon enough. If not, he would chalk it up to experience as a lesson on inexplicable human conduct.

He had reached back home and slipped into his armchair with a glass of hot tea in his hand. His mother lay still breathing softly on her bed. She would not know what her son had been through. He closed his eyes and sipped at the tea and felt the slow return to normalcy. He prayed to whatever friendly gods he knew to show him a reasonable way out, to ease his troubled mind. He had never thought it was going to be easy. But too, he could never have foreseen an ending as explosive, as horrifyingly filthy as this one. He felt he had been

physically abused and battered, that nothing would cleanse him of the scalding acid poured on him through the words of the bitter old man. He had no clue as to how it would all end; he had no clear expectation of how Alice would react. He blindly groped about in his mind not knowing what was coming. He waited, mind drained of both sorrow and happiness and let the peace flowing from the hot tea going down his throat suffuse his body with its incomparable gift.

He had only a couple of hours to wait for the doorbell to ring. He had not moved from the armchair, except to check on his mother in the room next door. He had even prayed to her, to help him find strength at this moment of distress. He had come back and just sat down again when the doorbell rang. He did not bother to wonder who it could be and for sure, he had not expected anyone at this time of the late evening. The door opened and a new universe opened with it. Alice. Alice and the two children. Bags in hand, she stood at his door smiling amidst the tears in her eyes. She had burnt the bridges behind her; now there was no going back. Her headlong flight in the evening of that rainy day had burnt the very earth beneath her feet, leaving it scorched and smoking. There was no way she could retrace her steps back to the Manjooran household, neither of her own account nor on the pleas of her mother. She may consider relenting if her father called her back; called her back with her children, and her Hari. But, Hari had to be a part of the resolution. There would be no negotiations on that issue.

Hari stood at the door and let the worries and trepidations of the past few hours seep out of his tired body. The sight of the woman he loved brought gladness; it rose like a warm, life-giving cloud all around him. There was much to do, so much to plan for together, in this life they would now live in joint bliss. The rooms to be re-ordered, the children to be fed, the altering of the patterns of life, the accommodation of each into the curve of the other. Then there was the question of their marriage; the civil ceremony to be performed in the presence of the judge of the court. And the wonderful, exciting, boring, everyday tasks of life together.

He conceded it was almost a filmi, romantic story with all the ingredients of perfect love and domestic bliss, except for the fact that at every minute of the day, the foul, bitter words Manjooran had flung at Hari, stalked them like an evil ghost, walking through their memories, through the moments of their present lives. And though they had found salvation outside the perimeter of Manjooran's fief, those words hung threatening and ominous, a naked blade brandished at their throats. Even when the invitation card of their court marriage had been passed on to her parents through a mutual friend, even though Alice had telephoned her mother to inform her about the forthcoming marriage, there had been no response from her father. Sosha had wept with frustration at the blind, brute stupidity of her husband. She had also prayed for her daughter's happiness and lit a few candles for the new couple in the church. Even when Hari's mother had passed away about six months or so after their marriage, and news of her death was sent to the Manjooran household, there had been no response. A cold, icy chill hung over their respective homes, and any mention of each other brought on a studied indifference that was complete. Alice did not know where she stood and she hesitated to raise issues with Hari. Sosha longed to see her daughter and her grandchildren, but the grim-jawed, unrepentant man who was her much-loved husband, denied her this simple privilege.

Hari knew it was time for the ghost of Animosity Past to be put to rest; this heavy iron blade of bitter words had to be sheathed once again. What a pity it had to come after the death some weeks ago, of a fine, patient, loving woman. If she had not passed away, could they have ever considered the possibility of this reconciliation, this bringing down of a proud, arrogant man? Did it have to take a tragedy to bring back the smile on their faces again? Hari shook his head sadly. There are no answers to such questions.

The thoughts blew through his mind like a dust storm as he waited by the bedside, his face expressionless, his mind alert to the nuances of expression on the faces of the ones around him. Alice, happy with the expectation of improved domestic harmony, the people she loved most in life all around her, all in the same room, all willing, for the moment, to live with each other, to co-exist, to be tolerant. Rohan wondering how his Kochuacca and his grandfather could bear the thought of talking to each other, when they had not

mentioned each other's name for these past two years. And Appachan, now looking lighter and happier and for the first time smiling at him, holding Alice's hand, ruffling his own hair. It were as if some kind of magical transformation had been wrought before their very eyes.

"And now, Alice Mol, you must leave Hari and me for a heart-to-heart chat. We have much to talk about. Go take a walk in the corridor while I set some things right." The words were still imperious, but now stated with a smile and a slow twinkle lighting up the eyes. Hari nodded; he had not thought it would be possible that things could be set right by Manjooran merely asking for his crimes to be forgiven. Sins are not forgiven as easily as that. But he would make an effort, sure he would. If Alice's father took a step towards him, he would take two.

Alice was thrilled. This was going better than she had thought possible. She was also a little nervous about how Hari would react and the tone and tenor of the coming conversation. She wished she could be in the room and hear what would be said and interject or intervene when things were going awry. But she knew this was something she should not, would not be allowed to, do. She gathered Rohan and walked out of the room, with a long backward glance at Hari, begging him with her eyes, pleading with him to be wise and mature, to grasp this opportunity and forget wrongs done to him, to forgive an old man his sins of pride, to consider the joys of a family redeemed.

"I will not lie to you," Manjooran began, "nor will I try to defend my horrible behaviour. I do not know if you know this, but when you walked into my house that day, I had no clue whatsoever as to who you were or what you wanted from me. It was, therefore, something of a violent shock when Alice told me that she knew you intimately and wanted to marry you. I have thought often about why she had not confided in me all the many months she was staying with us in our house. If only she had, she would have prepared me for what was coming. So, you see, even more than the shock of getting the news sprung at me in so sudden a fashion, in your presence, when you had just walked into the house, a complete stranger, even more than that, what took me by complete surprise was Alice's exclusion of Sosha and me from matters so close to her heart. Why did she need to do that? Now, sitting here, I cannot truly say, if I had been kept in the picture, that I would have accepted you as my son-in-law, or whether I would have still kicked you out that day. To compound matters, to rub salt into the wound, I was shocked into disbelief when I guessed that you are a Hindu. To me, the steadfast pillar of the Catholic Church in Kochi, this was a stab into my heart."

"I lost all sense of reason and equanimity and said things that I would never have contemplated. Call it temporary insanity, call it madness, I have no excuse for such extreme boorishness. When Alice informed us of her decision to follow you into the night, at that moment, I could not have cared less. I did not think of her, or of myself, or of the darkness flowing like a swelling, black river through Sosha's heart. Sometimes, I wonder whether it was I who killed Sosha that day, though she died a good two years later. I must have, yes, I must have, as surely as shooting her with a pistol, or with a knife plunged into her poor heart. Many a time in the last two years, sitting alone in the house with Sosha by my side, I have wondered where we were going, where we were drifting off to. With George away in Mumbai and Teresa in England, what were we doing sitting alone in the evenings, knowing full well our daughter is but twenty minutes away. Sosha tried, over and over again she tried; she would plead and beseech and argue and protest and finally go to bed with no dinner, crying herself to sleep. I would sit on my armchair, monarch of all I survey, feeling the night creeping in around me, hearing the snuffles and sobs from Sosha next to me, hardening my heart until I could feel nothing at all, no emotions, no feelings, ruling like an eagle overlooking a prairie, cold and proud."

"I know now I have been a cursed fool, to have lost a daughter and my grandchildren and indeed, my Sosha, all in the space of a few minutes on that rainy evening two years ago. I have no strength to fight. I see no reason in the intransigence I so assiduously practiced these many wasted days. I don't know what differences there are in religion and dogma and why a Christian should feel himself to be the exclusive property of his God. I wonder now, with the wisdom that my Sosha's death has so belatedly gifted to me, what I was doing

these past two years, in which fantastic world I was living, where I could boot out the man who loved my daughter with foulest language and send Alice and the children into the night with just a suitcase in hand. What kind of a monster was I all these years? Sosha's death showed me all in a flash of light, in a clarity that was blinding and so utterly obvious, what things were important, what are irrelevant. It took me sixty two years to learn that, can you imagine how slow one can be to acquire wisdom?"

"Now I ask you to forgive me, for what I said to you that day, for the unforgivable crime I committed on you, for throwing Alice and the children out of the house in bitter spite that my commands were not obeyed, my dictates were not complied with, for the torture I inflicted on Sosha and for being the worst, unforgiving hard-hearted man I have been these past two years."

Manjooran felt he could not continue, his words were choked, his eyes were burning and he had no strength left. He was gasping and unable to speak any more. Hari reached out his hand and passed it lightly over the old man's forehead and said, "You have said it all; I need no further explanations. Your words have washed away the bitterness I have tasted in my mouth for these many months now. Don't belittle yourself any further. We have so much to give each other, and we constantly deny ourselves these precious gifts for reasons irrelevant. Now it's all over, let us be friends again. I know Alice would be thrilled at this, for this was the one black cloud on her horizon. Let me call her in; she will be overjoyed when she knows her fears have all been set to rest."

SOSHA REMEMBERED

Manjooran was discharged from hospital next day after a dull breakfast of oats and toast with a watery pineapple jam. Dr. Rekha Kurien came in at eight in the morning. She was at her efficient best, bustling into the room, smiling at Alice and Hari and the children and going through the examination of her patient with clinical competence. Manjooran had shaved and put on a clean shirt and trousers and was eager to leave, once the formalities were completed. Dr. Kurien, thorough and quick, wrote out a list of medicines, mostly tonics, vitamin supplements and the like. She dipped her hand into her pocket and pulled out a card she handed over to Alice saying, "You'll find my address and contact numbers on this. If you do need me, any time of the day or night, do not hesitate to call. Mr. Manjooran, I wish you a speedy recovery. I am sure you'll be perfectly ok within a couple of days. Your daughter will take good care of you." She smiled at him from over her glasses, a full, pleasant smile that radiated cheer. Then she was out of the room and on her way.

That smile remained with Manjooran for some time and he found himself often going back in the course of the day to the memory of that beaming face. The bills had been settled and Manjooran slowly got up from his bed. With the help of Hari who held him by his upper arm, he walked out of his room and into the lift. The bright sunshine outside seemed to upset him a little and he had to screw up his eyes to allow the irises to adjust to the light. Then he was led to the old Fiat and soon enough was on his way to the Manjooran home. There was a hint of a suggestion that he could come over and stay with them, but there was an apparent reluctance that was obvious and Alice did not press the point further. All in good time, she thought to herself, all in good time. What a change there has been wrought in twenty-four hours. Her world had altered in a manner impossible to believe. Her father and Hari, in the same vehicle? Talking to each other? The proud, defiant Manjooran, finally able to live with the truth that Alice and Hari were man and wife?

Later, when Hari and Alice were alone, they had a long discussion about the miraculous change that had transformed her father in the past few hours. Hari was caught in two moods: he was overwhelmed by the courage and honesty that Manjooran had displayed in confronting the simmering issue and confessing to the humiliating truth that he had been wrong. Hari had to concede the greatness of heart in his plea for forgiveness and had no choice but to bow down to the generosity so blindingly apparent in the moment of confession. But he also knew he would have to struggle hard with conflicting emotions within himself. Would he be able to forget the intolerable insults that had been spat at him by the indignant, furious man two years ago. This would take some doing, but his father-in-law's prayer for atonement left him no choice. He had to accept the pardon sought from him. Alice understood perfectly the welter of emotions Hari was going through. In her quiet persuasive way, she had walked with Hari through the past many months and had finally taken him to the difficult world of reconciliation.

Armed with the truth that they were indeed doing the right thing, they decided to commit themselves to strengthen that tenuous peace. They would not be found wanting in this delicate moment of grace and expiation. Back at Manjooran's place, Alice and Hari made a few necessary improvements to perk up the overall atmosphere, by changing the curtains to something more airy and light coloured, by ordering extra newspapers and magazines to keep Manjooran distracted and engaged during the day. They asked Kamala to prepare a diet for him that would be varied and interesting, one that would keep his appetite up. They made arrangements to ensure the children would be over for a short time at least on alternate days. Both Alice and Hari realised now they would have to reorganize their lives in order to accommodate her father's schedule. This posed no problems, for with some rearrangement of their daily calendar, they would be able to come

here as often as possible. College wound up each day at about four and there was enough time for either of them or the children to visit the house and keep the grieving man company. It would take some effort and careful monitoring for a few days, but the good cheer he was already showing was encouraging.

They went over to the neighbours on both sides of the house and invited them over for a cup of tea in the evening. Srikumaran Nair and his young wife agreed straightaway. After the funeral, they had on a few occasions tried to visit their bereaved neighbour, but had been told by Kamala that he was either sleeping or had refused to meet anybody. Discouraged, they had gone back, wanting to be of some help, but not knowing how to go about it. On the other side was Mohammad Koya, who was usually out of the house; but they were lucky today to find him in. He too agreed to come over in the evening. Both the neighbours were told in confidence about the problem at hand, which was to help Manjooran regain his normal equanimity and prevent the ever-lurking, black depression from overpowering him. In this simple subterfuge, both the Nairs and Koya agreed to help out as best as they could.

That evening there was a small gathering of sorts. Sukumaran Nair and his wife were the first to arrive, spreading good cheer with their friendly grins and words of comfort. Mrs. Nair had brought over some freshly baked biscuits to add to the refreshments, some ladoos and barfi with savouries and fruit and biscuits. There was coffee and tea and limejuice. Mohammed Koya came in next: he had a broad grin on his face and said something to the effect that Manjooran had all of them worried for some time. Koya was genuinely glad Manjooran was better now and promised that he would drop in from time to time to look him up and cheer him in the days to come. There was the pleasant, easy buzz of conversation. The guests praised Mrs. Nair's biscuits and they all exchanged telephone numbers and addresses, promising to keep in touch with Alice and Hari in future. The two children, Rohan and Mohan, were thrilled to be back here, where they had stayed with their mother in the days before things had gone sour between Appachan and Kochuachan. They stayed close to their grandfather and plied him with tea and biscuits and made him eat more than he would normally have, until Alice stepped in and took them in hand.

There was much conversation as Sukumaran Nair and Koya were introduced to Hari. Of course they knew all about him but they avoided any reference to the great rift that had split the family some two years ago. Koya had always felt that Manjooran had been unfair in denying his daughter a happy married life, especially after the sorrow and grief her estrangement with Subash had caused her. Everyone had an inalienable right to search for happiness: who could be denied that, he wondered? He had even thought of talking about this one day to Manjooran and Sosha, but then had second thoughts about interference in matters of another family. Though Sukumaran was non-committal, not wishing to comment on the conduct and behaviour of anybody else, Mrs. Nair had surprisingly supported Alice's action in no uncertain terms. Frivolous as she was, she had some clear notions about such matters, strengthened by the endless supplies of romances and novels proclaiming the cause of free choice in matters of love and marriage. But now that things were ok, they all did comment on the great change that happiness brings to a united family.

Manjooran did not talk much, but there was a great lightening of the load from his chest. For the first time after the passing away of Sosha, he felt he had the courage to face life again, to go through the rest of the days allotted to him with some measure of grace and fortitude. He listened and smiled at all of them, especially at the children and their ceaseless movement from one end of the room to the other. They seemed to be playing some kind of game, the rules of which only they could understand. But the quite hum of the conversation in the room, punctuated by the laughs and the calls of the two children had such a soothing effect on him that he felt blessed to return once more to the world of the living.

There was too a surprise visitor that evening, one that Manjooran had not expected at all. When the doorbell rang, he wondered who that could be and sent Alice to the door to find out. He first noticed the welcoming smile on Alice's face before seeing, with some surprise, Dr. Rekha Kurien walking into the room. Alice introduced her to the rest of the guests and whispered to her Papa that it was she who had invited her to this small gathering. The fact was that she had been genuinely impressed with the compassion and concern that the good doctor had displayed during the two days she had spent in nail-biting worry at the hospital, that she had been prompted on an impulse to invite her too for this small get together.

"Hello, Mr. Manjooran, and how are you?" The voice was low and pleasant and courteous. "Alice had called me over and I thought it was a good opportunity to check on my patient. I am glad to see that you are looking good."

"Thank you, doctor, I am grateful to you for the care you took of me and the kindness you showed Alice during the two days I spent at your hospital."

"You did cause some concern to your family, you know. But all that is over now. You have come back from a living hell and I am glad you are back. I am sure that you will be perfectly ok now."

It was a simple courtesy call, he knew that, but Manjooran was happy she had come. She was, in fact, the very link between his days of darkness and the moment when the black veil seemed to lift, when he was brought back to the living world again. He found himself watching her pleasant smile and listening carefully to all that she said. He insisted that she taste the sweets and sip the limejuice; he asked Mrs. Nair to ply her with the biscuits she had baked. He listened to the easy graceful way she included every one of them into her conversation. Dr. Kurien noticed the photo frames on the sideboard, of George and Sheeba and their son as also of Teresa and wanted to know who they were. Manjooran wondered if she noticed the absence of photos of Hari and Alice. There was no sign of their children too. That was something that he should set right soon, he vowed. She had a kind word of enquiry for Koya and a query or two about the cookie recipe. She asked about Mr. Nair's business and wanted to know about the college where Alice and Hari worked and the progress of the twins at school. She had most of them talking with her and soon she seemed to be the center of the conversation. Manjooran noticed how she took care never to impose herself on the others, but encouraged the rest of them to talk and participate in the conversation.

Manjooran found himself watching her movements and the grace with which she spoke to others, solicitously and caringly, and the smile that often lit up her face. He seemed to see a woman who was at peace with her life and had found the grace to accept all things for what they were. He saw her wide-spaced, large eyes and her slightly graying hair swept back over her head, the way she sat on her chair with the plate in her hand and the fork held in balance as she turned to the people in the room and talked to them. He saw the glint of the studs at her ear lobes. He wondered whether she may have ever faced tragedy in her life, how she could have gained that peace and equanimity so apparently shining in her face. He wished her well and all happiness for the healing touch she had bestowed on him. He prayed she would be protected from the sting of sorrow and grief; that she never know the horror of the passing away of a loved one. For a moment, he wondered why he did that, he really did not know. With reluctance he turned his eyes away from her and talked to the others, in the safe and sound knowledge that they all meant well for him, that he was with friends and that he should be grateful for their company.

It was a gentle and wonderful time, one that strengthened the mood of good cheer set into motion after Manjooran's return home. Before one knew it, it was seven thirty and getting late and everybody was rising to leave. Koya was the first to rise; he had to go out for a dinner with some of his bachelor friends. Dr. Rekha said she had patients to attend to some miles away in the town and that she'd better hurry before it was too

late. The Nairs also left simultaneously. Suddenly they were left alone, Manjooran and Alice and Hari and the children. George and Teresa were far away and they could be here only when there was some pressing need or, God forbid, another tragedy, another death in the family. The ones who were present in the room now, they were the core of the family that would be around him in the days to come. Manjooran understood that well now. He prayed to his God above to keep him and those around him happy and contented as long as He would permit.

Two weeks later was the simple ceremony for the fortieth day anniversary of the death of Soshamma Manjooran. The friends and neighbours who gathered for the prayers in the church surrounded the bereaved family with a cloud of warm wishes and sympathies and undiluted love. Sosha had been well loved; she had friends from virtually the whole town, people who had loved her for her kindness and her generosity and the sheer goodness of heart. The priest, the young parish pastor who had presided over the obsequies when Sosha had been interred, chanted the hymns and made an eloquent speech. He remembered the virtue and goodness of the departed spirit and prayed for the salvation of her soul, for the strength and courage of the ones closest to her to bear this loss with fortitude.

John Manjooran sat on a chair at the front of the prayerful people, facing the altar, but did not raise his eyes. He looked down into his hands on his lap and let his mind fill with the music of the voices raised in hymn. He saw Sosha close to him, next to him on his right, caressing his forehead, and smiling at him. The memories of her face this time brought a calm peace into his mind, there were no more jangled nerves and discordant tensions smothering him, squeezing the breath in his chest. She seemed content, happy, or was he imagining it? From the corner of his eyes he saw Alice and Hari and the children next to him. So that's it: she has seen the family together again, that's why she is happy.

The other two of his children had not come. It would have been difficult to expect Teresa to come back all the way from the U.K. for this small ceremony. She had called long distance, though it sounded as if she were in the next room. She had asked about him and how he was coping. She was thrilled that Alice and Hari were both in the house, but apart from expressing her joy, she did not probe further. She would get more details from Alice later, of that she was sure. Manjooran had some hope that George at least, if not all three of them from Mumbai, would make an attempt to participate in the prayers; after all he was just a day-and-a-half away by train. But he had rung up the previous night and expressed his inability to come. He seemed to be distant and brooding and Manjooran had not tried to persuade him.

The prayers were over and there was a moment of silence. The gathered community bowed their heads in memory of Sosha. And then they were all being invited to the community hall for refreshments and tea. The absolute anguish of the sudden death had been mellowed by now. The sharpness of pain had been blunted. What was left was a dull longing that would perhaps never go away from Manjooran's heart and soul. From his chair at the head of the table, he looked around at the people who had gathered in mourning for the departed Sosha. There were staff from his old office; there were husbands and wives, colleagues and friends with whom he had grown up in the years past. Who had known him and Sosha well. He was grateful for their presence, their comforting sympathetic smiles. He saw some of Alice's friends, a couple of classmates of George and Teresa and some of the younger children of relatives who had come from near and far for the ceremony. His eyes caught and noted the striking presence of Dr. Rekha Kurien as she sat at the table not so far from where he was. Alice may have invited her over. He found his eyes straying towards her. Then some of the women of the prayer group to which Sosha had belonged came over, full of gushing compassion. Some even had tears in their eyes. Manjooran allowed their commiseration to flow over him and he felt blessed, anointed with grace.

The breakfast of appams and stew with egg masala was delicious, served with a host of accompanying delicacies. The murmur of the people in the hall was muted and deferential and by the time coffee was served it was ten o'clock. People started getting up from their chairs, walking over to Manjooran and bidding their goodbyes. Many of them made him promise he would keep in touch with them and call them up in case he should need anything. He smiled at all of them. He felt at peace. To him it was now obvious that Sosha was happy. And why should she not be; Alice was back, Alice and Hari and the children. If only he had had the courage to have embraced them in his arms when there was still time, when she was alive. Maybe her weary heart would have held her together for some more time, maybe she would have been still alive and with him. He knew the thought would constantly disturb him in the days to come, niggling at his mind, making him lose sleep, making him worry if he were the real reason for her early departure.

Back home, when Alice and the children had left with Hari in the old Fiat, he sat down in the drawing room and spent a couple of long, leisurely hours glancing through the old family album, looking at old photographs of all of them as they had grown up together, the many milestones of their conjoined lives, the births of their three children, the acquisition of their home, the joy of Alice's marriage, the mischievous grins on the twins' faces, Teresa on her way to the University in the UK, George's marriage and the beaming baby face of their grandson. Looking back, everything seemed so right now. They had lived their lives as they had seen fit, and there was on the whole, more joy than sadness. Sure there had been some mistakes down the way; but whose life doesn't have some of them. All in all it had been a good life. Though Sosha's was shorter than it should have been. Shorter by a million years.

Fine, I understand Sosha, I get the point, I have to live without you now, and I shall; do not worry for me. I have learnt much in the few days of your absence than from the many days you had pleaded with me, in the forty years of our lives together. I promise, I shall make up for the grief I caused you by my blindness, my pride, my arrogance. I shall miss you horribly, every minute of my life, but I shall now make you proud of me, as you will see. Keep watching over me, be my guardian angel, sit on my shoulder and, in the fading light, point out the way ahead to me. Surely I will go where you say.

Manjooran needed to work out a plan, a schedule to help him in the days ahead, to organise his life in the benevolent shade of the memory of Sosha. He needed to get into the thick of relationships, to live life in the company of the people he knew and loved. This he knew now, was a blessing beyond compare. If he needed to hold somebody's hand, he had Alice, and now Hari and the children. He had to embrace life, not run away from it. And so he would.

PART II

One is not born a woman,
one becomes one.

- *Simone de Beauvoir*

MIDNIGHT'S CHILD

Rekha was a child of the midnight, born in the month of the country's awakening to freedom. From her grandfather, she had heard stories of faceless, ordinary men and women who had willingly entered the titanic struggles of the time preceding her birth, people who smiled at the death certain to come their way, of stirring tales of violence, and non-violence, that had swept across the country and the thrilling eloquence of the true leaders of our revolution, their voices raised against the might of the British Empire.

At the dawn of freedom, Kerala was a sylvan land of unmatched beauty, of rich paddy fields and extreme poverty. Social engineering over the past countless centuries had left behind a legacy of toleration, of unique demographic patterns, of communities evenly balanced in the complex society of the times. The men all looked similar, white shirts and dhotis and toothbrush moustaches, sandals on their feet. The women were starting to raise their heads, emboldened by the power of education. The poor were finding expression for themselves in the siren song of Marx. The rich were reluctant to share their prosperity. There would be political experiments carried out here that had no parallel elsewhere. It would take another half century for Kerala to become God's own country.

Rekha and Chetan lived in their old rambling family house at Trivandrum, not too far from the center of the town. Decades ago, it had been bought by the family from a royal personage, chiefly to demonstrate its economic superiority over jealous relatives. The house was all whitewashed and brilliant in the sun. Rekha's father made it a point to give it a new coat every year, so it looked ever new and inviting. The doors and windows were all painted green and the effect of the two stark colours, white and green, made it resemble an old colonial house, once full of people, where butlers in livery and footmen in uniform attended to the needs of their feudal lords and ladies.

There must have been a dozen rooms lying scattered within the walls of the house. Some of them were not used at all: they may have been occupied by cousins and relatives who used to, in the old days, come down from the villages to live with this wealthy relative of theirs, in search of employment or a better education. There were bougainvillea climbing up the walls all round. The large acreage of tall teak trees and green grass made it a peaceful haven for birds and small creatures, squirrels and pigeons in the daytime and bats and large moths at night. As little children, Chetan and Rekha spent hours wandering around the compound, climbing the trees and feeding the bold squirrels and pigeons with bananas and grain until they became so friendly they would rush to greet them whenever they went out into the courtyard. There was a small pond at the farthest reaches of the sprawling property, where tiny silver-headed fishes swam. When whistled to, they floated to the surface of the dark, still waters. Rekha used to cup her hands and let the fishes swim in to nibble at the flakes of grain she placed within her palm. Chetan warned her never to hold them with her fingers, for if the slimy coating of their bodies was rubbed off, they would surely suffer and die, for so delicate was their body metabolism.

After the excitement of the Independence struggle was over and the citizens of the country settled down to the everyday business of living their lives, her father, who had a degree in law, started a legal practice that soon became a roaring business. Her grandfather, a farmer by profession and with large tracts of land in Kottayam, had sold off every inch of his properties there and shifted in with his elder son in Trivandrum. The other children, two daughters, Rekha's aunts, were comfortably married off in various parts of the State and had played hardly any part in Rekha's life or education. Achechan's practice soon became much too big for the house and he had to shift his office to a better location. He soon discovered he needed assistants to help him in the continuously burgeoning work and enrolled a couple of bright young lawyers for just that. Thereafter, there was no looking back: the acclaim and praise that he received was unprecedented. At times, he was nowhere in sight for days on end, leaving early for his office and the courts and returning only when the children were already asleep.

Her mother was a teacher in the Women's College and she lived in a world of books and poems and essays and literary classics that seemed to entrap, inveigle and imprison her in a fine world of subtle sensitivity. She spoke in metaphor and symbol that only few could decipher. She had a separate room for her books all to herself, where the rest of the family would hesitate to enter. It was curtained and cool and the distemper on the walls was of a dun colour, quite suited for contemplation and study. Throughout the day there was a dull lamp left lit on the table. The room had rarely seen natural daylight and it seemed apt that it was illumined only by artificial electric light. Rekha felt a candle would have been more appropriate; such was the old world charm the room radiated. It reminded her of drawings in the books of Charles Dickens, sketches of rooms of dreary barristers, or advocate's clerks, filled with shadows and not luminosity, the very lamps throwing darkness on the walls rather than rays of light. It was hallowed ground, and the children tended to talk in whispers on the rare occasions they happened to tread its polished wooden floors.

Her father's father, her Appachan, was the lonely figure in the room upstairs, who at the evening of his life had nothing to look forward to but death. He usually lay breathing in the stale air of his room, spread-eagled on his bed. He was in reasonably good health, but regretted his decision of selling off the ancestral property and coming to the city to live in this prison of a house. Rekha and her Chetan, deprived of the presence of their parents in their lives, used to go up to his room and spend countless hours, hearing him narrate stories of his village, of the cows and the farms which produced enough for all of them and the members of the extended family. He could never forget the extensive arable lands his family had possessed for generations, and the calm, deep sense of serenity he felt when he walked among the stalks of grain ripening under the sun. He explained to them the unique numismatic values of the monetary systems in vogue then, of sixteen kashes making up one chakram, of four chakrams making up one panam, of seven panams adding up to one rupee. And how the British, to underline the undeniable fact of their complete domination of the country, insisted that when 28 chakrams made up one Indian rupee, the British rupee would be equivalent to twenty-eight-and-a-half chakrams. Half a chakram separated native from empire. He talked too, of the great struggles that the country went through, of the momentous events he had lived in the thick of, when the slowly awakening people were lifting themselves to self-determination and independence, of unforgettable stories of those stirring times when the country rose to the call of the Mahatma.

As a child she had imbibed these tales in the very air she breathed. She had joined the Holy Angels' Convent as one of the tiny tots in Class I and had grown up in the school, rising from one class to another. She acted in school plays and participated in recitation competitions that extolled the virtue of the patriot and his love for country and God. She had argued at length with children of her class, who tended to take these momentous matters lightly, who had no qualms in showing scant respect for things nationalistic or patriotic. Her Headmistress regarded her as an ideal student and held her up as a model for the other lesser idealistic schoolmates. She led the students in inter-school debates and quiz competitions. She was invariably made monitor of her class and when she reached Xth Standard, she became head girl for the School.

Life at home, when she was very young, would have been wonderful but for her brother, two years older than she, who acted as if he were God's gift to humanity. To him, Rekha was below contempt. When she was little and a mere toddler, Chetan bothered her and tortured her as only a nasty elder brother can. Rekha was often bested in the struggles between them. On one occasion the little brat had swung at her with a small iron washer, attached to the end of a long piece of string. The metal struck at her left temple, drawing blood. It probably terrified Chetan even more than the bawling girl. The commotion had brought Amma and Achchan out into the yard where Chetan received the rough end of Achchan's hand and tongue. Chetan seemed to have learnt his lesson that time. But that did not stop him from taunting her relentlessly. She used to cry, but soon learnt that crying would only encourage the demon further. So, as she grew older, she stopped crying and carried the battle into his camp, taunting him with shrieks and grimaces from a safe distance, secure in the knowledge that her long nimble feet would easily carry her to safety, well beyond the reach of her rotund sibling's reach.

But their childish animosity did not last. Her brother, growing older himself in the nearby St. Joseph's Boys' school, turned out to be a fine lad after all and the needless scraps between the two became a thing of the

past. They learnt to lean on each other, to help each other in class matters, in swotting for the exams. He was not as brilliant as she was, but Rekha, though herself younger and in a lower class, found herself assisting her brother, guiding him in his work, helping him to keep his head above the waters and pass from one class to the next. They became the most excellent thing that siblings could possibly hope for : the best of friends in a world that had not much use for them. As the time came for passing on to the Pre-Degree classes and then on to Graduation, she asked herself the question what she would like to be when she was free from the onerous task of educating herself. Her Chetan was well on his way to becoming an assistant to his father in his legal work and by all accounts was not doing too badly. She was, however, glad to have a friend and ally in her Chetan. They spent hours together talking about the life ahead, their ambitions, the way they would like their careers to evolve, their determination to be the best young people the earth had produced.

Rekha's views on life, as the days passed, were gradually being reshaped, reformed. From the wide eyed idealistic child she once was, living off Appachan's staple diet of Bharat Maa and the struggle for Independence, she was now increasingly looking both inwards and outwards, but this time with her own eyes, not through borrowed vision.

Inwardly, she was learning to see how people were using each other only to further their own ends. Her father, Achchan as she called him, used his increasing tribe of legal assistants roughly, shouting at them, even dismissing them from his service the moment he detected the slightest infringement of the rules he set for his establishment. There was no empathy, no care and consideration for the young, growing, hopeful minds working with him. He was consumed with the thought of making more money, of getting to be more renowned, of reaching some Parnassus of achievement as yet untouched by any lawyer he knew of. He had no thought for personal comforts; he did not worry about what he ate or drank. Everything he did was focused on the task of the moment, the brief he was holding, the case he was contesting: all else was subordinate to that thought.

Rekha came to know of cases won by him against brilliant prosecution lawyers, cases of men of low repute, of blackmailers or corrupt businessmen. The fees were all that moved him. The rightness of the case was of no importance any longer. The old idealism had somehow seeped away. All that mattered was getting the client off the hook, to have him exonerated by all means, fair or foul. As time passed, Rekha discovered her father was one of the most selfish men she had ever come across. The platitudes he mouthed about the Independence struggle and national ideals were just words, the expending of worthless air from his lungs, mere exercises to make himself appear ethical and principled.

In her Amma she found a person completely oblivious of her responsibilities to her husband, to her family. She was a large woman, with a pair of thick glasses permanently on her face, either perched low on her nose when she was reading, or up on her forehead when lecturing to her class, or when rarely, she indulged in conversation with her children or her husband. She lived only for her books and for the many hours of study and reflection, of writing learned papers that few read, but which earned her acclaim and renown over the whole literary world. But were one to ask her about her husband, or what she was doing for her children, one would have been faced with blank looks or some deprecating statement that they were old enough to look out for themselves. Rekha knew her mother was not capable of selfishness, but what she really was doing was living on a strange literary planet, where all that mattered were words and lines, some clever turn of phrase or an essay which struck her for its quaint style or language. In the pursuit of the perfect poem, she forgot her imperfect husband and children.

Rekha used to ask her at times: what matters perfection of English when your children are left out in the cold to fend for themselves. What about the things that normal mothers do; holding your children in an embrace, telling them a good bed-time story, bandaging a hurt knee or blowing out the dust from an irritated eye, making a special dish for Sunday evening dinner, giving the children a good scold for telling a lie. Amma just laughed and said something to the effect that it is one of the ironies of life that one can neither replace

one's mother nor one's daughter. Now what was that supposed to be, Rekha wondered? Her mother was a perpetual student of the fine and classical things in life without knowing that life begins at home, in the hurry burry of the routine of the day, in the myriad joys and worries that besiege one's daily life. The living of that life is at the core of morality: how one lives one's allotted days. Amma had no moments for her children or her husband. In a singular way, the husband and wife contrasted each other absolutely. One worldly wise and self-seeking, the other living in an ethereal world, with no thought for herself or those nearest to her.

In the outside world too, she saw in her class in school and at college, many of those whom she considered to be her friends for what they really were: utterly selfish, caring not a whit for the others. She could now recognize the real diamonds hidden behind the bland faces and shabby clothes. Her realisation that she could, with some practice and thought, identify the real person from his demeanour, gave her some confidence. She was soon to develop the knack of character appreciation and was satisfied to know that more often than not, her assessment was correct. Rather than giving her a cynical and darker view of life, her experiences at home and at school and college, made her wiser beyond her age, gave a sardonic edge to her personality, a mocking keenness of word and action, both endearing as also awe-inspiring. Her classmates used to sit around her and laugh at the clever things she used to utter, not even knowing the meaning of the words she used or that some of the barbs were directed at them.

She had a couple of close friends and the three of them were inseparable. One of them was Mini, a fair, college beauty, who hid her intelligence behind a fabulous face and pretended to be a moron most of the time. The fact that she was brilliant was revealed only when she topped the Pre-Degree exams in the University. She had decided she would be a doctor at the age of five, her parents having pointed her in the right direction. She had already consumed all available books on medicine and health from every library in town and knew more about the organs of the body and their functions than even a doctor. The other was Abha, a giggly, sentimental, ever-smiling, mousy girl who decided to take to the profession of a doctor, moved by the overpowering feeling of vicarious pain and agony at the mere sight of suffering patients waiting in line at the hospital. She was still not sure if she could face the prospect of conducting a major surgery with all its blood and gore. But she would give it a try. The three of them had taken a vow to live life together and face the world with a united front. It was a friendship that lasted for all their lives, a rare thing in a world where loyalties fade faster than the light at the end of day.

In fact, it was in the course of one long, rainy day of intense discussions, sitting in Mini's small tiled house not far from the center of the city, the three of them decided what to do with their lives. Finally, they took the plunge together to become doctors. After their Pre-degree examinations, they entered the Medical College, young students with white coats and stethoscopes, full of trepidation at the sight of the surgery rooms, in awe of their professors who knew all the answers to their unending questions. Within a few months, their faces had become well known in the corridors of the Medical College as the freshers most likely to succeed. They were known to be not three persons, but one body with six legs and three heads. Mini was the 'poocha kanni', meaning the cat-eyed one, the reference being to her light brown eyes and her stunning looks. Abha was the 'elikunju,' the mouse child, an appellation that irritated her. Rekha once told her that if she didn't stop feeling sorry for herself, she would ask the Poocha, Mini the cat, to eat her up. Rekha herself was known as the Spanish Inquisition, for she asked uncomfortable, searching questions, catching her professors unprepared and fumbling in the classroom. Not that she enjoyed such moments, but she felt she had the right to be enlightened on every subject taught her until she was sure of what she was learning. Spanish Inquisition was soon abbreviated to S.I., that in common parlance, also was an abbreviation for Sub-Inspector. Both the appellations were apt, for apart from a talent for asking difficult questions, she also kept the rest of the class on a tight leash, warning them of the approaching presence of a Professor or, during free periods, keeping their high spirits always at a manageable level. Her old school talents, acquired as Class monitor, appeared to have rubbed off on her permanently.

Life was the great teacher for Rekha; she imbibed all she could, from its many faces and its countless moods. She learnt her first major lesson in Love from the Medical College itself. Ravindran was an older student, a

dour, dark, handsome, bespectacled cynic who swept her off her feet with his endless cigarettes and his quotations from the best of Leftist literature. Her normal talents of face reading and character assessment seemed to have deserted her as, despite the warnings of Abha and Mini, she fell headlong into a disastrous affair that left her bruised and rattled, but wiser and more cynical. Through the fortnight it lasted, she went with him through several rounds of the city restaurants where Ravindran kept plying her with cups of warm coffee and Parle biscuits. One quiet rainy day, when classes were over and the students had all left, she found herself led by Ravindran to the close confines of the Medical College laboratory, where she surrendered herself to him on one of the hard benches lying in neat rows all around. Her long tresses lay like a black cloud around her head as he reached out for her. It was quick and painful, but at that moment, she did truly feel she had reached a high point in her life. She was sure that all that followed thereafter, would be colourless and without lustre. The gasping ecstasy of the moment brought her to her knees in wonder and astonishment.

She knew it could not last, for to Ravindran she was but another notch in his belt. Once the prize was achieved, he could not have cared less. For a brief time, she felt she had been trampled upon and neglected, but her natural sense of good cheer made her see sense. She was soon back to her role as class leader and S.I. She was fortunate that Ravindran did not advertise the names of his many conquests and kept the burgeoning list only to himself. And so, while there was loss of virginity, there was no loss of virtue, which, as we all know, remains intact, until proven to have been lost.

She had confided in Mini and Abha all that had transpired and they together hatched a plan that would, in some measure, repay the Casanova for his act of treachery. Rekha did not harbour any real ill will or resentment against Ravindran; however, he had to be paid back in some measure. It was an elaborate ploy that involved a pint of castor oil mixed in a bottle of Coke. In a separate incident, it included the spilling of a large bottle of gum over his text books and notes, which effectively stuck together all the pages of his elaborately prepared notes, readings and other writings. Having lost control over his bowels he was confined to his hostel room where, during his recuperation, he discovered that each and every page of his innumerable books had been gummed together and that in no way could he separate the pages to make them readable. He did not have a clue as to who could have managed to play this monstrous joke on him, but he pondered on this mystery for days on end. Abha once asked him for his notes on dissection, and for a moment he was left wondering whether there was a connection between this apparently innocent question and the joke perpetrated on him. But Abha's innocent face belied that line of thought. Ravindran told her that there was some problem with the notes and that they were under revision on the basis of some readings he had obtained from a cousin of his, a doctor in the United States.

There was great irony in the statement, and the three of them had a long laugh over the matter. That Ravindran kept the matter a secret was proof enough he was completely disconcerted by the incident. That he had to resort to a complete lie of the mythical cousin from the United States further established he had been shattered by the events. Moreover, the assertion that a Leftist student spouting material dialecticism should depend on medical notes prepared in a decadent capitalist country, was the sublime irony not lost on the three girls.

The five years in the Medical College formed a bank of memories in their minds, which would sustain them in the many years of their lives yet to be lived. It was in the fourth year that they got their long awaited opportunity to interact with practicing doctors who were treating patients, real-life patients who breathed and lived and suffered pain and sorrow. Rekha was moved, but not so terribly as to lose her sense of balance. She learnt of the terrible agony that ripped apart the bodies of patients, and also their families, as they struggled to fight the terrifying nature of their illnesses. She understood nothing of the arguments espoused by fatalists that such patients were only suffering for the wrongs committed by them in their previous births. She scoffed at the idea of a celestial angel recording the good and bad deeds of each person in a monumental register, and how the accounts were settled by visiting all forms of punishments such as disease and the like on the 'evil' ones. Rather, she tended to think of the manifestation of disease as only arising out of lack of hygiene and

genetic disorders and superstition and ignorance. It was only much later that she took each of her failures to heart and found cause to curse at a God who knew no better. But that was some million years away.

Mini was more pragmatic and refused to go into the mythical or physical background of the patients. She preferred to see each patient as a case to be treated, to be given medicines and cured. She would do her very best to bring relief from pain and discomfort, but if she failed, it would not be due to lack of effort; it would only be because the very best she could offer was not good enough to tip the scale in favour of the patient. There would be no slackening in her efforts to bring a better life to the patient, but if her hard work failed, she would not cry over it. It was a practical, admirable attitude and she followed it for many years of her outstanding career.

Abha was a mystery altogether. Everybody knew she was squeamish, trembling at the very sight of blood. And indeed, in the first days when she was exposed to the mess and gore of the operating table, she felt, to her eternal embarrassment, a sudden weakening at the knees and a heaving in her stomach that made her rush out of the room. Those who tended to mock at her for her apparent frailty were, however, astounded to see her conquer these frailties within a week and settle down to the task of cutting and snipping and carving and excising with no problems whatsoever. It was, therefore, to the great delight of Rekha and Mini and, of course, the consternation of some of the more sceptical ones in class that she announced she would become a surgeon when she passed out from College. She, in turn, would make history, as she undertook surgical miracles of a variety and scope hitherto unknown in these parts.

Classes were exhilarating; a few of the professors were able to grab the attention of their students and take them along the route to knowledge and a much deeper understanding of the species called *Homo sapiens*. The body was now no longer such a mystery, as each layer of skin, muscle, vein and organ was revealed under the knife. For Rekha, Gray's Anatomy was not merely the standard textbook but really a work of literature, a magnum opus of such beauty and wonder. They devoured books of reference and sought every opportunity to expand their particular areas of interest. The five years they spent in acquisition of knowledge would be the solid foundation on which the rest of their careers would stand, as each of them took up the tasks assigned to them. There were some for whom the Hippocratic oath were empty words of no moral consequence whatsoever in the daily practicalities of life. For others, truly charged with the spirit of service, it was the touchstone on which the ethical questions of life and death were tested and found adequate or wanting.

When time permitted, the three of them would roam through the streets and bye lanes of the city, beneath the benevolence of the towering Christ-figure in the Palayam cathedral at the center of the city, through the shady lawns of the Botanical gardens and along the busy, sprawling markets of Chalai. The beach along the coast was another favourite spot. With the crashing of the waves and the stiff winds beating against them, they would walk for a long hour, feeling the gritty sand between their toes and the cold, frothy wavelets lapping against their feet. Trivandrum cast a spell over them. Some of these memories from the best years of their lives lay around them like a wreathed cloud, bringing solace in times of stress and pain. In the many ups and downs of their lives, they would, in their minds, return to them again and again, to find good cheer and consolation.

On the day of graduation, when the farewell parties were over, and the three of them, watched over by her benevolent mother, had got together for a late cup of coffee at Abha's house, the three girls made a promise that transformed them into sisters of a special kind, closer than any bloodline or family contacts. They vowed to live life in a togetherness that would not fade or spoil, to stare unblinkingly at the world and its unpalatable truths without maudlin sentimentality and tears and to present a united front that would brook no interference from those who would dare to challenge their love for each other. To their own surprise, the vow did indeed last forever, and though it would be tested at times, it emerged from each crisis, stronger and deeper until the three of them, when together, felt the enveloping peace that comes but rarely in a lifetime of woes and troubles that the human condition is heir to. A couple of days before they left for their respective destinations, the three girls had met again over lunch at Rekha's house, where she had invited them for this

farewell repast. It was an emotional and heart-wrenching experience. They swore again to stand by each other through the highs and lows of life: of the latter they apprehended there would be many, but they were equally sure that their life would be replete with undiluted doses of the former.

FIRST APPOINTMENT

Outside the walls of the Medical College lay was a completely different universe. No more the academic world of books and laboratories, the atmosphere of blackboards and chalk, the smell of methane, the sight of test tubes and dissected human parts. The world beckoned and the knowledge gained in the classrooms would now be tested under the pitiless gaze of Life itself.

Rekha had no problems getting appointed as a government doctor in a rural hospital near Quilon district headquarters, not too far from Trivandrum. She was a little chary about leaving the protection of home, where at least she did not have to worry about the kitchen, or getting her clothes washed or the hundreds of domestic chores performed by servants she had hitherto taken for granted. Her family was undoubtedly wealthy, and back home there was a retinue of servants and domestic help waiting to obey her commands. While Rekha had definitely got used to the idea of these hangers-on, she had decided early on that she would never be dependent on them. She had learnt, by practice and by dint of hard work, the basic culinary talents required in the kitchen; how to prepare rice and a couple of vegetable curries, how to manufacture a fluffy omelet or some simple desserts. She was not too particular about keeping the house antiseptically spic and span and believed in an easy laid-back style of home management that was adequate and not too burdensome.

Her father took a day off to prepare her for the journey, to pack her bags and to give her a substantial amount as start-up money to help her settle down in Kunnampuram, near Quilon, in the small government quarters attached to the hospital. She was surprised at this gesture, from a man whom she had virtually given up as a parent, and was indeed truly grateful for this small act of kindness. Chetan had agreed to come down with her to the new place and see that she settled in properly. He was entrusted with the task of hiring an all-purpose servant to help her in her domestic management. Her mother, called away from her books and her dark curtained room, was for a moment embarrassed with the sudden prospect of bidding goodbye to her daughter, a task which, by definition demanded the display of emotion, the kind she was not used to. But she had the momentary grace to hug Rekha to her ample bosom and then let her go with a few whispered words of good wishes and better fortune.

In the short journey from Trivandrum, she talked with her Chetan about the future beckoning her and her worries about what the coming days would bring. She knew Chetan was by now fully engrossed in the legal work assigned to him by her father and had obtained his law degree that would make him, in time, successor to his father's mighty legal empire. She also talked to him about her two closest friends.

Abha had found some distant relative working in the UAE and had obtained a letter of appointment with an oil company to look after the workers and their families somewhere in Dubai. The job paid well. There were excellent company quarters available and it seemed that she was well set on the route to prosperity and financial independence. She told Chetan to keep an eye on 'Poocha kanni', her friend Mini, who had accepted a job as a doctor in a private medical establishment in Trivandrum itself. Rekha had some unformed and indistinct ideas about Chetan and Mini for she knew that Chetan had evinced a more than passing interest in the fair-eyed beauty. The idea of an alliance between her brother and her friend was a proposition too wonderful to ignore. Chetan looked askance at her, wondering if there were anything more significant in the statement than a friendly concern for a colleague. Rekha winked and thus, for the first time, made her intentions clear to him. Chetan's eyes widened and he started to blush and turn away. But Rekha gave him a sharp dig in the elbows and said something to the effect that it is the bride who blushes and not the bridegroom. Chetan pretended to be aghast, but did not protest too much.

By the time Chetan and Rekha reached the little village some twenty miles east of Quilon, it was three in the afternoon. A rough gravel road led to the dispensary. Through the undulating landscape, on both sides of the track, were coconut groves and tapioca fields, their dark green contrasting with the brown earth. Not far away were countless acres of paddy stretching away to the horizon. Dotted the hillside were thatched huts and tiled buildings with sloping roofs. The betel nut trees swayed in the wind. Her new place of work was in a green and shady nook in the corner of the village, the compound covered with trees, creepers running riot over the building. The small dispensary and the ramshackle quarters next to it, made Rekha's heart skip a worried beat and she started to question whether her decision to serve as a Government doctor was indeed the right one. Chetan gave her a quick reassuring pat on her back and walked out of the car into the verandah of the hospital where an old man, well into his late sixties was waiting for them. He was the ancient peon attached to the dispensary who had been directed to be present when the new doctor would arrive. Chetan knew that the retirement age of government servants was fifty-five, but he also knew of how the true age of lower minions of officialdom was always a matter of vague uncertainty. The age of such specimens as the one standing before him could be anything between forty-five and eighty. However, the young nurse who came out of the dispensary to meet them was another thing altogether: she introduced herself as Ruby. A plump, vivacious, sexy little thing, she wore a brightly coloured sari and a tight blouse, from which she was spilling out in a fleshy, flashy excess that had Chetan turning his face away.

There were no patients waiting to be attended to, for Rekha was told that most of them come only in the mornings. On an average there could be about fifteen to twenty patients each day. The brief introductions were made and everybody seemed to get on well with each other instantaneously. Ammavan was the old peon and he would help Rekha settle down in the quarters next to the dispensary. Ruby was the nurse, a qualified paramedic who has been in the dispensary for the last six months. The doctor posted here earlier, and recently transferred out, had already left, thus leaving the quarters for her immediate occupation.

Ammavan, in preparation for the arrival of the new doctor, had swept and dusted the small house. It was not as clean as it should have been and could have done with a new coat of distemper, but that would be later. There were a few essential items of furniture and they were enough for the moment. The first thing was to make the kitchen operational and she had prepared in advance a list of cereals and condiments and oil and spices required for the purpose. This was handed over to Ammavan who heaved a huge sigh, indicating either indifference or reluctance, but was prodded on his way to the small local market to purchase the goods. Setting up the kitchen would be done the next day, but the evening meal would have to be obtained from the nearby hotel. There was a handy tiffin carrier in which the rice and curries could be carried back from there.

By the time the tiffin arrived, it was late evening and Ruby had to leave for her home. Ammavan reluctantly agreed to stay on for some time. He had been enticed by the talk he had overheard about the domestic help required by Rekha and had an interest in getting his youngest granddaughter appointed to the job. Tentatively he enquired whether he could bring her the next day and introduce her to Rekha: she was about twenty and would be a great help to the lady doctor; she knew some cooking and could easily manage the sweeping and swabbing. As for remuneration, she would accept anything that would be given her. This was of some interest to Rekha and Chetan for they went into some calculations almost the possible age of Ammavan. If the granddaughter was twenty, and she was the youngest child of the family, then her mother, Ammavan's daughter, had to be about forty-five. And Ammavan would then be about seventy. They smiled wisely; who said that the retirement age in government service was fifty-five?

The night came fast and Rekha and Chetan had something to eat from the tiffin carrier, embellished with pickles and other condiments carried in tins and bottles from home. Ammavan was coaxed to join in and share the alfresco meal despite his protests and then it was time for him to go. She inaugurated the kitchen by boiling the milk and setting out a couple of cups of tea. It felt good to sip the hot tea and talk about things, anything, all things. Rekha and Chetan sat down to a long chat, lasting well into the night. They talked about their home and Achchan and Amma and the unknown directions into which both of their children were venturing. Their conversation kept veering to their parents: there was so much that made them very different

from other parents. They smiled and wished that Achchan and Amma would be ordinary people, just like the parents of their friends.

There was much concern for some of the things that Achchan had done or, more specifically, the kinds of cases that he was taking on. He knew as well as they did, that there was much criticism about his practice and his values, but everyone admitted that the sheer brilliance demonstrated by him was miles ahead of any of his rivals. They worried about the different set of morals that he seemed to live by. Chetan, as heir apparent, fretted about the nature of things he would be expected to do in future, when the mantle of succession fell on his shoulders. He shook his head; whatever the equation between the both of them, he was sure that he would have to take up the business from where his father left off. He would never consider leaving for another career. When it came to his time, he would certainly sort out problems of ethics or values. But the family business would go on. What was family, if a son walked a different path and shunned the track his father had lived for.

They talked about their mother and the distant shadowy world she seemed to inhabit, rubbing shoulders with Shelley and Keats. There was no criticism or regret, because they knew she was happy within the perimeter of her own universe. They smiled knowing that Amma simply did not realise she had some more down-to-earth responsibilities as mother and wife. By the time they did get down to sleep, it was about three in the morning. Tomorrow would be the first day of Rekha's life as a doctor and she was looking forward to the experience.

Chetan left early morning, after giving her a warm hug and saying that if ever she had any problem, she just had to call out and he would be there within an hour. Ammavan had returned with daylight, bringing his granddaughter, Rajamma with him, a small, dark, sharp-featured girl with her hair tied back into a low bun at the nape of her neck. Rekha appraised her quickly and told her clearly that she would watch her work for a day or two before deciding about retaining her or not.

She downed the hot glass of milk and toast that Rajamma dished up. Then she donned her white coat over her sari, strung the stethoscope about her neck and walked the short distance from her quarters to the dispensary. She made no prayers to God above to help her in this, the first day of her career. She knew He had no time for such trivialities. She only hoped she had confidence in her own abilities and the wisdom to know what she was capable of and what she was not.

Her days at Kunnampuram were full of activity, keeping her on her toes from about seven-thirty in the morning to about three in the afternoon. From her readings and her studies, she knew that in a comparative sense, medical facilities in Kerala were better than in any other part of the country. But that was not to deny the seriousness of some of the cases referred to her. There were cases of knifings in a constant internecine war that flared up in the area from time to time between two dominant caste groups. Rekha insisted that police reports were filed each time such cases were brought to her notice. The wounds were messy and sometimes deep, but nothing that an anti-tetanus injection could not set right. She treated each case on merit expressing no support for one or the other group, other than cursing them both for their idiocy and crass stupidity. She learnt in time to curse them with the choicest abuses the locals used and was gratified to see the scandalized expressions on their faces. It was an effective measure to shock them into silence.

There were too, cases of rape of young women and Rekha after the initial shock of seeing the traumatized women shivering in shock and fear under the sheets on the dispensary beds, determined she would do her utmost to toughen them so they could face assaults on them with courage and determination. She went to the local Deputy Superintendent of Police, a young idealistic officer, whose hands were full with countless problems he had to face on a day-to-day basis. She expressed her fears and worries about the poor victims and sought his help in tackling this particular problem. Any other officer would have politely turned her out, but something about the earnest young doctor seemed to touch a chord within him. He realised the advantage of having the local women trained to handle attacks on themselves with confidence and the effect this would have on the general crime situation. On her suggestion, he agreed to help organise self-defense training camps for the women of the village. He would ask for some women constables from the district headquarters to come down for a week and render training to the willing, stouthearted women of the village.

When word about this spread in the small community, there was consternation amongst the men and a quiet glee amongst the women. When the three tall, stout women from Police Headquarters landed up within a fortnight, Rekha was astonished to see more than seventy-five young women gathered in the hospital compound, eager and willing to participate in the training programme. Ruby too, was one of the eager participants. The programme was arranged in the late evenings when the dispensary work was over, from about five to seven in the evening, and was a resounding success in every sense of the word. The dispensary compound did ring with loud yells and shouts as arms and legs flailed in the air and imaginary enemies were struck to the ground. By the time the short course was over, the women were holding their heads high, full of an unsuspected confidence that really improved their self-esteem. Rekha was astonished to see the number of rape cases dropping dramatically. A couple of reported incidents where the women had repelled and chased off their assailants were a real boost for Rekha's image in the village. The women were full of praise for this unusual lady doctor who had showed them a dignified and defiant way to hold up their heads and protect their self-esteem, not to mention their bodies.

Then there were the innumerable every day cases that tested her patience and her knowledge in ways unknown within the walls of the medical College. What does one do with the middle-aged housewife who, despite being educated enough to know about contraception, still allows herself to be impregnated year after year? Or the young unmarried woman foolish enough to be entranced by the charms of a fickle lover and presents herself in the sixth month of pregnancy for an abortion? How does one tackle young boys and girls, who do not know any better than to inject themselves with chemical toxins that leave their mind spaced out and their bodies weak as a baby's? Or aged patients who came to her, simply because they were being neglected by their children, too busy with the demands of everyday life? Rekha tended to despair at times, but realised that she would have to maintain her equanimity without losing her compassion and sympathy. She learnt in time to separate morals from the monumental task of treatment, to see each person as a human being in need of medical treatment, as a case file, as a problem to be solved. She had to keep her head and her sense of humour, for she soon learnt that a pleasant face and a few kind words could bring the smile back to the face of the most depressed patient.

In time, she was able to develop a unique system of patient tracking, with meticulous registers recording the case history of every patient visiting the dispensary. Her monthly reports to the district hospital came to be accepted as a replicable model and she did receive praise from her superiors. Rekha soon came face to face with the politics of the Medical and Health Department too: envious colleagues who deliberately tried to thwart her work, the casual denial of the extra finances she required for improvement in facilities in the dispensary, the probing questions of audit staff who did not have a clue about the enormous problems involved in the management of the dispensary, the countless, daily, irritating details of statements that had to be prepared for reporting to head office and so on. Rekha learnt that the true test of a doctor's capability was whether the people you treated living in the vicinity of the dispensary, were happy with you or not. Her moment of greatest satisfaction came when the President of the village Panchayat, who was present when the Director of the Medical and Health Department came for a routine inspection, praised her, in her presence, in words that were wonderfully, and embarrassingly, full of compliments. The Director, who had come to be critical, had no option but to smile broadly and compliment her on her good work, puzzled how this new young lady doctor could have captured the heart and soul of the dour and normally supercritical Panchayat members.

She soon learnt to love the simple, uncomplicated people here, the ones who thrust the produce of their land on to her despite her protests; huge bunches of bananas, eggs, pineapples, mangoes, tapioca and the like. They may have had a shortage of money, but goodwill, translated into food and other commodities, of that there was no shortage at all. There was Hanif Mohammed who invited her to his old house, where he lived in royal splendour with his two wives and eight children. Rekha had diagnosed a small lump on his young daughter's neck as malignant and referred her to the district hospital where the timely surgery performed on her had very probably saved her life. After she had been pronounced cured, the burly man had insisted she come over to partake of a meal with his grateful family. He stood by and watched with pride as the large

giggling family crowded around her and plied her with all kinds of savoury dishes, kebabs and biriyani and roasted eggs and a whole lot of other stuff she couldn't even recognize.

And there was Annamma, the merry widow, who found herself one day to be pregnant and came to the clinic to convince Rekha, that like the Virgin Mary before her, she was sinless and that the conception was without blame. Rekha nodded in agreement, and asked her what she desired to do about it, to keep the infant who had all the potential of being the Saviour of the world or to drop the foetus. Annamma spent no time in deciding on the latter course of action, with no qualms about denying the world the benefit of a Second Coming, as it were. She dropped all pretence of being the immaculate woman when later she smirked at Rekha and confessed to her severe doubts about basic tenets and beliefs of Christianity.

There were too the innumerable young babes she helped bring into the world, for which she would often invite the trained gynecologist and obstetrician from the nearby dispensary, almost once a week or when required. The joy she saw on the faces of the parents was incredible and filled her with an emotional ecstasy that quite simply turned her wordless. She tried to balance this joy with the grief, the ever-present grief that lurked in the dark corners of the dispensary, like a ghost that refused to be exorcised. Death stalked through the old building of the dispensary about a dozen times in the course of her two-year stay there. Most of the victims were old and decrepit, but there were some cases, which so broke her heart that she was moved to tears each time it happened. Shambunath, the darling of his parents, a young lad of fifteen, who died in her arms of leukemia, after having been diagnosed as a hopeless case even by the Medical College in Trivandrum. Bhasker, the toddler, who, with his toothless smile, won the hearts of Ammavan, Rajamma and Ruby and all the others in the dispensary when he came for his inoculations, but who was crushed two days after, under the wheels of a truck passing through the village. Shiny, the paraplegic and retarded daughter of the village moneylender who decided quite suddenly one day to stop eating, knowing, perhaps in her own way, that she could not keep her parents in perpetual anguish all her life. She was gone within a week after her unflinching decision. The whole village sobbed in mourning at her funeral. Take the good with the bad, she kept reminding herself, the good with the bad, the sublime with the ridiculous, and learn there are things you cannot set right, try as you may. Take cheer in the fact that you try to make things, where possible, better than they are, and that is something to think about with joy.

On a more personal front, there was too the story of Rajamma, Ammavan's grand-daughter, who served her well and took care of the residence and swabbed and cleaned the house, and cooked for her and had been a good friend to talk to in the late evenings. She had unburdened herself to the doctor of all her personal problems including the prospects of her marriage with a hither-to unrevealed suitor. She had expressed her fears about father's adamant resistance to the idea. Rekha had intervened and won over, first the heart of Ammavan, and then of her father, by sheer persuasion and eloquence. The match was settled and the ceremonies carried out in simple piety and joy, watched over by the beaming Rekha, Ruby and other well wishers.

There was too the tragedy which shattered Rekha with its anguish and sorrow. Ammavan collapsed one late evening from acute chest pain and had to be rushed in the ambulance to the district hospital, with the weeping Rajamma and a grim-faced Rekha at the rear of the vehicle, holding on to the oxygen mask and the bottle of saline drip. But it was to no avail. Before they could reach the district hospital, he had slipped away, leaving Rajamma in a state of shock and Rekha with her eyes overflowing in despair. Ammavan had been an avuncular figure, long known in the dispensary and had attended to her every need in the short time she was there. He was gone now and it seemed that she would forever miss this taciturn, rarely speaking old man who had helped her in the first faltering days of her appointment as a government doctor.

There is a footnote in this story of Rekha's brief sojourn in the village, that of the vivacious Ruby and the enticing charms that she held for a young lad who used to hang around the dispensary, with the sole intention of gazing at her. Distracted, Ruby called him over one day and enquired about his intentions and his plans for the future in general. He revealed the unplumbed depths of emotion he had discovered when he first laid eyes on this magnificent specimen of female sensuality. He promised undying love in exchange for marriage.

Ruby was more amused than taken aback and said something to the effect that he had better have a much sounder and substantial claim, that he should prove his love by establishing himself as a man of worth with a stable job and sufficient money in his bank account before he comes back to her as a suitor again. The lad disappeared the next day and was not seen of for over a year.

When he did return, he came back in a Maruti car with a flashy suit and the necessary accessories, indicating that he had, by magic as it were, transformed himself into a man of means; from a rather dirty looking village bumpkin to a personable and handsome young man with ambition and excellent prospects. He had gone abroad to some Arabian country and had worked hard for these past months, getting himself a permanent job as overseer in an Arab sheikh's business establishment, where he had earned enough to support himself and, of course, his wife to be. Armed with this qualification, he laid siege once again to Ruby affections. Ruby was rendered speechless, perhaps for the first time in her life. She liked the look of the young suitor and could find no reasons to reject the proposition, even though the lad was definitely younger by several years. Rekha was astonished at the change that a passing remark made by a pretty young lady could effect in the mind of a young man, charged with the emotions of love and adoration. She nudged Ruby in the right direction and arranged a meeting of Ruby's parents with the lad in question. Soon enough, things were arranged to everybody's satisfaction. Ruby was gone within a month, flying like a bird to her Middle East abode, and the dispensary had lost this charming, exciting young siren to the determined young man who would not take no for an answer.

In the interval, her Appachan passed away too, peacefully in his bed in the old house at Trivandrum, without causing any trouble or worry to his son or his family. He had lived an unhappy life ever since he had come down to the city from his farmlands in the village, but had uncomplainingly lived the life as was demanded of him. She went down to Trivandrum on hearing the news, and was gratified to see her father, with tears rolling down his eyes, for once displaying some emotion.

She spent two years in that little village of Kunnampuram and when she did finally leave on transfer to the district headquarters hospital, she could not prevent the tears from rising to her eyes. The place had taught her much, the informality of the rural village, the community that stood together, the love and affection the people would display if you were willing to work for them and stand by them in times of trouble.

A MATCH UNLIT

From the little village in Quilon district, Rekha had a series of postings and transfers that took her over most of the State, to towns and cities. By the time she had completed her third posting at Kottayam hospital, she was almost thirty years old. There were murmurings and whispers within the family; why should the good doctor be allowed to continue life as a single woman? Isn't it time she seriously considered the question of matrimony? She kept deflecting the question with her stock answer that Chetan was older than her and that he had to first climb to the guillotine before she ventured to follow in his footsteps.

That excuse of hers became irrelevant the moment plans were set afoot for Chetan's marriage. Rekha's well-laid strategy to bring Mini and Chetan together had worked. Mini was working in a private hospital in the same town, where her knowledge of the subject and her compassion for the patients had already earned for herself a sizeable following of patients and well wishers. There were too, some bright-eyed young men, colleagues and others, who were virtually swooning over her light gray eyes and her incomparable face. Mini had maintained a smile of pleasant equanimity on her face all the time and had not revealed her mind to anyone. The real fact was that Rekha's constant prodding and insistent suggestions about Chetan to Mini had not all fallen on deaf ears. Mini had very often seen him, as the three friends grew up together, dropping in and out of each other's houses. Rekha had noticed Mini's embarrassed looks and long sideways glances at Chetan, whenever he happened to be in the house. She had divined correctly that there was indeed some sweet music being composed between both of them.

By the time the three girls had settled into their respective professions, and Rekha herself was away in the village at Quilon, Chetan and Mini were both at Trivandrum. They met often, perhaps by accident, or perhaps by design made to look an accident. One late evening in May, sitting at the India Coffee House in the center of the town, Chetan made clear his intentions in faltering words, leaving Mini in an excited tizzy that rendered her speechless. Her moist, expressive eyes turned her into an unparalleled paragon of beauty as Chetan awaited her reply. He was blessed, indeed sanctified, with the nod Mini gave him in response to his single line question. It made him a king, an emperor of all that was in his ken, in the hope of the fulfillment of a destiny that was in the making for a few years now.

Rekha was informed when she came down to Trivandrum the next time and she was so ecstatic that she lost control of herself and leaped to the sky with her arms upraised, making foolish noises in her throat and weeping tears of joy. She rushed to Mini's hospital and made a complete nuisance of herself in the middle of the out-patient ward where Mini was examining a long line of patients waiting for her ministrations. The amused bystanders and waiting patients saw Rekha rush through the room like a storm and take Mini by the hand and lead her into an impromptu dance that brought out an embarrassed red in Mini's cheeks. Its entrancing effect was to turn her into incomparably lovely apparition that had the witnesses gasping for breath. She had a tough time trying to persuade Rekha to calm down and get her to sit down quietly on the sofa in her room.

Now that things had been sorted out between the two main actors in the unfolding drama, all that was required was parental blessings from both sides. Rekha undertook to take up the task. The quick visit she made to Mini's parents yielded results that were as expected. They were all for the match and expressed the hope the event takes place as early as possible. Once this was settled, she went to her mother sitting ensconced in her room and broached the subject. Amma perked herself up from a dissertation she was preparing on the impact of Impressionism on English literature. She was visibly interested in knowing the details of the unfolding romance, for after all, Chetan was her son. Chetan stood to a side and watched mother and daughter exchange questions and answers and was relieved to see the nod of approval his mother gave once she had all the information. She had asked for all the details, had analysed them, very much like an intricate question in an examination paper, and communicated her acceptance. She smiled at Chetan and

wished him luck: yes, she knew Mini well; she was a frequent visitor to the house and she had admired her complexion and her wonderful beauty. Her light gray eyes had been the first feature she had noticed. She was happy to accept this lovely girl as a member of her household.

Now all that remained was to convince Achchan. He would be back quite late from his legal work. Rekha would wait till he returned to tell him all the news and get his approval for the match, before she left back for Kottayam. Chetan was a bit reluctant and, indeed, embarrassed, to promote his own case. So Rekha agreed to be his spokesman. She did not even ask Amma to help her in the task, for Amma was not to be disturbed with such mundane things. Indeed that was not the kind of relationship that Achchan and Amma shared. As a practice, Amma would have had her supper and gone back once more to her room and her studies. She would, by about half past ten, retire for the night and she had no idea when her husband returned from office. It could be at any time at all. There were some days when he would be back by six-thirty in the evening, but normally it could be at any time between ten and eleven. He would straightaway go to the dining room, where the servants would reheat the food and serve him his dinner, which he would consume in solitary splendour. They waited on him hand and foot until he had downed the last gulp of water and left the room.

Rekha used to wonder about the singular marital life the two of them shared. Between literature on the one hand and the legal work on the other, it was a miracle how their two children did, in fact, come into existence at all. She had observed the kind of relationship that the two had, with much curiosity and interest. In the few public appearances they made, such as marriages and dinner parties, the two went together, sat down separately, and came back together. Not that matters were acrimonious between the two of them. Far from it; in fact when they did talk, they seemed to exchange good humour and repartee. But it was the conversation of acquaintances, not of husband and wife. Rekha conceded that a husband and a wife could be friends too, in addition to the marital status that they shared. She knew a few married people, who enjoyed a wonderful and deep relationship, of being husband and wife, as well as friends; their magic spark tingled and sparkled. Here it was different. Here there was only the froth of clever conversation, not the body and soul of a good wine. And what transpired in the bedroom was something that Rekha's mind refused to comment on, refused to imagine.

On this day, Achchan came in at about nine o'clock and went straight to the dining table, where he was surprised to see Rekha waiting for him. While the servants laid the plates and brought in the dishes, he enquired about her work and when she would be returning to Kottayam. Rekha watched Achchan's face carefully: in the last five years or so, he had changed considerably. From a tall, slim man, he had grown almost corpulent and barrel-chested. The hair on his head was slick and oily and combed backwards. His face was shiny and stretched tight with the thick walrus moustache concealing large areas of it. He appeared full of worldly problems, harried and hassled by the pressures of his life. When the servants had withdrawn and they had the room to themselves, she broached the subject of the forthcoming match. She talked about her old friendship with Mini and the growing fondness of Chetan for her old 'Poocha kanni' friend and that the two had expressed their desire to marry each other. She also told him about the approval of Mini's family and how Amma too had given her consent.

She had finished. She watched Achchan's expressionless countenance as he listened stone-faced to the recital of Rekha's story. For the first time, Rekha felt the slow rising of a cold dread in her throat. He sat like a big, black toad in front of her; the oily hair on his head was an evil glare around his skull. What is this, what evil is brewing in the air, she wondered. A raw, senseless fear gripped her chest and she seemed to feel breathless for a moment. "What is it, Achcha, what is the matter, you are not saying anything?"

"Mini, the beautiful daughter of the contractor Ninan, isn't it? And your old friend, right?"

"That's right, Achcha, she has been my friend for many years now, and with Abha, the three of us, have promised to live our lives as best friends for ever."

"Mmmm, let see now... Contractor Ninan is the owner of a fleet of trucks used for transport of building material, right? Did you know that he contested a case against my client, building contractor Mammen, for damages arising out of breach of contract. And did you know that about a year ago, he won the case against

me, which caused a loss of about three lakh rupees to Mammen. Not to mention the incalculable loss of face and prestige that he caused me in person. Do you know about this case, Mol?"

"No, I do not, Achcha." The room suddenly turned cold; there was a trembling in her left hand that appeared from out of nowhere. She found it difficult to swallow. "But, what has that to do with the marriage proposal, between Chetan and Mini. The legal disputes you have had with Mini's father should not, must not, be held against the happiness of Mini and Chetan. And the two of them do love each other. What could be more important than that?"

"You will never understand how the real world works, Mol." An icy chill had entered his voice. "Life is not all love and fresh air and young boys and girls running around trees. There is more to life than meets the eye. Relationships are based on mutual trust and good will. How can there be trust between Ninan and me when we both know he has bested me in a legal battle, and made me lose my position in the fraternity of lawyers. And I cannot allow the marriage of my son to the daughter of an enemy who made me bite the dust. Do you understand that?" His cold eyes looked at her expressionlessly. His voice was unhurried and even. There was not even anger there, only an empty, amoral, flat tone that gave no hint of the feelings inside. "Do you understand that?" he repeated.

Rekha felt the ground slipping away from under her feet. She knew her father and she knew that this was a position he would not rescind from. She knew that she could rant and rave and scream and shout and it would all be to no avail. She felt the long suppressed rage rise from within her and fill her chest. But she kept quiet. She held a rigid control over her anger and vowed to try again, to beg once more, to use logic and reason and plead for the happiness of her Chetan and her dearest Mini.

"Achcha", she said, her voice low and controlled, "that was a case you fought a year ago. There must be many cases you may have argued in court and lost. Do not tell me you bear a grudge for every lost case, that you treat all of them as your personal enemies. Surely life is not just a balance sheet of cases lost and won. And the happiness of your son, does that not count for something in this life of yours? And when everybody else has agreed on this and are willing to give their blessings to the proposal, why should you stand in the way, Achcha?"

His eyes were glittering like diamonds in the night, hard and cold. She waited for the response and when it came, she could hardly recognize the voice of her father. It had changed now and was thick with an undisguised contempt, a casual dismissal of a subject that had a life and death significance for persons she loved, but which seemed irrelevant and trivial to her father. "I think I have made my views absolutely clear, Mol. There is nothing more to be said. You may go. By the time you leave for Kottayam tomorrow, I may not be here to see you off. I have an early morning meeting and I will be leaving at six."

But Rekha was already out of her chair. She did not wait to hear the end of his words. She flung her chair away and did not see it crashing on to the floor behind her. In the heart-stopping silence that followed, the only sounds were the clatter of Rekha's sandals on the floor as she rushed away. She was blinded by the tears that suddenly stung her eyes, at the adamant obstinacy of a man she called father, at the fading prospects of happiness in the lives of two people she greatly cared about, at the impotence she felt in being utterly helpless in the face of this stone wall against which she had beaten her head with no hope of success. How can one argue against this? How can she hope to convince a monster who thought more of his own prestige and worldly success than that of the happiness of his one and only son.

She rushed to her room, passing by Chetan's closed door, not having the strength to tell him what had transpired, not wanting him to glimpse her stained and ugly face, not wishing to see the agony that would surely cloud his eyes as he heard the report of her conversation with Achchan. She flung herself on her bed and cried like a child at the passing away of the final shreds of respect she had once had for her father. She was filled with the bitterness that rises like a poisonous cloud when all hope is lost and there is no one, not one person, who can lend a helping hand. For a moment she thought of rushing to Amma and confiding in

her, in pleading for her intercession, but gave up the idea immediately. Rekha knew her mother well; she would give her a confused smile and mutter some proverb or a quotation from some poem she knew, about mice and men, about Fate and destiny and the useless ambitions of ordinary people aspiring to live lives of happiness. She wept as she had never done before: she wept like an adult in the throes of an unquenchable grief, with no hope left for the future, with no prospect of a rising sun on the morrow, in the grip of an endless night of anger and sorrow.

And her Achchan sat with an immobile face and a stone heart in the dining room for a long hour, as the servants cleared away the plates and waited for instructions. He waved them away and while the lights were turned down one by one in the big rambling house, he sat on, head bowed, wondering about the nature of the events that he may have set into motion. He did not worry whether he was harsh in his response to the proposition his daughter had set before him. Rather, he was stupefied that she could not understand his concern for the prestige and honour of him and his family. Kurien Vakil would have things his own way or not at all. That is a lesson he thought he had taught his children well enough. That is why he wondered at the intransigence of his daughter, who had the nerve to challenge him and then run away without waiting to be dismissed.

Rekha left early next day back to Kottayam and the District hospital. She had no courage to face Chetan. She had no words for him and she could not meet his eyes. She left a note, slipped in under his door as she left the house. She admitted her failure to move her father to a kinder, more humane point of view. She encouraged him to leave the household, to elope, to disappear into the wide, wide world outside the old family home and find happiness for himself and Mini. Even as she wrote the words, she knew full well that Chetan would never ever follow her words of advice; never ever would he contemplate a life with Mini that would be cut off from the Kurien family. Chetan would hate his Achchan, curse him in silent agony, but he would not leave the home. And as a sleepy-eyed, vaguely concerned Amma watched, he would dry and wither like stray leaves under the summer sun, until one day he would realise he had grown old, grown in the absent minded way of those who have lost contact with the world outside, grown beyond the embrace of life and love and family and joy.

And so Chetan responded in the only way he knew possible. Despite the urgings of all who knew him, despite the stern warnings of his Achchan, despite the mournful pleadings of Amma herself, he rejected all talk of marriage for once and for all. And there was no power on earth that could make him change his mind.

Rekha did not speak about the matter to Chetan ever again. She wrote a long letter to Mini that evening from Kottayam, seeking pardon for not having fulfilled the obligations of a friend, in having let her dearest friend down. Mini did not reply for long, but a month later, she received Mini's wedding invitation card: she had been betrothed to a plantation owner's son just a week after it was finally known that things had not worked out well in the proposed match between her and Chetan. The marriage was fixed for the next Sunday. There was a brief message written in Mini's long, sloping hand on the card itself: Please do come, if you can. No, no she could not, Rekha could not attend the marriage of Mini to a stranger, when her own brother waited out the days of his life as a bystander, while the wondrous, many-splendoured thing called Life passed him by.

The denouement of the story never ever came. There was no ending to the plot. It was an endless, bitter drama, souring day after day, drawing father and son away from each other, but never ever finally breaking off. But what it really resulted in, as far as Rekha was concerned, was the final breaking up of her own relationship with her father. After that bitter night, there was never ever a single occasion when the two would spend time in each other's company, talking, chatting as a father and a daughter would. Not that their relationship had ever been very good. Rekha had long ago realised the true nature of her father's personality and had kept aloof from him even in the daily routine of her early years in the house. But as long as she had lived in the house as his daughter, some kind of normal interaction had to take place; it was inevitable in the normal rhythm of everyday living. But with Rekha now away from Trivandrum and financially independent, there was no earthly reason for her to be even cordial with the one man whom she abhorred with every inch of her body and soul.

Mini's marriage was talked about in the town for long, for the lavish arrangements made by her father and the perfect match the young bride and the groom made. Apart from the Kurien and Ninan families who knew the true facts of the events preceding the marriage, there was no one, not one single person, who would guess this was not as it should have been. No one, not one single person from the Kurien family attended the marriage, and there were some comments made about their absence. Chetan had left town on a business visit to Madras and was not seen for a month or two thereafter. Rekha had not sent a card in greeting or even a bouquet of flowers. Her absence was sharply noticed. Along with Abha, the three girls had been inseparable. Abha had taken the trouble to come down all the way from her UAE assignment. The fact that she had, contrasted sharply with Rekha's absence, for she was but four hours away by train or bus. Abha's insistent questions to a wan and weary Mini about this got no response except a meaningless answer that perhaps Rekha was busy in her work and couldn't make it.

Abha was shrewder than that. She couldn't take this casual reply for an answer and certainly knew that something was amiss. After the marriage was over, she took the trouble to travel down to Kottayam and talk things over with her friend. Confronted with the presence of an angry Abha, Rekha could pretend indifference no longer. In the course of a long night in her doctor's quarters next to the Kottayam hospital, Rekha poured out her heart to Abha. She bitterly cried herself ill, she wept like a child lying in Abha's lap, and would not be consoled. Abha cried too, for she could not understand why she had not been told the truth, why Mini had been evasive and not confided in her, or even hinted at what the truth could be, why Rekha had not mentioned this predicament to her. After all, they had shared all things together, and the grieving heart could only be lighter if its burden is shared with others. The two girls wept for what could have been, but was not, in the face of Achchan's blind stupidity.

Abha resolved that she needed to make another trip to Trivandrum before she left back to Abu Dhabi. After spending a troubled night with her friend she rushed back to Trivandrum to meet up once again with Mini. She was just about to leave for a fortnight's honeymoon with her young joyful husband, when Abha took her aside for half an hour. No one knew what they talked about, but when it was over, Mini came out looking cheerful, the colour back in her cheeks and the light of the morning sun sparkling in her light gray eyes. Things had been set as right as was possible by the determined Abha and a letter that Mini sent Rekha a few days later brought things back to normal. Mini said she was happy with her new husband, as happy as she could be in the circumstances, and that Rekha had no reason to break her heart over something just not fated to be. And in any case, all this provided no reason for the three of them to stop being the best friends in the world. And thus was fashioned some kind of a truce with the tireless Abha as mediator. And the three of them once again, after this brief interruption, began to rely on each other, to live life secure in the knowledge that they were blessed in each other's company.

Chetan spent the next decade in a silent fury, which just never exploded, and just never subsided. He took to alcohol in a calculated and deliberate manner, never once losing his sobriety or his icy control over himself. He refused all attempts to get him married and indeed there were at least a dozen efforts made in this direction, by fathers of eligible girls who eyed with avarice the large legal empire that he was heir to. He refused to discuss the matter, even with his mother, who, for once realised the seriousness of passing on to another world without ensuring the smooth succession of the considerable wealth owned by the family. If Chetan had no children, what would happen to the properties which he was heir to? But she might as well have been talking to a stonewall. She had some inkling of the issues involved that had given rise to this extraordinary situation, but she did not have the courage or the conviction to confront her husband with the same. And what good would it have done anyway?

Years later, when Achchan had passed away, after a long illness involving a coronary bypass, when, in the midst of one of the largest crowds ever seen in the funeral grounds, a sombre, tearless, iron-faced Chetan threw in the earth on to the coffin in the grave, he was heard to mutter that had his father passed on some years earlier, he may have been happier that much sooner. Those who heard pretended not to hear, and in the mournful mood of the crowd, it was taken to be the sad, mindless things that people in grief are wont to say.

Rekha stood dry-eyed near her mother, still and watching, no grief warping the tranquility of her mind. She only wanted the ceremonies to end so she could take Amma back to the house. The legal empire was now Chetan's, his alone. But he was determined to ensure that the Kurien legal office would henceforth show a face that was humane and sympathetic, where money and profit were not the only things that count for in this world, that concern and care for the underdog and the weak would enlighten the working of his office. Chetan and Amma stayed on together in the long rambling house, reaching finally, as time passed and the years mellowed them, some form of equanimity and understanding. Rekha could not help remarking that there was more understanding and light in the house, now that Achchan was no longer a resident thereof.

LOVE COMES SAUNTERING

Dr. Rekha Kurien was thirty when Love came sauntering her way. She was now in the Main Hospital in Cochin, having acquired for herself an awesome reputation as a doctor who had the common touch, one who instinctively knew the heart and soul of her patient, who would say the right thing, make the perfect gesture, soothe the troubled brow and bring ease to those in pain. The ups and down of her personal life, her bitterness with her father, her inconsolable grief at the pain her precious Chetan was going through, these were the thorns that stung her every day, and whose hurt she learned to accept as part of her life. She accommodated them as the curve in the body of one who carries a heavy burden on his back. But she accepted the load and refused to bow her head: she would remain cheerful, for the very meaning of life for her was to search for happiness.

Dr. Simon Kuruvilla was the Associate Professor of the Pediatrics Department in the Hospital and a figure who roused feelings of awe and respect, rather than love and affection. His achievements were immense and the work he did in surgery of children was coming to be acknowledged in the entire South. He must have been about thirty-seven or so when Rekha met him for the first time, a couple of weeks after joining at her new posting in the Hospital. He was an unsmiling, serious-faced, tall man who spent all his waking hours working at the hospital, or at his home, where mothers and fathers of all sizes and shapes, came carrying their precious burden, their children, to be examined by him. At home, the fees he charged was minimal, merely to meet the cost of his establishment, and there were innumerable cases where, seeing the tight financial straits of the patients, he would wave away the proffered fees and send them on their way. He needed only the blessings these poor people showered on him.

There was an overlap very often in the different Departments of the Hospital in terms of the patients coming their way. Rekha at the General Medicine Out-patient ward often got patients who should have gone straightaway, for example, to Orthopedics or to Gynecology. Sometimes fearful women patients who did go to the Gynecology Department were diagnosed to be suffering from some simple gastrological ailment without any problem in their internal plumbing. What was feared to be a fracture sometimes turned out to be merely a strained muscle. The opposite was also true, when what was apparently a minor ailment turned out to be something that could be fatal. It was out of one such erroneous admissions in Rekha's Department, of a child patient, that there arose the first occasion for her meeting with Dr. Kuruvilla.

Farida had been brought in with a mild fever and cramps in the stomach and Rekha, after some probing and gentle palpitation of the child's stomach, diagnosed it as something more serious, requiring the intervention of the knife. By the time the diagnosis was made, the little girl child was in spasms. She was hustled into a wheel chair and sped on her way by the nurse with Rekha following at full speed, through the long corridors of the hospital, rushing like the wind, calling out to the people in the pathway to clear the way and let the patient come through. She burst into the Pediatrics Department, straight into Dr. Kuruvilla's chambers, where he was bent over a narrow cot, examining a small boy. He turned around, with raised eyebrows and irate face, angry at this sudden intrusion.

"What is the meaning of this, nurse?" he barked, "and you? Are you the doctor? Can't you see I am already examining a patient...."

"Hold it, Dr. Kuruvilla, I am as aware of hospital protocol as you are. But if you waste another moment, it could mean the life of this little girl!" She spoke curtly and was not bothered with the fact that within the hierarchy of the hospital, he outranked her by several years. She lifted the little shivering body from the chair and laid her out on the cot for him to examine. Dr. Kuruvilla's face was still furious, but he took one look at the child and decided to keep his words to himself for the moment. He took out his stethoscope and bent over Farida's frail body. He placed his fingers on the quivering stomach of the child and manipulated the muscles of the abdomen. It took him but a minute to reach a sudden decision. He turned around and shouted to his

nurse: “Get her ready for operation straightaway. Call the anesthetist and Dr. Soman: I want them here in two minutes.” Then his face softened and he turned to Rekha waiting and watching silently from the door: “You were right to bring her in, I am sorry I was a little abrupt. We’ll talk after the surgery is over. You have diagnosed her correctly; very few could have done that, you know.”

Rekha heaved a sigh of relief: not only for the child who would now be in safe hands, but also because her comprehension of the case had been correct and she may very well have saved the child’s life by her direct intervention. Notch one up for the good side, she said to herself and smiled. The wry comment reflected a long-standing philosophical belief she nurtured, while mocking the very theory on which it was built. She had no particular thoughts or beliefs about religion or God or destiny. She thought too many people had spent too much time thinking about these things, and all to no avail, for nothing concrete ever came out of it. But, since there had to be something conceptual to provide the basis for the work she had taken on as her career, she drew up a simple calculation.

Of all the patients she examined or treated, the ones she had helped in making better, she chalked up for the Good Side and the ones she was not able to help out, she credited in the name of the Devil, the Captain of the Bad Side. Since the successful cases were far in excess of the failed ones, she knew she was doing a good job. And she smiled, knowing the flaw in the argument, but also knowing that the argument sounded good. Here was a case, Farida’s, which was touch and go all the way: it could have gone either way. With the successful intervention of Dr. Kuruvilla, she had pulled one back from the very jaws of Captain Devil. When she came back to the Pediatrics ward some three hours later, after disposing off her patients in the out-Patient ward, she was glad to see a beaming Dr. Kuruvilla telling her that everything was all right and that had she come in even a quarter of an hour later, things could have gone horribly wrong. He nodded in appreciation of her alacrity and congratulated her on her astute diagnosis.

“I think I need to treat you to at least a cup of coffee in the Hospital canteen, for your good work, Dr. Rekha! And to make amends for my insensitive barking at you!” Dr. Kuruvilla was aghast at what he had just said. Was it he who was speaking, who was smiling at this stranger before him, this tall personable white-coated lady doctor whom he had met for the first time just a few hours ago? How had she managed to breach his defenses so easily? Rekha agreed readily enough: something about this serious-faced doctor had appealed to her, his professionalism, his immediate recognition of the seriousness of the case before him and his instant response to get Farida to the surgery room without delay.

It was a good start, this quiet fire that was ignited that day in the messy, not-so-clean canteen, with a cup of coffee and a couple of sandwiches, amidst the clatter of the plates and the cups and the shouts of the bearers. This first meeting was all about enquiring and probing and making a judgment. The two of them spent the little time they had, asking questions about each other. There was more light and wit in the questions she asked him. And there was more of assessment and a quiet appreciation in his queries. She probed audaciously, mischievously, and learnt things that he had not told many people earlier. That he lived alone with his father in the Ex-Army Officer’s Housing Colony about three kilometres away. That his father was a war hero, having served with distinction in the 1965 war, when he had won a medal for exceptional valour displayed in the face of enemy action, which unfortunately had taken away a limb, leaving him quite disabled and unable to get out of his wheelchair. That his father was his best friend in the world, with whom he could joke and fool around, with whom he could share a bottle or a cigarette. She wondered to herself why he had not married till now and was surprised to hear him answer, though that query had not been voiced to him. He said the situation at home was perfect and the presence of a third person, a stranger would have been injurious to the harmony they both enjoyed so perfectly. His father, however, continuously tortured him to accept the inevitable and bring home his daughter-in-law, who would look after him in his old age.

Rekha told him bits and pieces about herself, about her parents, her brother and her own life as a doctor. She left out the painful details of her never-ending feud with her father who was now completely severed from her in mind and heart, the long, unending pain of her Chetan who lived with the ice flakes shuttering his

heart, who shared rooms in the very house of the one man who had done his best to deny him his rightful happiness. She was silent too about the nonchalant ignorance of her mother who refused to open her eyes and see, who had swallowed the cannabis of poetry to shield her from the rigours of taking decisions, of feeling, of taking chances, of taking a stand, of taking a beating, if required, of doing anything; who resided in this fugue of her mind, floating in the cloudy bliss of a enchanted story-book world.

She shook her head and turned her mind to the present, doing her very best to tease and tickle the fancy of this doctor, this fine-looking, wonderful man who hid his very face from the ones around him, this man whom she found attractive and beyond compare, not because he was handsome, which he surely was, but because he was like a big baby, serious and unsmiling at first, but opening up with time to a twinkle eyed, dimple-cheeked amiability full of confidences and the simple ingenuousness of truth without frills. This one looks right, Rekha, this one's got to be slowly teased into the cupped palms of her hand like a tiny fish and kept secure and warm against her own beating heart.

And so she decided that it was time to seek her own happiness, to start the quest for someone whom she felt would be finally worthy of her love, to seize the opportunity that fate and Farida had brought her, to reach out and grasp to her soul this man who sat before her, not knowing the complicated plots being formulated in her head. She went about her task with deliberation, for the pursuit of happiness is every man's right, and every man, and surely, every woman, has an inalienable right to seek to grasp that shimmering goal with all the resources at his or her command. She told herself there was nothing conniving or scheming in what she was doing, that surely, she was not forcing Simon Kuruvilla into matrimony at gunpoint. Surely he would decide of his own; she just needed to convince him that she was the right woman to stand by his side for the rest of his life.

They used to meet often, thereafter, in the hospital canteen, in the restaurant across the road from the main gate of the hospital, even at roadside stalls, for the quick evening cup of coffee. Each time they met, the rightness of their being together became more apparent, the delight and the joy of each other's presence became obvious, making a deep impression on both of them. Simon called her over some weeks later for dinner at his place, to meet his father, the retired Brigadier. It was a new threshold in the quickly developing story of their friendship. To be invited to Dr. Simon Kuruvilla's home certainly was significant, surely it did mean something out of the ordinary. To meet his father, he said; undoubtedly, it did point to something of great purport.

As Rekha got ready and dressed that evening for the visit, she looked at herself with care in the mirror. Here she was, thirty-two years old and in her prime. She had eyes wider apart than usual; more efficient stereoscopic vision, as she often explained to her brother. There was an argument that the wider apart the eyes were, the easier it was to get a better 3-D vision. From this, the argument went further, that such a person, trained through generations of genetic development, would also have a better comprehension of the problems faced, a more intelligent appreciation of the other's point of view and thus more empowered to resolve fractious issues with greater felicity. This person would be a negotiator, a conciliator, a dispute settler, or so the debate went. But then, she scoffed at the very premise of the argument: she had certainly been able to negotiate Chetan's problem, hadn't she? Although she did say it, she knew that she generally did get on well with people, whether as class monitor in school or as S.I. in the medical college! That apart, Rekha wondered how people saw her, how would Simon have seen her, she wondered, when he had first lain eyes on her.

He would have seen a tall, slim figure, not really fair of face, her complexion wheatish, but with the confidence of her own self shining through her smile, whenever it flashed out, genuine and from the heart. She stood five feet and four inches when measured from the heels of her bare feet to the top of her head. That sure was tall for a girl in Kerala. A little heavy in the chest, with a slim stomach, but as she walked, one could imagine the long legs moving hidden under the sari. She had a quizzical sideways glance that raised questions in the minds of those who received that look. That glance meant, I have your number, I have your

coordinates, I have a clear idea of what you are and what you want, and you can be sure, it is not me you are searching for.

Of course, she was not beautiful, and in the company of Mini, when the three friends had been together, she used to look positively commonplace. She wore a red bindi, a small one, right in the middle of her forehead. Her Achchan had once made a comment as to whether girls of Christian families should wear bindis or not. It was just a casual comment, but obviously meant to disconcert her into giving up the habit. This was at a time when she had entered her Pre-Degree classes and she had left behind the pigtails and long skirts of school days and had started wearing simple cotton saris as she left for classes in the mornings in the College Bus. She had suddenly looked older, more mature, and perhaps had disconcerted him when he saw her striding out, the red dot blazing on her forehead. Amma had intervened and had said something about the third eye, and the relevance of inward reflection and the raising of the kundalini. It was something Rekha had not quite understood; it had been too philosophical for her liking. But whatever it meant, Achchan had stopped his comments after that. Most probably, he had not understood it too.

She wore her hair long. Over the years she had taken much pride in how she had looked after her hair, had washed them with coconut oil and shampooed them every week; it was a long, luxurious swathe of black that enveloped her face and stretched low over her back, turning her regal and proud. She sometimes despaired of her long hair: it was impossible to maintain and take care of, as it should be. For a doctor, it would have been simpler to have short hair: it would save so much time and energy and in the long run would be more efficient in terms of the work place and her own hygiene. She remembered her father saying that long hair was the true sign of feminine grace and girls of good families always should wear their hair long. If Achchan said that, then surely she should do something to the opposite. That would make good sense. Someday she would cut it short, but not yet. Someday.

As to the face itself, there was a tiny scar on her left temple, not more than a quarter of an inch, where long ago, the wild, irascible five-year-old Chetan had caught her with a metal washer swinging at the end of a long string. She could smile now, for though she had been terrified at that time, Chetan had stopped his childish, physical assaults on her after that incident. About a year ago, while in deep conversation with her brother one evening at the old house in Trivandrum, he had reached out his hand and touched the scar gently. He had not said anything, but she saw his eyes turn moist in the memory of the juvenile crime he had committed on her. She had just laughed it away, saying that Achchan's tight slap that day had probably saved Chetan from a life of hard crime and put him on the right track.

Her ears were larger than usual, but she had her long hair to cover it up as well as she could. She had been given an old pair of ear studs by her Appachan, her grandfather. When he had moved from his farm to the city house of his son, he had brought with him an old wooden box, carrying some of the things he treasured. And most of them were precious possessions of Ammachy, his wife for sixty-five years, who had left him for her heavenly abode some short months before Achchan had persuaded him to come and live with him in Trivandrum, rather than all alone in the village, far from the city. One day, soon after Rekha had passed her Pre-Degree examinations with flying colours, as she was chatting with him in his room upstairs, he had asked her to wait for a minute. He had then opened his wooden box and pulled out a small velvet covered sachet and handed it over to her, saying, "this is for you, Mol. Your Ammachy used to wear it when she was alive. I always wanted to give it to you on some special occasion. And now that you are going on to Medical College, I think this is the right occasion."

She had been overwhelmed when she saw the small blue stones set in gold. Even then, in her mind she could clearly see them nestling against her grandmother's earlobes and wondered at the strength and the warmth and the grace the stones must have imbibed, absorbed, soaked in, lying against Ammachy's skin all those many years. She felt blessed, anointed, filled with a grace she knew she would have to earn in the years ahead, as the stones lay against her own skin. Between her desire to show off the stones and at the same time hide her large ears, she was, everyday of her life, placed in a conundrum that refused to go away. She compromised by combing and pinning her hair in such a manner as would leave her ears covered, but would

expose the ends of the earlobes alone, where the blue stones would be seen, flashing gently against the black of the hair.

Her lips were not thin, not thick, slightly curving upwards. She knew she was wide-mouthed and suddenly laughed remembering Abha's comment so long ago of eating a banana sideways. She wished she could wear lipstick on her lips, but Kerala in the late seventies was still not kind to those who wore lipstick: they were looked at askance as if the application of the beauty accessory on the lips necessarily meant that the person in question had loose morals. Her teeth were slightly uneven, but each morning she spent more than usual time to brush her teeth so thoroughly that her teeth sparkled like those of a model in a toothpaste ad. It made her smile so much more attractive.

Her nose was sharp. Something her father had said had stuck in her mind: something about a good family's genes appearing clearly in the shape of the nose. He spoke of the patrician nose, the aquiline nose, clearly indicating old and respected genes and how the snub-nose, the short, stubby nose, invariably pointed at inferior Dravidian genes. She shook her head and finished stabbing a few pins into her hair and walked out of her room to the waiting car sent by the Brigadier to pick her up. She had worn a dash of perfume, light and aerie, under her ears and on her throat. She floated into the car and was on her way.

The Brigadier's sharp, black eyes shone brightly as Rekha walked into the room. Simon had met her at the door, a little short of breath. He seemed to have run to the door when the doorbell rang. When Rekha was led to his father, a small wiry man, leaning back on his wheel chair, with pepper and salt in his moustache and on the fringes of his almost bald head, she found herself charmed by his elegance and his wit. He smiled and said, "So, this is the lady who has smitten my son with her magic? Welcome to my humble abode! Come and sit here, my dear, and let me have a look at you." Rekha was almost swept off her feet by his gusto, his sense of good cheer. He patted an armchair next to his and watched as she sat down at his command and arranged the pleats of her sari. No, she was not embarrassed, but sharply aware of the attention being given her by both son and father. "And what will you have now, gin and lime or brandy."

She was suddenly taken by surprise and leaned back into her chair, jolted by the unexpected question. She was being offered alcohol? A lady being asked to drink? She saw Simon watching her carefully, waiting for her response. Despite having attended many parties amongst the fraternity of doctors, or even earlier for some of the interminable evenings that her parents were invited to at Trivandrum, this was the very first time she had been offered something alcoholic to drink. Her Achchan used to imbibe, and fairly regularly, after getting home from his work or late in the evenings before sitting down to his dinner, sometimes at midnight. But never ever had she been offered anything such as gin or brandy or whiskey. On a couple of occasions as a student in the Medical College, she had been surreptitiously offered a glass in the rare, late evening parties that had been sometimes organized. But she had not wanted to indulge in something done so secretively. Here, she realized, imbibing liquor was a part of the army man's life and the Brigadier probably did not know that for the woman in Kerala, this was almost like blasphemy. And living a quiet, secluded life, he had been kept unaware of the social mores to be followed. His disability may have further isolated him from the inevitable parties that army officers usually attend.

What should she do? What was the right thing to say? If she made a pretty moue with her lips and said something about never having drunk before, she might make the Brigadier turn up his nose and snort, condemning her as a namby-pamby, knowing nothing of the right way to live a graceful life. If she pretended nonchalance and asked for whiskey, neat, on the rocks, she might unnecessarily offend the sensibility of Simon. What should she do? Was this a test she was being subjected to? As these thoughts flashed by in her head, she opted for the middle path: she couldn't go wrong there, she hoped. "Do you keep wine, sir: I wouldn't mind a small glass of wine, please, if its not too much of a bother." Wine had been allowed, especially as the children grew older, in the Kurien household, and she guessed she could live with that.

Simon seemed to smile for a moment. The Brigadier did not falter for even a second and was calling out to the servant to bring in the champagne. "The best for you, dear, nothing better than the bubbly. And what's

this I hear you calling me sir? Am I your officer, are you serving under me, by any chance?" He winked, a little salaciously she thought, but she knew he meant nothing improper, even in the choice of the words he had just used. She replied, "No, I am no officer under you, though I serve shoulder to shoulder with your son in the hospital. And what should I call you, how should I address you? Simon, please help me out, this is a little embarrassing for me you know!"

The Brigadier gave out a big guffaw and when he had done, he smiled and said, "Simon calls me Daddy, propah British and all that. For want of anything better, you too could try that, darling!"

So Daddy it was. Daddy, this funny, irascible man who refused to let his disability get him down, who allowed the delight of the moment to consume him, who deliberately pushed to the back of the shelf, all the pain and the sorrow of his mutilated body, the everyday plight of the wheelchair. While Simon, assisted by Man Friday Daniel, the retired batman that the Brigadier had brought along with him on retirement, attended to the needs of the dining table and set the chairs and the plates and the cutlery, she sat by this small man as they talked and talked. He told her of his life in the army, his escapades in the war and, in passing, of the death of his wife some fifteen years earlier on the operating table of the hospital where she had gone to undergo a routine appendix operation. The loss had been incomprehensible. There had been some talk of the incompetence of the doctor who had performed the operation and Brigadier Kuruvilla had briefly contemplated the institution of a criminal case to punish the surgeon in question. But it had all been too much of an effort; his mind was clouded with the pain of the loss and he had given up much of rational thinking as the grief overpowered him.

News of war and rumours of war had almost come as a relief. This was just before the hostilities had broken out with Pakistan in 1965. When the two nations had gone to war a month later, he had fought as a warrior gone berserk, at the head of his infantry unit, full of the fury and the anger that had consumed him at the senseless death of his wife, seeking to punish the enemy at the border, as if their soldiers had been responsible for her awful, mindless death. He wished to make them pay for the crime committed on him by an implacable, blind God, Who had refused to listen to his pleas, his prayers, his imprecations, as he had knelt outside the operating theatre and prayed for his wife's life. The shadowy form of that unheeding, cruel God had taken the shape and face of the enemy that he fought in the war. He had fired at him in uncontrollable fury, had thrust his bayonet time and time again into him as the two armies shook and grappled in the clash across the deserts of Rajasthan's borders.

Towards the end of the war, one afternoon while he was sitting in the shade of a tree, panting from exhaustion and masking his face from the swirl of the dust and the smoke, an artillery shell had whistled its way in from nowhere, slamming the ground just twenty feet from where he was. The thunder of the explosion had deafened him, but when he was roused by his anxious lieutenant from a sudden darkness that exploded through his head, he was coldly amused to see he had lost a leg from a sharp-edged shrapnel that had cut through his left thigh like a hot knife through soft butter. He could not, for the life of him, imagine why he felt no pain, no agony, even as the blood spurted out in great fountains from his body. It was left to his lieutenant and some of his soldiers who worshipped him like a god, to stem the flow of the blood with a towel wound tightly above the stump. He was rushed to the field hospital, where a harried and overworked doctor struggled through several hours of surgery to save his life.

Decorated for incomparable valour in the face of unbeatable odds, he was discharged honourably and had led a life of retirement thereafter. There were two reasons he had nudged his son towards the medical profession. One, he needed to prove that a surgeon could save lives; his son would be the living proof of that proposition. Not like the doctor who had botched up an operation as simple as the removal of an appendix. The astonishing surgery performed on him by the medical doctor in the field hospital, struggling in the swirl of the dust of battle raging all around, had been another reason for him to push his son in that direction. The Brigadier, with no one but his only son, had discouraged the latter's ambition to enter the armed services like his father, for if anything did happen to him, then where would that leave a crippled ex-army officer with no one to lean on? Enough of killing; it was time to think of healing the sick, of saving lives. Simon had

accepted the argument after the two had discussed it for long: he was impressed by the logic of the proposition. There was no looking back after that and Simon had gone on to great academic achievements and outstanding work with scalpel and knife, finally proving that the surgeon's job was to save lives and not to take it. The Brigadier would prove to the world what he could not prove for his wife.

This confession of sorts made in the light of the gentle evening lamps in the drawing room of the home where the father and the son lived, made Rekha finally come to a decision. She was astounded to see the relationship of the two, where they teased and taunted one another and hurled insults that would have made anybody blush. It was obvious that they loved each other with a pure, unique love, unmatched and unlike anything that Rekha had ever seen. She instinctively thought about her relationship with her own father and felt saddened, inconsolably saddened for herself and for her father and for the unyielding chill in the Kurien household. One day before long she would have to reveal all of that to Simon. He should know things about her that she had not revealed to many people ever before, before they both took the plunge. She knew she had not revealed any of this developing relationship to her own family, not even to Chetan. And soon one day, when things had become clearer and Simon would make the inevitable offer, she would have to tell her people too. And she was damned if she would let anybody stand in her way, not even her father. Over her dead body. She would not let him play any games with her happiness, she was sure of that. For the moment, all that she had to do was enjoy the evening and listen to the ebb and flow of the conversation and join in whenever she could and see the joy that a good father and son could give each other.

She was ribbed about her dramatic entry into Simon's room the first time she had met him, with words of approbation from the Brigadier to the effect that that was perhaps the first time his son had allowed any lady to speak to him in that fashion. "Perhaps he likes a masterful woman to control him," he smiled. "Most of his life he has only seen me, a doting father around him. He took a look at you and decided that he would like you to place the reins around his neck! All he needs now is to be ridden." It was scandalous, what this graying soldier was saying and Rekha, though not the type to blush, found herself turning her head away, her shoulders shaking with laughter.

"Look who's talking? Have you ever been much of a rider, Daddy? All your riding produced just one, me! Poor show for a macho soldier!"

Brigadier Kuruvilla pretended to scowl. "I'll answer that question when I know how good a rider you are. You are thirty-eight years old now and you do not know even the basics of riding. Enough of talk! It's getting late. Set the table, it's time we ate and let this poor girl go back to her home."

Daniel was well versed in the culinary arts; the delights served up on the table were extraordinary. There were kebabs and roasted fish and a fine white chicken in coconut milk, tasting as if it were the diet of the gods. The basmati rice was fragrant with each grain separated from the other. Over dinner, Rekha talked about her experiences in her different places of posting, including her first posting at Kunnampuram, the little village near Quilon district headquarters and of her subsequent assignments in different parts of the State. She could not avoid talking of her home and her parents and her brother. Both Simon and his father had not heard of Kurien Vakil and in a way she was glad of that. Who knows what rumours they may have heard or what they would have thought of him? She talked of her mother with less of caution and of her achievements in the field of English Literature, the innumerable laurels she had won for her papers published in international journals. Of Chetan she only said that he was helping his father in the legal business and that the three of them lived in their ancestral home in Trivandrum.

Before she knew it, the evening was over and it was time to get back. Regretfully she got up, thanking both of them for the wonderful evening she had had, so full of light conversation and banter, so full of family love and camaraderie and so filled with the joy of togetherness. She was envious too of what she had missed in the everyday chore of growing up as a child, and later as a young woman, and what she could never ever hope to have in her own home. Simon was sent with her to drop her back at her quarters, with a shouted

warning from his father to keep his hands to himself, tightly clutching the steering wheel during the short journey.

As the car drove back to the hospital quarters with Simon driving, Rekha was silent, collecting her thoughts, arranging in her mind the impressions gathered from the Kuruvilla home, and feeling the bliss that comes when one gets the confidence to look at the future and smile. Did Simon feel the same way? If only he understood and felt the same way as she did. Simon did not speak: there was much on his mind too. And as he drove the car through the night, he felt that he was on the brink of a great discovery, one that would shatter the life he had led as a contented bachelor where he had nothing to do but enjoy the company of his father and laugh away the evenings. Now there would be deeper waters to swim in, fuller breaths to take, a more complete immersion in the many joys and sorrows of Life.

ONE WEDDING...

This time Rekha made her plans carefully. She was determined to make it clear to her father that she had made her final and irrevocable choice. That she would stand by it, irrespective of Achchan's wishes in the matter. He may simmer or sulk, shout or scream, but she was not going to stand by and bow her head to his dictates or to anybody who would have the gumption to even try. The memories of Chetan's misfortune loomed large in her mind. Never would she allow her own happiness to be trampled upon, not by her father, not by anybody, and damned be social compulsions, frivolous gossip and sheer malice. If she stood up for herself, she hoped to make it clear too that she was, with a kind of inverted logic that defied explanation, also standing up for Chetan. It was an undoubtedly belated defiance, but she would demonstrate she would marry where she pleased and with one whom she chose. This lesson you had better learn, Achhan, I am not one of your slaves.

She was certain by now that Simon was ready to pop the question. He had built the drama up with such spectacular nervousness, that Rekha knew it was coming right from the first moment he rang up that morning and invited her for dinner at the hotel overlooking the pier that very evening. It was a Saturday and work at the hospital was lighter and soon over. They did not see each other at the canteen, wishing to keep the joy of their meeting reserved for the late evening. There was a slight nip in the air and, as he stepped out of the car to pick her up from her quarters where she was waiting for him, Rekha was surprised to see him in his suit, looking elegant and debonair. He was mildly embarrassed when Rekha commented on his attire and said things that would make him blush. As the car drove on to the hotel for their dinner date, she pulled his leg mercilessly. He gave her back in kind.

"That suit sure makes you look a dandy, Simon. I wonder who the lucky girl is!"

"You'll see her tonight. I'll introduce you to her at the hotel, Rekha. You'll get to see her yourself. She is my kind of woman and when you see her you'll realise what a real woman should be. Not the kind of aggressive feminist that you are!"

She knew he was ribbing her and not a doubt passed through her mind. Of course there is no other woman, she told herself; but she couldn't keep her heart from fluttering a little. On the way, as he negotiated the curves on the road, he talked to her about the approaching cold season, the new shops coming up on the pier, the recent political trends in the country as the Janta Government grappled with issues much beyond its competence, losing the confidence the beleaguered people had given it after the episode of the Emergency was over.

"Its amazing how some of these northern states allowed themselves to be brutalized in the family planning campaign unleashed on them", Simon mused.

The myth of the great Indian male was something that never failed to astonish Rekha. She had watched how each of her male colleagues, one after another, had fallen at the feet of, first, his mother and then his wife, and finally his mother-in-law. And woe be to the man who had to fall at the feet of all three, trapped as he was in the exquisitely torturous system that made him a prey to the emotional blackmail of all who surround him in the Indian family system. When would a man truly stand on his own two feet? And not be prey to the snide remarks by the mother who wanted him to be around her, paying her all the attention she so rightfully demanded as payment for the years of motherly love and affection she had showered on him as he had grown up. And behold the wife who pulls him in the opposite direction, for she perceives her husband to be mama's boy, realising soon after marriage that in India one weds not the bridegroom but his family too. And then the mother-in-law, who through her daughter, had the stupid boy tied up in knots within days of tying the knot. Rekha knew that was a cliché, but she thought, really, it is true.

“Nothing to be astonished at,’ she quipped, “most of the men must have been impotent even before the goons came with their scissors!”

Simon readily agreed, but pointed out that with Indian women being the ice maidens they normally were, it would be more convenient to be impotent rather than burn without the prospect of release.

But this was no night for light banter on sexual mores. This was the moment Simon had been waiting for all these years, for in the bliss of bachelorhood and a handful of a father to take care of at home, he had forgotten to search for happiness, for himself and for him alone.

He felt his hands quivering as they reached the hotel and parked the car outside the glittering entrance. Rekha had not waited for him to come around the car and open her door. She had never believed in such niceties. She was already out and waiting for him to lock the door and move on to entrance. He glanced sideways at her profile as she strode by him, step for step. He knew she was an equal of his, one who was all woman, who was no simpering genteel lady, but a partner who would stand by his side, not two steps behind, who would shoulder responsibilities with him equally, not pass them on to him with a helpless shrug.

At the door of the hotel, the concierge welcomed them in and they moved on to the restaurant and the seats reserved for them. The waiter pulled back the chairs and waited for them to settle down. The lights were bright, glittering on the mirrors on the walls and the cutlery and the crystal glasses strewn on the tables around them. It was time to order and Simon left the task to Rekha, leaning back to watch her as she went through the menu and ticked off what they would eat. She did not consult Simon except to ask him for his choice of the dessert. By now they already had a fairly good working knowledge of each other’s food habits. Each of them could easily order for the other. The task done, they sat back to wait for the dishes to arrive.

Rekha looked around the room, observing the simpering social butterflies clinging on to the arms of their men, with large areas of skin exposed, blowing kisses at persons known and unknown elsewhere in the room. She wondered how many of them were actually married or lived in sin with their partners for either money or to pay off a debt, or perhaps for a fleeting sense of security. It was demeaning, it was humiliating, and she wondered how many of them realised that. She shook her head in annoyance; her mind was wandering from the truth of the approaching moment. She needed focus, clear perception, undiminished insight and the strength to say what she so wished to say, without hesitation, without stuttering, without the possibility of being misunderstood.

She said, silently chanting the words, as a great peace and equanimity flooded her mind: I will always be myself and not what I think you want me to be. You have to take me for what I am, not for what I do not pretend to be. What you see is what you get. I will stand proud and free, my feet firmly on the ground, by your side, not ahead, and God forbid, not behind. When I say ‘I love you,’ it will be because I commit myself to you freely and without reservation. If you feel loneliness and you need me, I will be with you then. If you need the comfort of my touch, I will comfort you. I will demonstrate the glory of love to you. Every day, we shall teach other the meaning of loving and being loved. I will give you all the love my heart possesses. And when my speech is silent, know that it is not because I have nothing to say, but because what I have to say cannot be encompassed by mere words. Each time I smile at you or touch you, or hold you, or kiss you in silence, I am babbling a thousand words that only you can hear. At times, you may not understand me, when I act with a passing strangeness. You may at times question my actions. Understand Simon, that no one is constant. To change as the seasons do is no sign of inconstancy; this is only the natural ebb and flow of life itself. But in that flux and movement is a permanent truth, the truth that like the earth itself, which is not fixed, but wobbles and revolves around the sun, I am, forever, yours.

Unconscious of the music of the words in her head, Simon was talking to her of the first day of their meeting, the moments they had shared in the last few months, of the many occasions they had met at work or in the evenings after hospital hours. He was building himself up to the moment when he would ask her the question she longed to hear, and she knew well it was coming her way. He saw her silence, her inward contemplation and solemnity, her distant smile and wondered what she was thinking of. He could not hear the thousand words that she was singing, but he knew, instinctively knew, that she knew too what he was about to do, the

nature of the commitment he was about to bring into their lives. So he waited for the waiter to place the dishes on the table and move away. He watched as she served him and served herself and got down to the task of eating. She was nibbling, poking and pushing at the food on her plate, watching him, curiously, wide-eyed, with wonder as to why such a momentous event should be disguised in small talk and embellished with food and silver cutlery.

For a few anxious moments Simon wondered if he had chosen the right day to ask the big question. She smiled and he felt pacified again. By the time the main and side dishes had been consumed, and the dessert was brought in, there was no way the moment could be postponed any further.

“Rekha, the time has now come to reveal the real reason of bringing you here. There is much I need to say and much that you have to listen to.” He swallowed and began with much hesitation and more trepidation. When he had started from home, he was fairly sure of how to go about the business of asking a woman to be his wife, but now that knowledge seemed to have fled, leaving him fumbling and confused. How the hell was he going to get through it, he wondered.

“Why don’t you just say it out, Simon, just ask me, quick and straight, it will not hurt. And you know as well as I do what my answer will be. While I am thankful for the romance of the evening, I don’t want to see you suffer any more.” And she smiled. And Simon smiled back at her. She had made his task immeasurably easier. All he needed to say to this wonderful, wise and beautiful woman was, “will you marry me, Rekha?” And so he said it and so she said yes and that was that. There were no bright fireworks or lightning in the sky. No bells tolled the moment. The ring and the ceremony would come later. The moment itself was done and it had passed without embarrassment. Simon was thankful to this woman, who would stand by his side shorn of maudlin sentimentality and filled with the simple sense of what is right and what is wrong and what is good for both of them.

The Brigadier was ecstatic and laughed in delight when the two of them visited him that evening after the dinner and informed him of their decision. Of course, he had known Simon would ask Rekha the fateful question that evening, for father and son had been discussing the matter amongst themselves for a couple of weeks. Both of them had even worked out a plan of action, a strategy that involved some flowers and a ring and some rehearsed words that would, in rhetoric fashion, be spoken at the appropriate time and in the appropriate mood. Simon smiled and reported that Rekha had exonerated him from the bother by her timely intervention, saving them both considerable time and energy. The Brigadier was delirious with joy and looked at his daughter-in-law with new respect.

There remained the task of conveying the news to Achchan and Amma and to take her Chetan’s blessings. The next weekend when she went down to Trivandrum, she called aside her Chetan and told him of the developments. He was thrilled beyond words and hugged Rekha to himself for a long moment. There were some very important apprehensions running through his mind, worries that kept raising their ugly heads even as the news of the forthcoming wedding sang like a summer song in his mind. What of Achchan? What if he raised some stupid, incomprehensible questions to which he would accept no logic, no pleas for sensibility. Fleeting, the face of Mini passed through his mind, as she had done in the last several years, in moments of loneliness, in the evenings, in the glass of whiskey in his hand, in the dreams he struggled with at night. Rekha sensed the distress within, and the intuitive sibling that she was, divined perfectly what he apprehended.

“Do not worry, I will not allow myself to be humiliated or bullied.” She paused for a minute, wondering if she should be cruel and risk hurting his feelings. “Learn from me, Chetan, learn and consider what you have lost in your meekness, for I promise you that I shall grasp the happiness shimmering before me with both my hands and will let no one, not even Achchan, not even the very Almighty up in His heaven, stand in my path.”

She looked away from him, her eyes almost brimming over, refusing to look at his face. Chetan, suddenly turned somber and inward looking, watched her go, praying, with whatever faith was left in his heart, that all the happiness in the universe, even the share denied him, be showered on her head.

Rekha walked on to Amma's room where, as expected, she was bent over some books, writing incomprehensible words that would be printed in some highbrow journal. She would get even more kudos, while she didn't have a clue about the happenings in her own home. Did she, Rekha wondered, have even an inkling of the torture her first born son was going through every day of his life, living in this prison of a home, working in his father's office, obeying the dictates given to him and hoping for all this to end, hoping and praying for the strength to stand up in defiance to all that was trampling him to the ground, seeing in his mind's eye the imagined scene as it should have been played out, when the issue of Mini had come up. When he could have walked out of the house and taken Mini into his arms and damned be the rest of the world.

No, Amma had no comprehension, no understanding whatsoever, of the happenings around her, of a bitter piece of life stuck in her son's throat, of the manifold crimes her husband was committing each day in the name of legality and jurisprudence. Amma looked up from the dim light of the table lamp and smiled as Rekha walked in. Rekha gave her a quick hug, for she was her mother. There are two sorts of crimes: her father could have given her a lecture on the difference between a crime of commission and a crime of omission. Her mother had been committing crimes of omission for all these years, by abdicating her right to take a stand, to make decisions in the house, decisions affecting herself, her children, the stability of the family. While her father had committed one crime of commission after another. Of course, Achchan would deny that he had committed any sort of crime at all, and would have thick tomes of Supreme Court rulings to prove he was right. And he certainly would not accept the dissenting judgment his daughter pronounced on him.

Amma was glad, genuinely glad Rekha was indeed getting married. She smiled and said, "at last. I've been longing to hear these words all this time, Mol." She asked about Simon and his father and seemed gratified to hear all the answers that seemed just about right. She had never been too bothered about religion, but gladly accepted the fact that Simon too was a Christian of the Catholic persuasion, just as she and the Kurien family was.

"All my blessings to you, Mol. Go tell your father the news when he comes. I am sure he'll be overjoyed."

That I will, Amma, that I will. Though his being overjoyed is no precondition for my happiness.

When Achchan walked in at about nine in the night, she was waiting for him on the porch. She smiled, while Achchan looked warily at her. He wondered what was coming, for conversation between the two was something he normally avoided.

"Yes, Mol, what is it? You look happy, today."

"I am. Come and sit for a while. I have some news for you." All civility and courtesy. There was no need to show her teeth at this moment, until she knew his reaction. And so, he sat down on the long armchair at the corner of the verandah and she on the chair next to him. Briefly she informed him of her decision to marry Simon. She did not give too many explanations, as if her case were weak. She would also not be too cryptic and give the impression that she was hiding facts. So she was brief, but informative; she was lucid, but not loquacious; she was clear and not irresolute. And she was polite, just this side of being curt. She talked of Simon and his family, having taken the trouble to get his family name and the various branches of his family tree, for she was sure that Achchan would insist on it. She mentioned too that Amma and Chetan had already approved of the match. Then she was done. Achchan sat silent and immobile for a long time. His black eyes lay sleeping behind his eyelids. For a moment Rekha wondered if he had been listening to her at all. But she knew her father. She knew he had listened and had placed the details in the right pigeonholes in his mind.

As a matter of fact, Kurien Vakil was assessing the situation as only he could. He weighed the pros and cons of his response. This Simon's family he had heard of vaguely and though they were not topnotch, as he would have preferred, they were not the dregs of society too. That was one argument he would not be able to pull off. He abhorred the concept of his daughter making a match for herself. It militated against his position

as the head of the family and threatened the very stability of family hierarchy. He was inclined to say no, in that quiet, unchallengeable voice of his; but then, he thought again. He had already alienated his elder son by his resolute refusal of his marriage with Rekha's friend. Should he risk another rift in the family? Was it worth it after all? And, he knew, in his heart of heart he knew, that even if he refused, Rekha would go ahead and do exactly what she wanted. She was not the weakling his son had turned out to be. She was a determined girl with a head of her own. And her refusal to follow his dictates would only make him look a fool in the small but critical society he belonged to. It would not do to have it appear as if his daughter did not obey him. Would it not be more prudent to accede graciously? Or should he make her wait and sweat it out for a while? And if he did that, what made him sure that she would indeed agree to wait until he came to a decision? She could still walk out in a huff and go and do precisely what she wanted to do all on her own.

And so a simple question of saying yes to his daughter's quest to find happiness for herself was turned into a long mental battle, a legal argument on the right and wrong of the issue, a struggle to find the perfect balance between acquiescence and refusal. He would come to a decision, but would make her wait first. He asked a few probing questions: the purpose was not to elicit information but to give the impression of careful consideration and debate. Rekha knew exactly what he was doing and smiled behind her face. As she waited, a lizard chirruped on the wall and the tick-tock of the large grandfather clock seemed too loud in the still room.

Kurien Vakil had made up his mind. He smiled and said, "all right, Mol, it is a matter of your happiness; you have my blessings."

It was done. An argument had been avoided, just. And Rekha too had made her point, in an unspoken fashion. It was a truce between them, in a manner of speaking, a stalemate that would remain in a permanent state of frozen stasis, where neither would make concessions to the other. Rekha went out of the room, a formal smile plastered on her face, which she wiped out instantaneously as she crossed into the next room. She informed her Amma and her Chetan about her Achchan's consent and then went to her room to set her mind in order for the coming events. She heaved a sigh of relief, for though she was ready to do battle in case Achchan refused, she was glad that she did not need to. Indeed, if it came to that, she would have given him a run for his money he would have never forgotten.

The engagement ceremony was held in the Kurien household some ten days later. Her aunts and uncles, old grandfathers and young children, cousins and nephews, some twenty of them had gathered for the occasion. She expected Simon's father and some ten or twelve of their extended family to be there before noon. Simon himself was prohibited, by custom and tradition, from being present. As usual, Indian society had decreed that neither the bride nor the bridegroom would have much to contribute to the ceremony, which, in fact, would decide the course of their lives together. It was left to relatives and friends to formalize the engagement. She was asked, in fact, directed, by Achchan's aunts who had come down for the ceremony, to look coy and demure and not to step out of her room until she was called for. Rekha fretted and fumed and made a fuss, but in the face of these dictatorial orders, she had no other option. Her cousins, her aunts' children, helped her into a fine blue Kanjeevaram sari and a matching silk blouse, making her hot and bothered and short-tempered. She grumbled but was silenced again and ordered to go and sit under the fan if she felt too hot. Almost exactly at noon, the Brigadier and a dozen other relatives came in a fleet of five cars. There was some problem with the wheel chair that had to be unloaded out of the boot of the car as someone lifted the Brigadier out and placed him on the chair. Vakil Kurien stood and watched expressionless as the chair itself, with the little dapper man in it, was carried up the stairs and into the house.

There were loud voices raised in welcome. The spirit of bonhomie spread through the bungalow as the turbaned waiters served sweetened limejuice and biscuits to the guests. Vakil Kurien knew his wife, the dreamy philosopher, was not up to the task of organizing and serving up refreshments, followed by lunch for about forty or fifty persons. So it was the Mascot Hotel caterers who were now performing their duties with military precision. After the introductions were made and the limejuice had settled down into a cooling pool in their stomachs, the parish priest stood up to conduct the formalities. He spoke of the joining together of

the two families, two households and the merits and virtue of the families on both sides of the union. He spoke of the blessedness of the betrothal and the duties that would fall on the young couple in the days before the wedding. Of how they are to keep their minds and bodies pure and free from cardinal vices, and prepare themselves for the great and godly duties of marriage. Vakil Kurien also had a few comments to make, which he did blandly and with a carefully nurtured smile on his face. When it came to the Brigadier to speak, he only said that he hoped with all his heart that the two of them, Simon and Rekha, would live together as happily as possible.

And then Rekha was called in, some kind of prize animal on display, to be seen and admired by the gathered guests. She hated herself for doing that and wondered if it were a throwback to some ancient custom when the bride-to-be was prodded and picked at, her teeth examined, her skin peered at for blemishes before the final nod was given. She stood embarrassed, not knowing where to look, until the Brigadier, recognizing her discomfiture, gave a loud chuckle and asked if it was time for lunch to be served. This was Rekha's reprieve and she was glad to be dismissed and sent back to her room at the corner of the house.

The table was loaded with all manner of goodies. Vakil Kurien had been deprived the opportunity of conducting a marriage in his own house, for his son had declined to grant him that favour. He would only have the chance to host the ceremonies for his daughter's engagement, for Christian law, unlike the custom in other Indian communities, had decreed that marriages would always be solemnized in the home and church of the bridegroom. This would always remain a kind of unfulfilled dream in his mind and his cold eyes would forever accuse his son for the denial of that dream. He did not understand that, but for his own intransigence, that dream could have been realised some years ago with much happiness and grace all around. Doesn't matter, he said to himself. So this was second best, and Vakil Kurien was determined it would be a feast long praised for its lavishness and culinary delights.

There were three types of fish, roasted and curry and baked. There were three types of meat, chicken and mutton and venison. The last had been specially ordered from his sister's estates in North Kerala, where small deer could be seen running amongst the underbrush and the trees. Then there was biriyani and parboiled rice and at least three different varieties of rotis. Standard vegetables like *'thoran'* and *'sambhar'* and *'mezrukka parati'* lay unrecognized on the table, for the great demand was for the meat and fish dishes. There was a contented buzz of conversation in the room as the guests dug into the food with great relish.

Amma walked around the room with a waiter in tow, asking the guests if they needed anything more, any special condiment to make their lunch even more delicious. Chetan stood in the corner of the room, his eyes shining with a happiness that threatened to explode in his heart with joy and exultation. Vakil Kurien hung around the Brigadier with a great show of courtesy and politeness that the simple good-natured man just could not fathom. Brigadier Kuruvilla cracked a few of his standard jokes and Kurien dutifully smiled. The twinkle-eyed man on his wheel chair asked to see Rekha again and she came out of her sequestered room once more. She gave him a warm hug that astonished the guests, for a bride-to-be was not expected to be on such friendly and amiable terms with her father-in-law. There were some whispers that circulated in the room, but not one of the guests had a clue as to what this was all about. And then, within a matter of minutes, they had all left.

Rekha was exhausted by the rigours of good behaviour imposed on her since morning by her well-meaning aunts. She changed into something more comfortable and sat down with Chetan and Amma at the table to tuck into the lunch with much gusto. Chetan smiled and laughed, as she had not seen him do for a long time now. And they talked of the preparations to be made for the wedding in two weeks time. Vakil Kurien had already initiated the arrangements. The bank draft of the dowry was sent through a trustworthy uncle over to Cochin to be handed over to the Kuruvilla family. This he insisted on, despite the loud protests of Rekha and Simon and Brigadier Kuruvilla, for he argued that not to give the dowry would detract from his social position. The money was duly deposited away into some long-term bank deposit and the Kuruvillas promptly forgot all about it. Vakil Kurien also planned out the design of the wedding invitation cards, the

details of the guest list and the many intricate minutiae that would all go into the success of the great occasion.

On the eve of the appointed date, the carcade of vehicles from Trivandrum moved in a grand procession all the way up to Cochin where a guesthouse had been specially arranged for their stay. The night was warm and humid. When the relatives and close friends had been served dinner and the din of conversation had stilled, Rekha walked up and down for a brief while in the small garden adjacent to the courtyard. The sky overhead was overcast and concealed the brilliant magic of its pinpricks of light spread out behind the clouds. She knew that the morrow would change her life forever. She knew her blissful life of singleness, and the independence to go where she wanted, to do what she willed, was coming to an end. She rejoiced in the knowledge that she was marrying the man she loved and that in her knowledge was the blessedness that comes but to a few where even love had to be carefully arranged, ordered.

She heard the sound of steps behind her and her heart thrilled to see Chetan who had come out in search of her. They sat down on the stone benches at the edge of the garden and talked long into the night of this and that, inconsequential, foolish things, long-forgotten memories. There was no discussion on the momentous step Rekha was taking, no contemplation of what the next day would bring, no pondering over the nature of the impenetrable veil hanging over the future. And then Chetan was chiding her for the lateness of the hour, that she would need some sleep before the dawn broke out over the eastern skies. This was the last day they would really be true siblings. They both knew that and though they were not inclined to let it end at all, there was the matter of the wedding the next day and Rekha had to ready herself for the occasion. She reluctantly rose, gave him an awkward hug and with a muffled catch in her throat ran up to her room, where, despite the troubled thoughts flowing through her mind, she fell into a dreamless sleep that saw her wake up next morning, refreshed and calm of mind.

The marriage ceremony itself was short. The Bishop, specially invited over from the main diocese, conducted the ceremony with such efficiency that within an hour the rituals had been completed. The large crowd of people who had come for the wedding admired the relative bloodline and genes of the two families and talked of the ancient lineage on both sides. There was much pride and satisfaction amongst the congregation, though some distant relatives burnt with jealousy at the sight of the successful celebrations. Jealousy was a constant factor in Christian marriages where the parents of growing girls remaining unwed beyond the statutory age of twenty-one, ground their teeth while maintaining a bland, smiling expression on their faces. And thus the day ended. When it was time for Rekha to leave for Simon's home, there was nobody who felt the prickling of tears to see her go. Except perhaps for Chetan who found it wiser to leave at that precise moment to look for the cars that would take the marriage entourage back to Trivandrum. And so while Rekha searched for her Chetan in vain, he was just not there to bid good-bye to. And then the car was carrying Simon and Rekha away for their brief honeymoon on the shore of the Periyar Lake at Thekaddy.

...AND TWO DEATHS

In the first months of their marriage, Life turned out to be all that it promised for new lovers. Rekha had always been the cool-headed cynic, but she found herself now swept off her feet by the passions running through her body. On the trip to Thekkady and in the ten days spent there, she learned to plumb the depths of the torrential sensual love coursing like a mad and heady alcohol through their bodies. In their cloistered bedroom overlooking the lake where the elephants came out and swayed in a slow dance in the waters, the young lovers taught each other the syntax and grammar of the language of love. In the early mornings, the windows of their room lay misted over and Rekha, sated with the passions of the night, would go over to the windowpanes and wipe away the cold dampness. The green trees and the placid rippling lake outside would appear, sweep by sweep, brush by brush, in the glass of the windows under her palms, if she were painting the scene herself. The weak light straining in through the curtains would fill the room with a tender blush as Simon stirred and awoke.

Breakfast was called for in the room itself and the lovers reclined in bed and polished off the toast and the eggs and the glasses of orange juice. The faces of the impassive bearers revealed no astonishment, for rooms such as these were invariably occupied by honeymooners and young couples. The white-liveried attendants had, in their daily and boring duties, seen so much of unabashed love and undisguised passion that this emotion too had palled under their bored scrutiny. Breakfast over, the plates and cutlery were placed on the floor outside their suite and the door locked with the 'do not disturb' sign placed unambiguously on the handle. The first frantic ecstatic hunger for each other was now maturing to a slow, deliberate languor, which comes to those who know that Time is on their side and that they may, with quiet understanding and deep joy, lie in the swirling waters of their love for as long as their desire sang through their veins.

Their need to touch and be touched was endless. Their lips sought each other's in ways they did not know possible. It seemed they wished to enter into the very hearts and souls of each other, to bathe themselves in the sure and unmistakable knowledge of the other one, the one that was not you. There as a rhythm and a movement like the restless waters on the surface of the sea, never ending, ever moving, as they found and found again, the unutterable pleasure of their discovery of each other.

There were no questions being asked, though there was a constant and continuous exploration that would not be denied. They explored their own selves and discovered in each other the contours of the world they had hitherto lived in. Now, they sought to create a new universe where both their identities would fuse and a new double-headed personality, the sum and total of their joint selves, would rejoice. They talked; at times throughout the night, at times in the early morning when there was not a sound outside and the stars could still be seen through the windows. At other times they lay in each other's arms, in the abandonment of their tossed limbs and disheveled hair. There was no need to count the hours here; no clock would tick-tock, signaling the approaching end of their time together. There was no day or night. No diurnal movement of sun or moon marked the limit of their actions or their thoughts. It was as if they were young gods in training, seeking to create for themselves a sheltered lagoon of tranquility where the world outside did not interfere, an island of self-supporting togetherness, a small planet only they could inhabit.

The world beyond the doors ceased to exist for most of the day. The food that came in was, more often than not, sent back, barely nibbled at or desultorily tasted. Sometimes, when desire had been momentarily spent, they felt inordinately hungry and called for huge helpings of food they devoured in great gulps, hardly chewing the morsels. They made two halfhearted trips to the lake during this period, climbing into the motorboats that took out the tourists in search of the elusive elephants and other jungle animals. On both trips they did not see a single pachyderm. How was it that the ordinary, dull and lifeless people who went along with them did not, could not, recognize that on the pattering motorboat with them, were these newly wed man and woman who rejoiced in the dance of life every minute they spent in each other's company, that

they did not care a wit about elephant and wild boar, that they longed to get out of the boat and return to their room again. That old man and his charming wrinkled wife holding on to the railings in the boat, could they not see through their deception, their pretended unconcern and know that they were longing to get their hands on each other. This schoolboy, accompanying his parents, was he slyly winking at them? Did he know what they had been doing behind the closed doors of their room, just minutes ago? They were a little embarrassed in the way they stood close to each other, as the boat moved slowly and noisily around the lake. What would the people say, they asked each other? Could they see the inexpressible love in their fevered eyes? Did they know they cared not for the bright sunlight glancing of the rippled waters? When the boat came back to the jetty, they were off the very moment they reached shore, rushing to their suite again. They returned, not disappointed at the elusive elephants, but glad to get back to the comfort of their rooms, where they could be themselves, without the need to be polite and courteous to the others.

And thus passed the days they spent on the shores of the Periyar lake, a time spent in a cocoon-like isolation, where the unmapped continents of each other were explored, not in their entirety, but surely in their peripheries. That did not matter, for they had a lifetime to discover what remained unknown. What joy to know that the excitement of this discovery beckoned to them, that they had their lives to make their explorations.

The taxi taking them back to Cochin was slow and noisy. The driver tried to chat with them but got no response. The two of them lay relaxed in the rear seats at the back of the car. There was not much conversation, but there was, certainly, a thought that the glow of the incomparable days spent together at the resort was now fading. The routine task of life to be lived every day was now ahead. This cloud and cuckoo land they had inhabited, was now being left behind. And with each mile traversed on their return journey to Cochin, they knew that the everyday patterns of their conjoint lives would now demand from them adjustments and compromises, a give and take, a sweet appreciation of the requirements of each other's lives and a willing accommodation to each other's daily schedules. There would be difficulties, glitches, hiccups now and then, but the moments spent in the company of each other over the past ten days had given them a profound confidence, a sure certainty that things would work out as best as possible.

When the car drove in back to the house where the Brigadier was waiting for them, they were both glad and disappointed. The great honeymoon was over: it was more ecstatic and wonderful than they had expected it to be. It had taught them the magnificent promise of unconditional love. But it was over; there was a lesson in it somewhere, that the best things in life, while they may be incomparably sweet, were also short-lived. They got out wearily and were received by the smiling Brigadier, who wrapped her in a big hug, while, with a mock grin of pretended lasciviousness, he gave his son a wink; a saucy, leering wink. They both burst out laughing, and Rekha wondered once again about the nature of the wonderful, unexpected relationship father and son shared.

Life, the daily, humdrum routine of life, began again for both of them. The Principal and Superintendent of the Hospital they worked in had agreed to grant them the desired leave of ten days, only on the condition that they get back to their duties on the eleventh. With the greater maturity and wisdom his gray hair bestowed on him, he had calculated that the time of ten days is enough for a young couple to get to know each other, in spirit, and more so in body. They should be ready to start their work in the hospital once again, immediately thereafter. And so it was that in the next morning, the two found themselves rushed for time, hurrying to the bathroom for the ablutions, getting dressed for the day, hastening to the breakfast table for something to eat, and climbing into the car that would take them to the hospital, all in the space of a hectic half-hour that seemed less than five minutes.

There were adjustments to be made and this took them weeks, months, as things settled down to an even keel. They took turns as to who would use the bathroom first, who would ensure their clothes were pressed and readied for the morning, who would give orders to Daniel regarding Daddy's lunch. The Brigadier brought much joy to their lives: he was not the usual father-in-law, who would remain a little withdrawn and

formal, almost to the point of being stiff, who would stop the conversation he was having with his son when she entered the room and then talk of the weather, or the price of the vegetables or some other inconsequential matter. He did make it a point to give them both all the space they required as young couples in the house. But when they were together, as at dinner, he enlivened the place as only he could. Rekha determined she would do all she could to make his life as warm and pleasant as it could possibly be.

Each day, when they got back home from the hospital, they took turns to make the special cup of coffee they both yearned for so much, and the extra cup for the Brigadier. Then, before dinner, she would have to get the drinks for both the men of the house. The question of who cooks the dinner they resolved by leaving the whole damned business to Daniel. He was lord and master of the kitchen and, indeed, would brook no interference in the daily routine of cooking. It was only on a holiday, or when there were some special guests invited for dinner, that Rekha would tentatively venture into the kitchen and suggest some new dish, or a new way of preparation that Daniel would initially scoff at, but would then reluctantly agree to. The maid, Ponnamma, was a silent, nondescript woman, who sneaked into the house in the early morning, swept and swabbed and did all sorts of menial work and then slipped out again, without a word being spoken. Rekha did try to engage her in conversation, but apart from giving her a brief smile, she refused to be drawn into any exchange of confidences. Finally, Rekha left her to herself. Ponnamma was glad for this small mercy.

At the hospital, they lived in two different worlds, Rekha in her general ward with all the rush and throng of the patients, and Simon in the Pediatrics Department, where things were quieter, but liable to break your heart more often. The children, the young children, who were brought to him, sweet and delicate as exotic flowers that bloom for brief moments, made him gasp his breath in sorrow. It would not do to have the doctor show emotion. It was that thought alone that made him steel himself so that the sharp, prickling of tears in his eyes would not show. For Rekha, it was more of the mad rush and hurry of getting through the endless line of patients, scribbling the names of medicines for them or referring them to the departments where they would get specialized treatment. They would meet in Simon's room for fifteen minutes for lunch, where they would grab the chapattis, or rice and vegetables, that Daniel had packed for them. Then it was back for the afternoon shift and to go through the line of patients by about three or four in the evening. As time passed, they would get used to this routine, the domestic rush in the mornings, the press and hurry of the hospital throughout the day and then the drive back home to a relaxed evening before things wound themselves to a close by eleven in the night. It was a full day for them, and they would not have it any other way.

There were times when they would get a couple of days off and go to Trivandrum to catch up with what was happening there. Amma was her usual self, the vacant smile on her face as she looked up from her books and then welcomed them in. She would talk about things, inconsequential things like the servants and the crops in the fields and the leaking roof. Chetan would rush back home from wherever he was to give her a hard hug and Simon a warm handshake and to order for the special dishes to adorn the dinner table. He would himself spoon out the meat and the fish curries into their plates and watch with a grin as he saw them eat. Rekha's queries about him would be received with a slow nod of his head and a smile that said everything and said nothing. He would ask Simon about his work and his father and was pleased to learn that things were good and as it should be. When her father came in, late as usual, no concessions there for his daughter's arrival, there would be an all-too obvious stiffening, as if a cold breeze had blown into the room. Chetan would lounge about for a few minutes and then excuse himself to go to his room. Her father pretended he did not notice and kept talking to them, eyes fixed on a point at the far end of the dinner table. Simon was acutely aware of everyone's discomfiture at the arrival of the Vakil.

Thus the days passed. Rekha knew the regularity in her life was good and wonderful and she wished the days would pass forever in the even and normal routine that brought such stability and constancy to their lives. She used to wonder, who wants adventure and change, who wants the turmoil and chaos of life unsettled. What a fool is he who climbs Mount Everest or swims across the English Channel. Thank God for the regular ticking of the clock, the steady pulse on her wrist, the beat, beat, beating of her heart. One day, as she lay with her head on Simon's chest, in the late evening in bed after the most exquisite moments of passion

were ebbing from her body, she heard the loud and strong throbbing of his heart. As he traced his fingers through the strands of her hair, she knew, without a shadow of doubt she knew, that she could lie there, in the quiet eddy of that moment, for ever and ever, that she would need nothing more in life, no diamonds or gold, no filigreed ornaments or ocean pearls. What more could one yearn for than to just lay there on Simon's chest with her ears full of the beat, beat, beating of his steadfast heart. This was all she wanted in life, she was sure of that, completely and indubitably sure of that.

But the lines on her hand dictated otherwise. The planetary combination that ruled her destiny would not, at least not yet, allow her the peace and happiness she so cherished. There were somber plans being prepared, manufactured as it were, in the editing room by a gray, gaunt god who had never known pity or ecstasy. The script of this new drama had already been written. Rekha first knew of this one morning as she readied herself for office. She was in the bathroom, brushing her teeth and thinking about the day gone by when she felt the stirring of a nausea that gripped her stomach in a queasy moment. She bent over the washbasin and retched into it. She briefly wondered if it were something that she had eaten the previous night, or whether she was coming down with a cold and fever from something she may have picked up from one of the patients.

But even as the thought ran through her mind, she knew she was wrong. As a doctor she was sure, well, almost sure, that it was more of a momentous event than just that. She was fulfilling the biological task for which she had been evolved. She was reproducing herself with the awesome perfection that nature alone could perform. She was pregnant. For one moment she stood with her head bowed, caught in the thrill of that discovery, feeling her heart fill with a limitless joy, knowing too that for the next few months she would have to grapple with mood changes and swings of emotion, that she would be ecstatic and worried in regular intervals, that she would cry and laugh at the same time and become a bother and a worry for Simon.

As she came out of the bathroom, a radiant smile on her face, Simon stared at her and wondered why she was so full of an inner light. He loved every moment he spent with her. Every minute of his life he rejoiced in the great fortune of finding for himself the one woman with whom he could spend his life. Rekha's confession of her fears and her joys turned the moment into an unforgettable one. There were loud whoops of joy and cheering that for a moment startled the Brigadier in the next room, who wheeled himself out and knocked on their door to enquire the reason for this sudden expression of happiness. When he was told, his eyes lit up and there was the hint of bright tears of unchecked joy. And then he was enfolding them both into his arms and they were all smiling and talking excitedly and fixing an appointment with the gynecologist, making plans for the next several months. There were admonitions about Rekha's diet and daily regimen and dire warnings to her to adhere to the routine of exercise and rest. The Brigadier stated that Rekha could take leave from that very day itself and spend the rest of the required time in the house; the daily schedule in the hospital would be too tiring for her. Rekha interrupted him saying that she was not the first working woman in the history of the planet to get pregnant and that she could not even begin to consider the horrifying prospect of spending the next several months lying quietly in the house.

And so it was settled. After the routine tests and consultation with the doctor were over, they settled into a daily schedule that was regular and rock steady and filled with the abundance of love and caring, a close warm nearness that grew each day to such proportions that she felt her heart would swell and burst in glorious exultation in the everyday tasks of life. Simon would, in the early mornings, get up from his bed noiselessly and slip away to the kitchen where he would light the stove and boil the water and the milk and the tea leaves until it had turned into a strong, sweet concoction so full of a reviving strength that it woke her up from the dull and dreamless sleep that she would invariably have fallen into in the early hours of the morning. She would have spent most of the night tossing and turning in a twilight world between sleep and wakefulness, between dreams and fears, between fantasy and reality, where the images beckoning to her from the shadows of her mind were unclear and distorted, like reflections from an old mildewed mirror, whose silver had rusted away here and there.

But she was happy, happy beyond words, beyond the definition of happiness. She could not define the basis of her joy, except that the future was like a view from a window where the sun was shining in a cloudless sky. There was Simon by her side, strong and resplendent like a warrior in armour and chain, ready to ward off, with a mighty sweep of his sword and the strength of the fire in his heart, any evil that may threaten her.

And that is why, in the million years that she spent after that June morning when everything went horribly wrong, as she was left wondering and questioning about the sequence and the logic of the events, she could not find, try as she might, the reason why the appalling event should have happened at all, and most crushingly, why this had to happen to her, to Rekha Kuruvilla née Kurien and to the simple, wonderful life she had nurtured these past months. She was left maimed and disabled, shell shocked and incredulous, disbelief flooding her heart and her mind every morning, when she woke up in her cold and suddenly lonely bed.

She would play out the events in her mind in the first few months after it had destroyed every semblance of peace in her mind. She would relive the ghastly tragedy and the sheer, mindless terror of the accident. Simon had gone to work as usual and Rekha had taken the morning off to meet a colleague of hers who worked in a private hospital near her house, whom she admired and respected for her professional competence, a gynecologist who helped her through the many stages of the baby growing in her womb. It was now about five months and Dr. Rukmini would prescribe some vitamins today for her that would ensure her health and her vitality in the coming days. She got up lazily from bed that morning, after having dozed off when Simon had gone off to the hospital. The Brigadier had left standing instructions to Daniel that Rekha should not be disturbed or woken up, whenever she was sleeping. And so she spent another hour and half lolling in a doze before rising and having a quick bath and getting ready for her appointment with the ever-friendly Rukmini.

She emerged from her room and she could swear that she had never felt better in the few months after the conception. Everything seemed to be working like clockwork inside her. Even the morning sickness that had bothered her in the first three months seemed to have disappeared. She called out to her father-in-law that she was taking the old Fiat for the short trip to the gynecologist.

He called out to her from his room, “Hold on Rekha, do you think that I should come with you; maybe I could be of some use?”

“Not really, Daddy, it’s a routine visit, and I’ll be back within half an hour.”

“Maybe on the way back you could pick up a tub of ice-cream, that vanilla and chocolate mix you are so fond of.” He winked, for they both knew that though Rekha was fond of ice cream, it was the Brigadier who would polish off more than half the tub whenever it was bought. She smiled back, “Of course, I’ll pick it up on the way back. In fact, since its you who’s going to eat most of it, perhaps you could come too and pick up the double pack yourself.”

“I’ll take you up on that”, he said and he was off in a second, the wheelchair dexterously maneuvered to the dressing room where he changed his shirt and came out in a minute, ready to be lifted into the front seat of the Fiat by Daniel. Daniel saw that he was comfortably seated as Rekha got in and switched on the engine and turned the car into the driveway and the gate of the house. She revved up the engine, shifted gear from second to third and turned to the spry twinkling eyed man sitting next to her to ask him about the day’s schedule. At that precise moment, for surely, the moment was of paramount importance in the events of the rest of her life, her eyes had moved to her left as she turned to the Brigadier. For a couple of seconds, her eyes were not on the road lying across the path of the car, at the turning from the gates of the house into the main road. For not more than a couple of seconds. She would repeat that phrase for the rest of her life, over and over again, without let or pause. For not more than a couple of seconds. Until the words would lose all meaning, all context, a mindless chant that struck deep into her heart every time she paused to think and relive the horror of the moment for the billionth time.

The large minibus, a dark brown, sturdy vehicle, hurtled down the road towards the old Fiat as it climbed on to the road. The driver was young, a twenty year old with tight pants and a tighter yellow shirt, full of a

soaring bravado at the very thought of being at the controls of the large vehicle, as he floored the accelerator and turned into the precise spot where the Fiat, itself turning into the road, was getting to. The curve of the road was accurately aligned for disaster, the paths of the two vehicles leading to a geometric convergence of motion and direction and velocity that no one, not even the most practiced of professional drivers, could have avoided. There was an impeccable design in the format of those few seconds when her life changed irretrievably. It was a perfectly structured sequence of events that took not more than a couple of seconds to be executed, but which was final and irrevocable.

Rekha watched in horror as the minibus, without even the touch of a brake, cannoned against the side of her car where her father-in-law was sitting. He had no clue, as he sat turning towards her, starting to reply to her question, that at his very back was the hurtling form of the god of Death himself, disguised as a dark-coloured minibus, inexorable and merciless, without an iota of pity or compassion, ruthless and gigantically evil in its import and intent. The sound of the impact was disproportionately low, in fact there was no great explosion or cloud of fire and smoke. The full force of the minibus, now hopelessly out of control, slammed the small car so hard that it toppled over on its side and was pushed a good twenty feet away. The young driver, hands raised to his face, turned his body away from the windshield, knowing instinctively that the damage to his heavier vehicle would not be much, but that he would have to protect his face and his eyes as the glass splintered and scattered before his eyes. Other than the shattered glass and the dented body of the minibus, there was no other damage. The young lad would lose his licence and spend the next six months in jail for his negligence. He would from time to time remember the incident with horror that grew more and more fleeting as time passed. Within a couple of years it would be a barely remembered bad dream.

The Fiat, on the other hand, was a completely different story. The side where the old man sat was destroyed completely, shattered to the extent that there was nothing left but bits of broken steel and twisted plates. The body of the Brigadier fared no better. He died, within twenty seconds of the impact, after he gave out a long, deep piercing groan of agony and pain. It was the bellow of a mortally wounded animal and lasted but a few moments. The horrifying sound of the cry was seared forever into Rekha's brain cells, pitted into her psyche with a corrosive acid that played out the sound like a tape record, the deep groan of the passing away of a man. It would haunt her nightmares for a lifetime.

As for Rekha, she found herself lying crushed into a corner below the steering wheel, the harsh scraping noise of steel grating along on the tarred road fading from her mind as the car came to a halt. The car was by now motionless on its side, the mangled body of the Brigadier lay like an oozing wet and bloody weight on her body. She noticed there was not a sound, now that the accident was over. Everything was still and motionless. Dimly she heard the harsh cawing of the crows overhead as they flapped above her, flying about helter-skelter in the morning sky. A dull, gray film floated over her eyes and she felt weary, so very weary all of a sudden. She closed her eyes, not knowing what she would see when she came to her senses, when she would be pulled out of the wreckage. The heavy, and by now lifeless body of her father-in-law weighed down on her, and the blood that flowed generously from him soaked into her sari. But that was all right, she said to herself, so long as she knew that he was alive and that the ambulance would be here soon and that someone, anyone, would pull them both out of the wreckage and take them away to the security and comfort of a hospital. But even as she thought, she knew too she was only fooling herself. There was no possible way the little man could have survived the force of that monstrous, iron juggernaut slamming into him.

It was only then, only after the realisation that the once sprightly, irrepressible man who was her father-in-law was dead that she suddenly thought of the little baby growing within her, the reason for her trip out of the house today, the reason she was lying shocked and immobile in a car sprawled on its side, the reason why the body of the legless man lying huddled against her, was now without life, was undeniably dead, his lifeblood oozing away into the twisted body of the car, flowing over her sari and her legs and finally finding its way through the cracks in the metal into the dust and the dirt of the road below.

She could move her hands and in a sudden flurry of panic flushing through her body, she clutched at the base of her stomach, wondering what could have possibly happened to the growing embryo within. Her hands came away wet and sticky. There was more blood flowing waste today, she realized dully, not only that of

the old man who had shared her car today and whose life had just dripped away even as she watched it; there was too another barely living thing, the foetus of her unborn child, that was too, perhaps being sucked away, in the aftermath of the horrendous incident which, in the span of a couple of seconds, had irrevocably, momentarily and gigantically, changed, altered, amended and ruined forever the future course of her life.

It was all too much for her now. She could not think anymore as the enormity of the events in which she lay like a tortured prisoner on the rack, finally overwhelmed her. She closed her eyes, faintly aware that there was a sudden flurry of movement and the sound of voices shouting, and that hands were reaching out to her through the shattered window, strangers' hands, rough and trembling hands, that wished to comfort and soothe her. And then there was nothing more to know, she felt herself drifting away, floating on a sea of pain, grateful to lose unconsciousness, grateful to know that she did not have to think, to worry, to feel guilty, to even wonder as to when Simon would come, what he would think of and how very appalled he would be.

LIFE MUST GO ON

It was over. The world had come to an end. There was no movement in the desert of the planet she lived on. All animal, plant and bird life had been extinguished. She was the only surviving inhabitant of this lonely universe. Simon had left with a cold stare, giving her a month's time to vacate the house. He could not stand to see her, be with her, for even the short time it would take for her to find alternate accommodations. She guessed she should be thankful for the kind courtesy he had demonstrated, that he had not insisted she be ejected soon after the bier carrying the small, suddenly tiny body of the Brigadier had been carried away by the cortege bearers. He would be back now only after she had left.

In the quiet, silent house, she keenly felt the emptiness in her womb, the sudden lightness, the yawning vacuum that strangely felt like a weight in her belly, reminding her, whispering to her in sibilant sounds, shouting at her, that she had been responsible for the premature vacation of that temporary abode by the little pink, misshapen, wet and oozing piece of flesh pulled out of the sore and painful passage between her legs. She had wept inconsolably then. That small lump would have been a son. It was now on its way to the hospital incinerator, going, going, gone without a word of farewell. It left behind a welter of scattered emotions that would, in the next few days, slowly, but surely, scrape away at the foundation of her wonderful, ecstatic marriage, until the walls would start to crumble and collapse, exposing her grieving head to the rain and the storm outside.

She knew too that the little, good-humoured man who had given her many a moment of humour, laughter and smiles, had gone now, never to return. It was as if so many aeons had passed since the terrible events two weeks ago. The heaven she had exulted in, in the house of the Kuruvillas, had collapsed into a pile of debris. As she lay in the bed, the kindly Daniel having brought her a cup of tea and leaving her with a troubled backward glance, she understood the meaning of love gone sour, of vanished ecstasy, the disappearance of the bliss that had had been hers for some short time, when she had known that the other one in your life is someone so very like yourself, at one with each other, in perfect synchronization with the rhythm and movement of your body and spirit.

She agonized again and again for the millionth time, was she really responsible for the accident, was she the killer of both her unborn son and her father-in-law whom she had loved more than her own father. How would she go through this, she wondered, again for the millionth time, how would she face each day as it dawned on her life. She knew too, even as she said these words, that the peculiar, the singular, in fact, the unmistakably inexplicable thing about time, is that it passes by. It moves on. It runs, it dawdles, it staggers, it stumbles, but always moves on. In fact, the damned thing would not stop, would not give her a chance to catch her breath, to exhale and close her eyes and calm her troubled heartbeat. If only it would give her a chance to turn around the inexorable forward movement, to go back for a chosen period of time, to run over the events of her choice and then make small, simple amendments, to edit the tape and make the necessary changes.

Apparently simple ones, of no significant consequence. Such as sleeping on in her bed that day for another few minutes before getting up to ready herself for the appointment with Dr. Rukmini. Of not having asked Papa about the ice-cream, so that she did not have to wait for him to pull on his shirt and be helped into his car. Conversely, rather than amending things she had done, why could other things have not happened to her; could not Dr. Rukmini have phoned in and cancelled her appointment. Or Daniel waited a couple of seconds more to serve her the cup of coffee, just that inconsequential couple of seconds so that the minibus would have passed the gate of the house and safely gone on, with no interfering old Fiat car to get in its way. Or if Simon had not left for the hospital, had insisted that he too would come along with her, and that he had driven the car.

And what happened to Simon, this wonderful man who had been her most wonderful husband, who had been the firm foundation in her life these past few months, whom she considered as a very part of her body, her self, her very being. When she had regained her consciousness in the hospital, she first thing she saw was Simon at her bedside, a grim, darkly brooding stranger who told her in a dead monotone, that his father was dead, having succumbed to the enormous trauma that had overwhelmed his body. Simon had turned away thereafter and did not even ask a word about the foetus she had lost at the same time. Whatever had touched their marriage with a special magic had dulled and faded away the very minute the Brigadier had snapped his last salute at the gates of his house, slumped against her in the old Fiat now turned into a coffin. He could not even count the last few seconds of his life dribbling away.

Simon had not talked to her, not held her hand, not sat by her bedside during the next week as a raging fever took control of her body and ate at the insides of her uterus, now traumatized with the sudden ripping away of the pale pink lump of flesh unborn. He waited till the fever had subsided and took her back home in a taxi. He sat silently by her side as she tried to talk to him, to ask him why he was so silent, so cold and indeed so unforgiving, as if she had committed a cold-blooded crime, a premeditated double murder while in full control of her consciousness. As if she had pulled out a knife and ripped at their throats.

He told her that with his father blotted out of the picture, he had suddenly felt the draining away of whatever they had had between them. That she meant nothing to him now that his father was not around to make his bright-eyed jokes and snigger at the both of them. That even his unborn child would be of no consequence to him, because he would not have a grandfather to dandle the little child on his battered knees just above the amputated leg.

A grand design somewhere, she bitterly pondered. She was not used to brooding over deep philosophical questions that some people thought about every day with such determined contemplation. But look at it this way; she said, consoling herself grimly in the inevitability, the horrible fatality of it all. I could never ever have prevented it, this single cataclysmic moment, surely in the making since the Big Bang. This crash of Fiat and Minibus had been written in the records from even as far back as when God had said "Let there be Light." I was in the cross hairs of Time and Space, right from where it all started. Even as in the dark depths of the universe, the stars and planets were being formed, during the settling of molten lava into rocks and boulders, the weathering of the earth by water and wind, the arrival of single-celled organisms, and then the dinosaurs who dominated the earth for aeons, and finally, the straight backed erect creature. Through the pages of recorded history, through world wars, the ups and downs of the freedom struggle in the country, my birth in the Kurien household, my becoming a doctor, getting posted to this town of all the hundreds that existed in Kerala, meeting Simon, marrying him, making love to him the precise moment so the baby was conceived, to have taken leave from work that day, to think about ice cream, to have tempted the man in the wheelchair to come out with me, to have driven the car out of the house to meet that exact unmistakable second of time that would not be denied, that would not be exchanged with another, that was there, waiting for me, waiting to trip me up, turn my life upside down, to destroy and mangle every little joy I have ever had. Ever since the beginning of Time, this incident had been planned, had been chalked out, programmed to happen, at that very precise moment when it did.

Those damned couple of seconds would never leave her mind, she was sure, would never ever stop bothering her for the rest of her allotted days. What malevolent god could have planned this accident with such awesome precision, could have marked her out of all the billions who inhabited this sorry planet of hers. Here in the heart of this green, green land. Brilliant, dear God, she smiled bitterly, truly brilliant.

But she would be damned if she would let this break her spirit, she would fight, she would use her fists, her mind, her spirit and stay alive, she would not let herself be counted out till ten on the floor of the ring. Just let her cruise through the next few days, allow the buzzing in her ears to quieten down, and then she would be up on her feet.

What god could hold her down, she whispered through gritted teeth? She would show the world what strength there could be in a woman determined to find her own place under the sun, who refused to let herself be cowed down, who would be the finest fighter in the face of all adversity. See God, what a fine fighter I will be, you will be proud of me, see, but then you would have to stop trying to break me: ok? That's a promise dear God, that is a promise indeed. I will fight like the very devil himself and be a formidable foe to you, if you should cross my path. But stay away from me and you can count on me to hold you to a truce, an uneasy truce indeed, but a genuine truce, where you don't trip me up and I don't fight you like a wild tigress. Agreed? Lets shake hands on that.

Somewhere in the tortured confusion of her fevered mind, the face of her kindly, patient gentle God inexplicably turned malevolent and was now raining his thunderbolts on her. The bearded, cloaked God she had loved and prayed to all the years of her growing up, seemed to fuse into the face of the captain of the Bad Side, the very Devil himself and the two became a single-bodied, double-countenanced, terrifying, unstoppable Power that ruled the world in absolute arbitrariness, an anarchical heavenly-hellish government that heard no prayer, no pleas, no submission for kindness. For the rest of her life she would be torn between the images of Good and Evil, each, chameleon-like, taking on the colours and likeness of the other.

The next few days passed like a horrible storm blowing and scattering her thoughts like dried leaves across the sere and parched desert. First, a messenger sent by Simon reminded her that the house would have to be vacated by her within a few days, not more than three, because Simon saar wanted to shift in from his present abode in a guest house attached to the clinic of a friend of his.

The eviction notice set about a whirl of activities from concerned and grieving friends of hers, who cajoled and pleaded and threatened the Superintendent of her hospital to allot back to her the quarters that had been hers before she had shifted into Simon's house after her marriage. The pleas worked and the Superintendent, of gentle mind and a sentimental heart, more gentle, more sentimental than Simon's, cancelled the allotment that had been made to some other waiting doctor and allotted the same to her again.

Then there was the predicament of Daniel. He had watched the cortege of his beloved Brigadier being carried away for the funeral. He had tearfully helped in the arrangement of the wreaths and the prayers in the churchyard. To him, it was as if a grand era of greatness had passed away. After having served Brigadier Kuruvilla for three decades, he had no more strength in his body to continue to serve his master's son. More, he had watched in horrified silence at his inexplicable conduct, as he rejected Rekha in a manner that defied understanding. What on earth had the poor girl done to deserve this rejection, Daniel asked himself again and again? So it was that when Simon asked him to continue working with him on the same terms and conditions as he had worked with the Brigadier, Daniel had, after much thought and debate, refused. On the same night, Rekha too requested him, to continue with her in the new quarters allotted to her at the hospital premises. And he accepted, with the same logic employed in refusing Simon's request. Loyalty was of paramount importance to Daniel. He saw Simon's rejection of Rekha as a particularly cruel form of betrayal. And he had seen how close Rekha had been to his former master. He guessed, and correctly, that the Brigadier would have wanted him to care for the poor girl, just as much as the Brigadier would have been angry with the way she had been kicked out of the house by his son. It was a simple piece of logic that he could see so clearly in his mind, but one that left Simon defeated and bitter. Rekha rejoiced that she would have someone to comfort her and care for her in the darkness of the days ahead.

Rukmini, her gynecologist friend, who waited like a shadow around her, grieving in some illogical way that she was responsible for the death of the little embryo inside her, for it was she who had fixed the appointment for her that day, walked with her one evening in the garden outside the house, the house that she was soon to vacate, and talked with her, long and gentle, of this and that and the inexplicable ways of God and how one must learn to accept, if not understand, His ways. Rekha gave her a long, cool look that spoke volumes of what she thought about this pleasant homily. She did not retort or rebuke, she only looked away and smiled grimly. She let Rukmini talk, talk late into the night, hearing what she said, but not listening,

allowing the words to wing their way over her head into the twilight now slowly growing into darkness around her. And she let her heart harden, turn stiff and desperate within her, until she felt her chest swell up with the unspoken bitterness that swept like an acid through her body. Was this the way she would live out the rest of her life? Or would she be able to absorb, to accept and finally learn to smile away the tragedy that had destroyed the equanimity of the simple, sweet paradise that was home.

Abha and Mini were the main bulwarks of her life, on whom she rested the weight of her days, to whom she told tales she would never tell anyone, who hugged her and kissed her and consoled her in the darkest nights of her days on earth. Abha took turns with Mini to be around, to just be there when Rekha woke up in the morning from deep dreamless sleep or when the terror of the nights would sometimes awaken her, gasping for breath, in the first days after the accident. She had called them both on telephone, one after the other, as a desperate woman would turn to the only salvation she knew when knifed in the underbelly. In the incomprehensible words that struck sheer despair in the hearts of both of them, when they heard the details of the awful tragedy that had overwhelmed Rekha's, they found the time to rush to her side, both of them taking leave from their work for a week. They stayed on, asking for no reason, pleading no excuses to get back to their work, just being there, holding hands and wiping away Rekha's tears, crying with her, hugging each other with the strength of their hearts, with the blind knowledge that surpassed understanding, which only knew that they had to be there for their sister.

Chetan too dropped in as often as he could. There were some awkward moments when, on one of his visits, he met Mini in the garden outside. He smiled sadly and Mini turned away so that none could see the deep longing in her eyes. But that was but for a moment. It was Rekha who now showed them the way to reconciliation and brought them both to the shady verandah of the house where they all sat together sipping coffee and talking to each other, not with bitterness or sadness, but as old friends met once again after years of being separated. There was an easy familiarity that rose like a sweet fragrance as they talked and everything was again wonderful, almost as wonderful, as it had been once.

And then it was time to leave behind the house and all the bitter and sweet memories stored within, and move away, not too far, but within the same town, just about two miles from where they were. And she never saw Simon again. He got for himself a transfer from the town within a week thereafter, pleading inconsolable grief at the death of his father and a personal incapacity to come to terms with the loss. He could not think of living in the same house, in the same town, where the horrible accident had taken place. The house was sold off, fetching a tidy amount for him, not a moiety of which she received as her share when the divorce came through some six months later. The break was neat and clean, like an axe slicing through the branch of a tree. A week later, the bankers sent her an envelope with a draft returning to her the dowry that her father had sent Brigadier Kurivilla when their marriage had been solemnised. It was as if a refund had been made, for the contract of marriage that had not come through. Simon had done the correct, but heartless thing, a cold entry in the books to make the profit-and-loss statement balance perfectly. It was Simon's last act of misguided generosity.

Let no man put asunder what God has conjoint: only God has the unfettered privilege to do that, to put asunder what He has himself conjoint. And He had; with no thought for feeling and heart, with no consideration for the joy and ecstasy that the two of them had enjoyed with great abandon in the short days that it was their privilege to live as man and wife. It was over, it was done and that was the end of it.

There was an act that she had to perform on herself that would signify the end of a phase and the start of another. One quiet evening, after Daniel had cleared the plates and left for his small room at the corner of the quarters, she sat alone in her bedroom and prepared herself for the task. On her bed, with a newspaper spread around her, she collected her long tresses into her hands and with a large pair of scissors, snipped them off in three or four swift slashes. Her hair had been the source of compliments and praise of all those who had seen her. Even as an internee at hospital, her colleagues, and indeed some friendly patients, had admired it for its

length and thickness. Indeed, she had herself been almost vain in the contemplation of her bountiful, black plaits. Now, at this decisive moment, the moment that separates the future from the past, now was the instant that the break must be made; a complete severing with all she had had been in this life of hers till this very second. She left it at shoulder-length, stripping away with one quick sweep, a part of her personality she had always been proud of. Her ear-studs, so lovingly gifted to her by Appachan, now shone free and proud on her lobes. A weight was gone from her, a weight she had carried so willingly, even with conceit, till this moment. Now she would strip herself of all extraneous, unnecessary artifacts, accessories, appendices and trimmings that clutter up one's life. Now she would be her own minimal self, dedicated to the one task she was so supremely skilled for, the care of the sick and the diseased. That would be the very meaning of her life from today.

The days passed. As they must. Life at the hospital ticked on as it always had. The press and throng of the patients and their families were always there to confront her, to challenge her and to keep her on her toes. And thus she took up the threads of Life again. And again, she deployed her skills to save lives, to make lives better, and sometimes to shed tears helplessly as she felt the tender thread of breath snap beneath her fingers and the slim pain-wracked bodies fold into a lifeless heavy form even as she watched. And she gained the strength to be drawn back into the present day world, to be there for others, to be a part of the hurly-burly of life, to feel and laugh and cry at the life around her, to adhere to the promise she had once made in the darkest days of her life, that she would be the best fighter that there had ever been.

And as the days passed, so did Rekha grow in spirit and compassion, not diminished by the trauma of the incidents that had once spread like a dark stain across the promised brightness of the skies overhead. She grew handsome and golden-hued with the harmony of mind and spirit. She radiated a strength that her friends and colleagues found astonishing. She lived each day with equanimity and balance, accepting with a calm smile the things that she couldn't change and trying hard to change the things that she could. She brought smiles to many a face in the hospital wards under her charge. The little children who sometimes came into her hospital beds for brief moments, with shaven heads and a lost vacant stare on their faces as the chemicals coursed through the slight and slender bodies, broke her heart day after day. She swallowed the tears that rose to her eyes and chucked them under the chin and brought them sweets and trinkets to make them happy. And she never let on to the ones who hung around the little ones, the adults who found themselves as weak and helpless as their children themselves, the ones who had fear and despair in their eyes as the allotted days of their little ones ran out as so many grains of sand in a hourglass, that the pain-wracked bodies on the beds were at the end of their span of life and that it would be better to let them go on their way, to not hold them back, to let the grim faced reaper cut the cord of their life.

But the best ones she loved were those who wrestled with the pain and the illness and came out winners, smiling at her and their loved ones, the ones who had fought like tiger cubs and refused to bow their heads. She loved them for she was so very like them. She could almost see her face in theirs and she smiled to herself; knowing full well that many of them, as the course of their life took them down the diverse and magical paths it was their destiny to trod, would turn away from code, convention and even religion, and find their own path to follow in life. They would, when lesser mortals would have glanced away and shook their heads and lost their way, find their own peace, their own compromises, their own unique way to stare Life in the face and to keep their heads high.

It would be a lie to say that Rekha remained the cool, composed, inviolate woman who wafted through life as if she were a butterfly on a gentle breeze. There were times when she would feel the weight of the uncertain future hang like a shroud over her, dimming her vision and making her totter on legs suddenly turned weak. Sometimes, at night, she would wake up sweating, as if hurtling up from the canyons of her mind, up from a troubled sleep full of inexplicable dreams, and not know who she was, or what she was doing in a strange bed. One heart-thudding night, she had woken up with a start and could not remember her name. The terror

that suddenly shivered through her body had brought out a moist sweat on her brows. But she had screwed up her eyes and focused her mind and had seen her name appear before her eyes as if written on parchment paper.

At other times, it was the loneliness that besieged her like a disease, overtaking her senses, her mind, her body, her very identity. She tried as best as she could to wipe out the image of Simon from her mind, but that was not to be. He kept coming back over and over again like a furtive shadow creeping up on her, a sudden appearance when she last expected it, in the night when alone in her bed, or when grappling with thoughts about her future, about how she would be alone when she was an old and weary woman in her eighties. Who would look after her when she was ill, when she would lose control over her bladder, when she would require help to get up from her bed in the morning, with her washing, her ablutions, her food. Simon would take over the domain of her thoughts with the ease and fluency of a sleight-of-hand magician. He was there like a surprising jack in the box, to tease her, to question her, to make her cringe in waves of guilt that wracked her still from time to time.

At one point of time she decided to take a lover and went about the task of finding a suitable man with all the assiduousness of an aging beauty. She wanted something to hold back the passage of time, someone pliant and willing to bow to her every demand. She first searched among the younger doctor students but suddenly felt ashamed, like a mother looking for an amorous relationship among the friends of her son. She looked at colleagues and friends and felt that the easy friendship she had with them would be compromised, betrayed, if she went beyond the circle that defined friendship. She cast a glance around at older men, senior professors, the serious gray-haired doctors and saw them as happy, contented people, well set in their ways, in the comfort of their families and she shuddered to think what harm she would wreak on them and their loved ones if she walked into their lives like a bitch in heat.

No, she had to find her own way, her own salvation as she went down her path in the ordinary, everyday business of her life. She watched young girls as they came to her hospital, as nurses, as patients, as friends of patients, as doctors; she saw the blossoms in their cheeks. She felt acutely the rough rasping of the skin of her face under her hands. She knew she was not young anymore. The days of her life were passing. But she would live them according to her terms. She would live them as best as she could, head held high, her eyes shining like a torch that shone in the face of all that came across her. Daniel stood by her side at home, waiting on her, caring for her even as he himself turned old and frail. But he was the very symbol of devotion and fidelity. He would stay by her side till the very last breath in his lungs.

A voice inside still whispered to her: Life is not all about holding one's head high and staring at the world with unblinking eyes, its not about helping her patients get over their illnesses and putting them back on to their feet. And surely its not about getting up startled in the middle of the night and longing for the arms of a man to hold her as if he would never let go. There is more to come and I will be damned if this is the way the world will end for me. Miles to go before you sleep, woman, miles to go.

PART III

*“Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith “ A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half;
Trust God: see all nor be afraid!” ”*

Rabbi Ben Ezra
Robert Browning

STIRRINGS

The little cat sat at the doorstep of the house, the early morning sunlight bright and electric all around. Her eyes were screwed up tight, and in the loud purring that sounded from her little body, it was clear she was contented. Manjooran had just tossed her a couple of biscuits soaked in a saucer of milk. Half an hour earlier, after waking up in the early morning, he had called out to Kamala for his bed tea. Just in time and with unerring aim, the paperboy had flung the newspaper from the gate straight at the door, where it had landed with a thud. That had signaled the start of the day for him. Now, with the teacup on the peg table and the newspaper spread out in his hands, he felt brave enough to face the world.

He glanced at the little tabby as she lay soaking in the sun. She was mostly white with yellow stripes and a black spot on her nose. He wondered what she was really thinking of. Certainly, she must be contemplating the mysteries of the universe. Come tell me what you dream of, Puss, come, come to me. Disturbed from her meditation, she slowly opened her eyes. She looked at the floor, some slow, dark movement close to her paws. She saw the black slug inching its way along the edge of the tiled verandah towards the flowerpot, leaving a shiny, silvery trail behind it. Puss raised her paw, ready to strike at the helpless maggot before her.

“No, Puss, no!” Manjooran shouted, distracting her before she could swipe at the little slug. It is best to leave the little creatures of God to their fate. You don’t need a cat to complicate matters for them. He got up and walked over to her, picked her up from the floor and brought her back to the chair, cradling her slender, little body on his lap. She did not seem to mind that the slug had escaped her paws, for she settled down into the warm contours of his lap and closed her eyes again. Just about a month ago, on a similar morning a little overcast with clouds, Puss had walked into the house and had looked up at Manjooran as he sat down to the breakfast Kamala was serving for him. She was just a little older than a kitten. The tawny, yellow stripes across the slim body, the green eyes that stared at him as if they would charm him with a mystical spell, they were enough to ensnare him into a strange kind of slavery, compliant to her smallest whims. A cat now owned him. That by itself was nothing, but with all else that was happening, Manjooran wondered at the bewildering changes wrought in him these past few months.

It was now a little more than a year since Sosha had chosen to leave him and go her own way. She was gone; of that he had no doubts now, though at times the starchy smell of freshly laundered clothes lying folded in the drawers of the wooden shelf, or the sight of a twig of curry leaves on the kitchen ledge, would be enough to twist and wring the heart within his chest. He shrugged, he smiled and then he tossed the newspaper to the ground and lounged back into his easy chair. He closed his eyes, so very like the small cat on his lap, and turned towards the brightening heavens above his head. His hands caressed the cat as she lay back too. The warmth of her body seeped in through his shirt. He tickled the soft down under Puss’ neck; it made her purr a little louder. His face was turned to the sun and he lay absolutely still, on this, the three hundred and eighty-fifth day of his life after Sosha’s early morning flight.

There had been prayers for her at the church on the first anniversary of her passing away. Friends and relatives had gathered; Alice had stood by his side, calming as a steady rock. Hari and the children had hovered around, silent, unobtrusive. It was getting to be tolerable. Not yet all right, no, it could never be all right; but not as impossibly bad as he had once feared. There was now a quiet sadness, a dull ache at the pit of his stomach, a bowing of the head to what had transpired. Sosha had gone, and that was that. He knew now he would have to live with this weighty fact. That was the irreducible truth of it all.

His eyelids seemed to be translucent, the sunlight bright and warm streaming through like a benediction. He breathed in a lungful of air and held it in his chest, feeling the goodness of the morning like a pleasant draught of wine charging through the blood in his veins.

There were other stirrings in him too, sometimes shaming him, appalling him, turning him guilty and suddenly tired. When Sosha had died, he had considered that to be the cessation of life as he had known it. He would now live out the rest of his days as the blank pages at the end of a book. The book had been read; the story was well written, loved by all who had glanced through its pages. One hardly looked at the suddenly white pages at the end of the volume, a technical necessity after the words had stopped flowing. Perhaps a few words scribbled here and there, a phone number, a date, the address of an acquaintance. The end after the end; the dribbling away of the moments, the hours, the days, the years until the final whitening of light filling your eyes. This was what he had assumed all this while.

Now he was not so sure that was how it would end. This new other person, now strolling all over his mind; unbidden, without warning, there she was, this stranger walking through his mind like a spirit come to bless and sanctify his soul. She had that habit, coming up on him unexpectedly, at moments when he least expected her. There she was now, just behind his eyelids. She was smiling at him, her lips crinkling at the corners, her face luminescent and gentle. And how the hell had that invasion been achieved, the occupation of his deserted beaches. He smiled wryly. She had touched him with a cool hand on his forehead some centuries ago, when he was at the worst and most debasing moment of his life. And now, almost at the end of the words on the pages of his life, how could he even begin to understand the slow spark she was stirring in him. She was doctor, friend, woman, confidante; imperious, funny, acerbic, teasing, intuitive, and all of this all at the same time together.

The first occasion he had really exchanged pleasantries with her had been some six months earlier, a Sunday afternoon at the supermarket, when he had gone to fetch the provisions for the kitchen. He enjoyed this small domestic routine and he wished he had had spent more time with Sosha in its infinite tedium. Sitting at the table that noon for lunch with the boring dishes of rice and vegetable before him, he had been suddenly consumed with the overwhelming urge to eat fish, now, right then, that very instant. Kamala giggled behind her hand and informed him that he had polished off the last of the fish crumb fry Alice had brought him the day before yesterday. There was no more fish left in the fridge. Manjooran had decreed he would have fish now, right then, that very instant, that he would not wait a second more, and that he would back the car out through the driveway and speed off to the supermarket and buy that damned fish, that '*naimeen*' he so very much enjoyed. That he would bring it back home and Kamala would turn it into the best fried fish he had ever eaten. That while she was did so, he would wait and stoke the fires of his appetite with a mug of beer.

And so, determined to fulfill this little desire, he had driven out to the mart. He had parked his car in the vacant space that had appeared so very miraculously before his very eyes as another shopper eased out his car. He had slammed the door shut and hurried into the brightly lit interior. He had walked past the front door and along the cash counters and through the rows of candy and confectionaries, towards the rear of the stores where the fish and meat counters stood. He had smiled at the salesgirl. He had maintained a nodding acquaintance with her over these past months. He asked her if she had in stock that particular fish for which he had developed a sudden craving. She had grinned back at him, waving her hand like a magician and voilà, the huge bank of deep-freeze compartments opened its piscine treasures up to him. Manjooran allowed himself a slow, contented smile.

That smile was still on his face when he heard someone call out his name. The woman was standing somewhere behind him and to his left and he had turned towards the voice. And then he saw her. She had a half smile on her face too, a little hesitant, a trifle querulous, even a little worried: what he would think of her, for calling out to him at this brightly lit public place, at the corner of the supermarket. The supermarket is, as we all know, a neutral place, where people can talk to each other in the safe knowledge that in the presence of the polite, well-mannered staff, only pleasant niceties are ever spoken within its commercial interiors, under its fluorescent lights. "Mr. Manjooran, isn't it?" she had asked, knowing full well that it was indeed he. How could she forget this tall, big bodied man with his proud forehead and a barrel chest, whom she had cradled in her arms like an infant, who had wept like a child in pain that first time she had seen him in the hospital, a worried Alice holding on to his arms, hardly herself able to check her tears. She had slapped

his face gently and called out to him before summoning the nurse and injecting the contents of a vial of tranquilizer into his veins.

It had taken but a few minutes for the tears to stop and the body slump into a tried stillness that brought a troubled peace to his brows, and indeed on Alice's face. Of course, all that he had needed then was a couple of days of utter quiet, when the drugs would dampen the burn of the sorrow coursing like a forest fire through his troubled mind. After that, when he would be discharged, it would be up to him and him alone, and perhaps to his family, to set right the wounds in his inner mind. She had had no comprehension then, of the sorrow that had eaten like an acid through his body and soul. The next day, however, Alice had told her the whole sad story when Rekha had returned to check on him. She had found it pleasant to chat with this worried daughter of his before she went on to her rounds of the hospital wards. After he had recovered, a few days later, she had been invited to a small get together at the Manjooran home, where friends and family members had met, a kind of home coming for the man now recovered and on his feet. It had been a nice, warm-hearted gathering of people close to the family. Though she had wondered then, why she had been included.

Manjooran had been taken aback at her call and indeed a little flustered. He turned and regarded the tall woman who had called out to him. He recognized her instantly, for she was a fine head of a woman. Really, he was a little embarrassed too. He had thought about her at times, this woman who had seen him at his worst humiliating moment, who had cared for him in a cool, professional manner and with whom he had exchanged but a few words. He recollected the coolness he had displayed when she had spoken with him some aeons ago. He had then just drowsily awoken to a world that had changed since he had drowned in a sea of uncontrollable emotions. When he had wept like a child. Or a mad man. After his discharge, when friends and family had gathered at home to celebrate his coming home as it were, in recognition of the fact he was now changed, that he had been baptized in fire and had come out singed but whole, he had noticed her as one of the guests. She had briefly smiled at him and asked him, like a doctor should, how he had been. That had been some months ago. After that small gathering at his home, this was the first time he was meeting her, at this brightly-lit, neutral supermarket of a place.

"Hello, doctor," he had mumbled, and smiled back, a little tenuously. The salesgirl had by then pulled out a muscular fish from the deep freeze and was holding it out for him to appraise. This is getting better and better, he thought to himself, feeling flustered and embarrassed, his head bobbing and turning from here to there and trying to keep both the fish and the good doctor in his line of vision. There was a tiny smile on the doctor's face as she asked him whether he liked his '*naimeen*' curried or fried. He had smiled back at her. "Fried", he replied. "So do I," she informed. She had had already made her purchases and was on her way out. She had called out "Take care," had waved her hand and then was gone.

Out of such trite, innocuous events are momentous beginnings made. In the malodorous environs of the fish shop, who could have known that a turning, tumbling jumble of events was hurtling his way, to taunt him, to tease him, to challenge him to change forever? As he walked back through the store and paid for it at the counter, with the fish packed and under his arm, as he strolled up to his parked car, only one thought had kept hammering at his temples like a persistent headache; why had he not been friendlier, more normal, more smilingly nicer with her. Why had he acted like a tongue-tied, boorish country boy? He had shaken his head wryly and driven back home, strange unaccustomed thoughts flying like a cloud of dried leaves through the dissonant vaults of his mind. He shook his head as if to clear his vision.

The fish, as Kamala had prepared it, was excellent as ever. The beer was perfectly chilled and the evening could not have been more flawless. Soshia had flickered in and out of his mind, as she was wont to, whenever he sat down at the dining table. This time, though, she was somewhere at the periphery of his circle of thoughts. Over and over again, the scene at the supermarket was playing out in his mind, like a mini-movie, the frames moving across the retina like a procession of sepia-tinted photographs that refused to go away. She, this new stranger, this woman who had seen him in his weakest moments, stayed with him some long moments that puzzling twilight, until the frames had started to fade, lost in the countless, everyday

preoccupations of a lonely man who did not comprehend the rigours of living the twenty-four hours of a single, endless day.

Alice had come visiting that evening, with more pickles, jams and the like, for she had this unassailable conviction that a lonely man would be happy if he were continually served with things to eat. As if the stomach was the doorway to an unsullied life of happiness where widowers had lost all memory. He could not deny her the satisfaction of that imagined belief; so he pretended to be thrilled with the condiments as she took them out one by one from her basket. Rohan and Mohan were with her and they made loud noises as each item was pulled out. It was not clear whether they were cheering him on to taste the goodies or whether they were reminding him that if he did not do the honours, they would always be willing to lend him a hand, or a mouth; in fact, a couple of voracious mouths. He hugged the assorted packets to his chest and pretended again that he would never let them go, that he would not give them even a morsel of the goodies he clutched in his hands. They had groaned in half delight, half despair. Then their fears turned to joy as he spread out the packets, took one out and handed them the rest for their enjoyment. Alice chided them and warned them not to devour the whole thing by themselves, to leave most of it for their grandfather.

“I saw Dr. Kurien in the supermarket today, Mol. When I was buying fish. She recognized me and we talked for a while.” Talked for while? How long was a while? When all he had done was mumble a few words he could hardly remember now? He waited and watched, wordlessly, wondering what she would say, as she put away the snacks into empty tins and bottles.

“That’s nice. I hope you talked to her politely. You know, Papa, you can be quite gruff at times! She virtually saved your life!”

“Saved my life, my foot!” He was at his scornful best, for he would not accept the truth of what he had known. He must make a joke of his rudderless, broken-winged tailspin into despair. Then he changed tack: it does not hurt to be graceful. “All right, I accept, she did me a good deed. I guess I should be grateful.”

Alice turned to him and smiled. He knew she was wondering at this gentler face of her father. He knew too that she truly loved this new father who was surely evolving before her very eyes. Somewhere in her mind, he knew she was asking the question: did it require a death in the family, the death of a wise and wonderfully gentle woman, for her father to turn kind-hearted? Surely, they should not have lost two whole years of their lives together as a family.

Puss turned on his stomach; Manjooran held her down gently and she was content to stay on and purr louder than ever.

The second time he had met her, things were more quirky and out-of-joint than he would have imagined possible. It could not have been more than a month or two after the episode at the supermarket. It was late evening and Manjooran’s next-door neighbour, Koya, the carefree widower, had invited him out for dinner at the Sheraton on the beachfront. It would be only the two of them, these two gray-haired men brought together by the single commonality in their separate lives, the departure of their wives in mid-flight. There was an attempt at jollity, a false gaiety that made them laugh aloud at the feeble jokes of each other. For a few moments that evening, before he had accepted the invitation of dinner, he had wondered what the hell he was doing. He was on just nodding terms with Koya; of course, the man had been kind and full of concern after Sosha’s death when he was trying to find his feet on the ground beneath him. Well, what did it matter anyway, he had nothing better to do, and who knows, this parley over the wet glasses may make them better friends than they had ever been. Koya might even give him a few hints on how to live the single life with single-minded joy.

Sitting in a corner of the room, the bright overhead lights glaring brazenly at them, they had just poured out the mandatory glass of Scotch, when Manjooran had noticed the stately figure of Dr. Rekha Kurien, entering the dining hall, accompanied by a couple he did not recognize. It was clear they were all friends and that the couple had invited her out for dinner. In their present circumstances, he found it coincidentally similar. Friends who thought that single persons demanded to be taken out for dinner at five-star hotels. Perhaps true friends thought that way. On the other hand, maybe true friends did understand that dinner, and a full

stomach, was no remedy for the hunger of the heart. But that truth notwithstanding, only true friends would, never defeated, ply them endlessly with food and all manner of inconsequential temptations.

At that time, he had had no comprehension of the kind of life Rekha had gone through. He knew only that she was unmarried, preferring to spend the rest of her life in the inaccessible splendour of a stately spinster. Not that it detracted from her grace and civility. On the contrary, it elevated her onto a pedestal that made her almost, but not quite, unapproachable. A cold marble beauty never failing to inspire wonder and awe, a coolness that seemed to say, hands off, I need no one. One dare approach me only at the risk of being rebuffed. But surely, that was not correct. For both at the hospital, and later at his place for the home-coming party, she had been friendly and caring. At the supermarket, it was she who had called out to him, had been openly charming, while he had been tongue-tied and uncomfortable. So why did he think she was distant and unapproachable?

He watched from his corner of the room as she walked across to their reserved table and sat down with a rustle of silk, the appreciative glances of people around her. She was a handsome woman, of that there was no doubt; the proof was in the glances of the men who occupied the same space over which she held sway. Certainly, she could not be described as beautiful or pretty or even charming. She invoked some form of respect that did not tolerate any close contact or familiarity. Should he go up and make himself known to her? Should he? Indeed, this was the challenge: would he have the gumption to walk up to her and introduce himself again, this time with more civility and less of the awkwardness he had conspicuously displayed the last time they met. That question took some time shaping itself into a hard boulder in his mind, even as Koya was pouring out a second drink for him and urging him to bottoms up before they ordered the food.

For a moment he was lost in thought and scarcely heard Koya. Then he turned and said, and said without a thought for the consequences of his words, without thinking through what he intended to do, and after all what was there for him to worry about, he was his own man and he could do exactly what he wanted to, "That woman who is sitting at the third table towards your right. You know, she is the doctor who treated me when I was in hospital after Sosha's death. I think I'll walk across over there and talk to her for a bit. You know, it would not be polite to ignore her." That last was the justification he had to utter, the reason he had to go over and talk to her. Now why did he need to explain that, he wondered, to state to Koya that he was just being courteous and polite. He could go ahead and do exactly what he wanted.

Koya glanced up from his glass and nodded; "Sure go ahead, in the meanwhile I'm ordering dinner. And don't worry, I'll get you that fried fish you wanted."

And so he had stood up and walked across the room, swerving between the tables and chairs, and watching the electric lights bouncing off the bones of her shoulder as she faced away from him, and finally standing behind her chair and seeing the querulous looks on the faces of the couple at the table. They had noticed him while he was approaching and had wondered why he was standing behind Rekha, closer than he should have, had he been a stranger. Seeing their faces staring above her head at someone behind her, Rekha had turned around too, and had seen once again the face of the man who stood tall and imposing, framed in the light of the chandelier hanging straight above his head.

"Hello, Dr. Rekha, what a pleasant surprise to see you here." The words had sprung up quickly and were out of his mouth and he wondered how she would respond to this sudden approach from her blind side, from behind her, maybe even startling her at this unexpected intrusion. But she had not been flustered at all, she had not batted an eyelid; she was calm and collected, oblivious to the fact that this impulsive introduction on the floor of the dining hall was, indeed, a breach of protocol. Especially when she was with her friends who would not have wanted to be disturbed. But she was pleasant and cordial.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Manjooran, and how are you? It's a small world: we seem to be bumping into each other at the most unexpected of places."

And then he had stood there for a few minutes and had chatted with her. The couple she was with insisted he should sit down with them. This he had politely and firmly refused. He pointed out Koya at the other end of the room, that he had come with him for dinner and that, tempting though the invitation was, he could not, would not, abandon a friend who was even now waiting for him back at their table. And then he had stood there for a few long minutes, looming large over her, casting his shadow on her face, chattering away as if he had known her for all these years, the single shot of whiskey warming his stomach. And through all that joviality, wondering if, in fact, certain that, he was making a fool of himself.

Dr. Rekha too had enquired whether he would like to sit down, but he had refused again and had stood on one leg and then on the other, talking of something, of anything, of all things, though for the life of him he could not recollect, when later he had tried to, what he had spoken. Perhaps of how well he was now, how he kept himself busy throughout the day, how Alice looked after him, how his grandchildren kept him on his toes and amused him in the evenings with their childish pranks and how he found happiness in most things he did. Dr. Rekha's response too had seemed friendly and warm; she had not given the impression of being taken by surprise on the floor of the dining room of the hotel. She had seemed to be interested in conversing with him and had made all the right responses and had even smiled at him as he mentioned Rohan and Mohan and Alice, their mother.

It was an awkward arrangement for a social conversation. He stood looming over her, almost behind her. She was sitting and turning around in her chair to look back and up at him. The mystified couple at the same table was staring too, but was almost completely excluded from the conversation. The bright overhead lights cast shadows on their faces and hid expressions and moods. The conversation could not have gone on for long. He was soon exhausted, emptied of interesting words and clever phrases as the odd little exchange ran itself out.

Then he bid her a quick farewell and was walking back to the table where Koya, well into his third glass, was waiting for him. Suddenly light-headed, he downed the glass extended to him. Throughout dinner, he was tempted to glance back at her, hoping she too was turning back to look at him. But she and her friends had not tarried over dinner; they left early. Koya and he took time over their fish and vegetables in a room where things were suddenly bereft of delight.

Late in the night, the cheerful Koya had dropped him off at his home. Undressing slowly, he had slipped in between the sheets of his bed. In minutes, he found himself slowly drifting off to sleep. At that transient moment between wakefulness and sleep, he was, for a moment, nonplussed as images of the handsome doctor flitted through his mind. Too, somewhere in the background, he dimly saw unclear negative-like images of Sosha, fluttering up from the bottom of some deep sea, flapping around like small, dark-coloured birds in the evening sky. He shook his head to free himself from bewildering thoughts, for he was now confused. What had he done that evening; had he breached an iron wall of convention, had he been too forward in his conduct. Perhaps he should have kept sitting in the corner of the hall that evening. He should not have bothered to walk up to her. He was sure now he had acted like a fool. That train of thought did not go on much longer. The pegs of whiskey he had consumed were an aid to quick sleep and he found himself falling into a dark cavern where all thought and images were blanked out.

Manjooran looked up from his reverie and found the little cat on his belly turning around and yawning into his face. There was the odour of milk and something harsher in her breath and Manjooran smiled back at the cat. Keep sitting, Puss, keep sitting for a few minutes more and then I'll let you go. Let me think about that third time when I encountered her, or rather, when she encountered me. In the graveyard, at the foot of Sosha's tombstone. What a meeting that was, and what a lot of images and thoughts had crowded into his mind then.

Manjooran recalled it was five in the evening that day and he had been compelled by a force that he knew nothing of, to go for a drive far away from the bustle of the city, to sit and think about this and that. And

what better place could there be for contemplation than the quiet, ear-aching stillness of the cemetery. So he had driven himself out of the city and down to the foot of the small lane next to the cathedral where he had parked the car. Then he had walked down the small pathway leading to the chapel at the corner of the vast acreage to the rear. There the quiet tombstones were telling their own stories, if only one would stop and listen. Sometimes one doesn't know why a communion with the inner self becomes an imperative. It is a sudden shout in the heart. Who can stop a man from entering the gates of his own private purgatory, to sit still and let the mind flow where it will. It was a dark and somber moment and the memories of words once spoken long ago, actions knowingly and unknowingly taken, were casting their long and menacing shadows across the stillness of his mind. He had finally walked up to the simple slab of marble that lay like a quiet statement, full of grace and poignant sadness, and had sat down in the grass at the foot of the stone.

The white headstone had but a few words engraved: 'Here lies beloved Sosha, still living in our hearts.' Sosha, my dear, dear Sosha, you flew away before my wings could grow. I still stand rooted while you roam the skies. You left me here to mourn for you, for myself.

There was an uncomfortable weight in his chest and he let out a huge sigh. He closed his eyes and he felt the need, the want, to lie down on the grass at her feet and look at the sky overhead. So he knelt down and then folded his body sideways and lay down, knees curled up, his arms clutching his body. There were but a few white clouds overhead in a sky that was blue, much bluer than he had seen it for a long time. The leafy trees at the margins of the graveyard all round, stood as gentle sentinels guarding the ones who lay there, just below the skin of the earth. He knew he would not cry, for the sharpness of the grief had by now eased. It was more than ten months since that early morning when a part of him had died and he had been left all alone, very, very alone. Until he had found the strength to pick up the pieces, with help from Alice, and resume as best as he could, the sorry little life that it was now his kismet to live out. So he knew he would not cry, for surely, that was not what Sosha would have him do. Surely, she would not stand the sight of him weeping out his heart like a small child who had lost his toy. No, that would not do. So he would not cry, though he would have, could have. So he turned his body again and lay flat on the grass spread like a carpet all around. He lay eyes closed, mind filled with heaving thoughts that swayed and ebbed around him like an ocean tide.

That she was close to him, just six feet under the ground, was a thought that never failed to astonish him. How could that be and he not feel her in his arms, not feel her presence around him, not recognize her in his nostrils, the singular scent of her body after her morning bath. Try as he might, he could not now evoke in his memory, the whole, living, three-dimensional, palpable presence of the woman he had loved for all the years they had spent together. Was it really forty years? It didn't seem that long now. He lay on the grass and looked up at the sky. Forty years was more than his suddenly sluggish mind could comprehend; it had not seemed even a third of that.

The distant sound of an approaching car disturbed his mood and made him frown. Of course, there must be others too like him, who would come over to ponder, not so much about the mystery of life, but of the mystery of death, the extinguishing of the breath in one's lungs, a window suddenly shuttered.

The purr of the car engine had shattered his peace and pensive solitude. So he had to sit up and cross his legs under him. He refused to get up onto his feet, for surely he had the right to sit at his Sosha's grave and think about things, to observe the images that passed over his eyes just under his eyelids, to shake his head over memories that none but he had any comprehension of. So he had sat just that way, as the white clouds passed over his head and the cool evening breeze blew, ruffling his pepper-and-salt hair and the ghosts of the past flitted and floated within the vault of empty spaces in his mind. The scrape of sandals nearby distracted him again and he wondered who it was that had come by to scatter his thoughts. He peered out from half closed eyelids and saw the cream-coloured sari someone was wearing, someone who was too close for comfort, who

was intruding into his small circle of isolation. Now who the hell is that, he wondered, crinkling his forehead in irritation.

His eyes widened, in surprise, even consternation, as he noticed the tall woman, eyeing him in surprise, with intense curiosity showing clearly on her face. It was she again, the handsome Dr. Kurien, and for whatever purpose she had come here at this time, it was quite unsettling to find her now among the tombstones. There was something even a little macabre in this sudden rendezvous in the midst of the dead. So he had stood up, a little painfully, the joints of his knees creaking in discomfort and he had tenuously smiled at her.

“Fancy meeting you here, of all places, Dr. Kurien. How come you are here?” His voice was low and indistinct.

“For the same reason you are here too, Mr. Manjooran. The dead have a way of calling out to you, if you have the patience to listen.”

She did not ask him about that special gravestone, at the feet of which he had been lying. He saw her eyes as she read the words written on the marble stone. She seemed to pause, and then was a little embarrassed. “I am sorry, I seem to have disturbed you in your reveries. I won’t trouble you any further.”

And then, she was turning away. He called out to her. “No, no, that’s all right, doctor, I was just about to get up and leave myself.”

And then everything seemed to be all right and the awkwardness between them was gone and they were smiling at each other. And Manjooran found the small audacity to ask her if she would like to sit under the trees on the margins of the cemetery. There, stone slabs served the purpose of benches and the shade of the overhanging branches of trees was inviting and peaceful.

Yes, she would like to. He was happy too that she had agreed to sit there for a while. As they walked over, he wondered if she had someone well loved here, lying beneath the stones in the graveyard.

“Yes, someone I knew once very well,” she said, “he was special and loved me as his own daughter. But that’s a story I shall not bother you with. I come here at times when I need to commune with myself and think about the foolish things I have done. Sometimes, I need to be with myself and myself alone.” Was there a warning somewhere in those words, he wondered, was she telling him that she would like to be alone. “I am sorry, Dr. Kurien, if you would like to be alone, I won’t intrude.” “No, no, Mr. Manjooran, its always nice to meet you; we do seem to keep stumbling into each other, I know, but I really would not mind sitting with you over there, under the trees.”

And so it seemed to be the most natural thing in the world to walk over to the benches and sit there, not too close to each other, but as close as propriety, the grave propriety of a cemetery, would permit. They had smiled again at each other and then it was easy. Yes, talking was easy and the words came out, fast and flowing and they did not stop. Manjooran felt the simple joy of release, the release for the first time, the first time after his sudden freedom from the chores that matrimony had placed some forty years ago upon his shoulders, the release of thoughts kept within himself all these days and weeks and months. And the lady sitting beside him was listening with a patient, understanding ear. There was some ironic humour and some deeply felt words and the sudden clouding of his eyes and the halting of speech and the wry recovery from the pain inside and the flow that kept coming and coming from some well of feeling and emotion deep inside and he was telling her things he had never dreamed he would tell another, not even his children, not even Alice. Dr. Rekha Kurien, suddenly turned confessor and confidante, friend and ally, listened to him and heard him out as he spoke of his Sosha and her gentle life and the love they had shared and the wonder of it all as the years passed and how that love became stronger, more solid than the rocks in the mountains, how he had felt the sharp keenness of the knife jabbed into his heart that cold and friendless night when she had chosen to leave him for ever, and how he had survived in a deathlike stasis that stole all mind and emotion and thought from him, how he had fallen into the deep, dark, lonely pit where only the most desperate would

go and how she, the good doctor, had pulled him out and brought him back to the light, where under the ever present shadow of memories, it was now his lot to live out the rest of his life.

He spoke too of his old discord with Alice that had festered in his mind, and in Sosha's mind too, for the two years they had been estranged. He spoke of his endless guilt that the tensions of that estrangement may have contributed to the sudden passing away of his beloved wife. He cursed himself for the time wasted in their reconciliation and he cursed himself for the pride that had kept him from embracing his newfound son-in-law, about his constant worries that the wounds he had caused him would never really heal, despite the apology he had rendered for crimes committed. He spoke of the brooding he would often succumb to, his thoughts about his son who was there and never there, his worries about the distant and cold daughter in a foreign land. And as he spoke, he wondered too at his suddenly trusting self, and of why he was unburdening himself to this woman, this friendly wraith in the darkening gloom of the graveyard who listened with compassion shining in her eyes.

It was a long monologue that Manjooran had needed to speak out for some months now, only that he did not know he had to speak those words, only that, though there would have been many who would have perhaps heard him out, there was none who would listen as Rekha did. She did not interrupt, but listened without speaking, listened as long as he talked. With him she felt the pain he had known then in those first days, the pain that was still a shadow tugging at his feet as he walked through the lonely days of his life. He was spent by the time he had finished, but satisfied too, replete with a cleansing that had been wanted, desired, demanded for all these days, the need of which he had not comprehended till today. By then it was getting dark and he slowly, painfully got up from the bench and walked with this newfound friend, who now walked in step with him. She did not question or criticize; she walked quietly too, but with a full and deep silence that spoke more than it concealed. They led each other to their cars lying at the gates of the cemetery and as the first stars came out, they went on their separate ways, not with words of farewell or goodbye, but with the unsaid promise of meeting again, sometime in the near future, sometime soon.

Puss got off Manjooran's stomach and lightly jumped to the ground. This time there was no restraining hand to hold her back, for Manjooran was asleep, drifting in the mellifluous mood of the memories flowing like a gentle river through him. It was a bright sunlit morning. The newspaper fallen from his fingers lay on the ground and Puss played quietly with its tattered edges, as they fluttered in the breeze. Though Manjooran had woken up just about an hour ago, the moods he had gone through had brought him to such a clement turn in the flow of his memories, that it was easy to succumb to the tempting draw of sleep again. He dreamed of clouds floating in the clear blue sky, of trees swaying in the breeze, of a tabernacle at the foothills of a huge mountain and the sound of chanting of hymns in the air all around. He was never as close to bliss as he was then.

In another part of the city, Rekha had just woken up after a restless night. She had spent many hours that night trying to find sleep, but sleep would not come, preferring to flit about like a spirit around her head, refusing to settle down. Unbidden, the memories of her last meeting with Manjooran flooded her thoughts. His words had moved her in a manner she had not thought possible. She had, in the years spent at work in the hospital, seen life and death in all its forms, its bitter moods often overwhelming the sweet. Her own encounters with a malevolent fate that had chosen deliberately to cross swords with her, had turned her cynical about the power of memories. Till today, two decades after the events that had split open the domestic happiness she had rejoiced in for such a short time, after she had come to terms with the knowledge that men could be such bastards when it came to dealing with women more so when the parties involved are wives and husbands, after she had reconciled herself to the fact that she would never ever know again the joy and ecstasy that once had been so fleetingly hers to enjoy, till today, she had thought she had had a clear handle on emotions that move the human soul. She herself, she well understood, was a case in example. But now she needed to think about it all over again. Manjooran's simple eloquence made her want to shed the crust of cynicism she had acquired these past years.

Indeed, she had seen it all, and it had taken superhuman effort on her part not to let herself be drowned in a wave of self-pity and loathing that would surely have ruined her very perception of life. On the contrary, each slap of fate had made her stronger, harder, tougher. As time passed, she had known that to be bitter was more weakness than strength. She had vowed she would not rant or rave. But she would certainly not let a vicious God determine how happy or sad she should be. So, despite the harsh personal experiences that would have, but for her strong mental propensities, turned her into a sour, cynical, middle-aged woman, she had taught herself to retain her humanity, to nurture her deep understanding of the trials that people go through, and not let go of the compassion she knew she possessed in abundance.

Yet, for all those years of seeing life in its variety, of having seen the good and the seamy lie cheek by jowl, as peas in a pod, Manjooran's confessional, as he had poured out his heart to her that evening at the sleepy, little cemetery, had moved her in a way she found impossible to believe. Not that his story was unusual in the many-paged compendium of human experience, for surely there have been other men who had lost their wives while sleeping in their beds, other fathers alienated from daughters, other proud old men brought to their knees by personal tragedy.

What was it that was different, she struggled to understand, what was so special about this troubled man struggling to find happiness in the void where he had been thrown, a man whose very foundation had fallen away from under him, as he lay asleep in his bed, deep in the darkness of an ordinary night. His bed was the safest place he knew in the world. He had partaken of the ecstasies of that safe haven, without knowing how fleeting its comforts could be, ignorant of the transience of it all. And then, suddenly in the course of one single night, there was the stark emptiness of the mattress on the bed next to him. The question of Manjooran was getting to be clearer to her now, even though she had known the bare facts as revealed to her by Alice in the hospital ward, where the shattered man had climbed out of the deep abyss into which he had fallen. She knew that Manjooran now comprehended his condition. He now knew that he had not fully understood, appreciated, or given thanks for, the depth and worth of the immeasurable love that Sosha had had for him. He had taken for granted, as an immutable truth, that she would be there for him, with him, as a part of him, forever. His sin was not that he had not loved her as much as he should have, but that he had loved her less than he had acknowledged to himself. He had not known that the most precious love in the world, is all that more precious because it is in the grip of the decay that all flesh is subject to. Its a simple lesson that cries out to be comprehended, but one that refuses to be easily understood; a lesson required to be studied word for word, clause by clause, until all what it means is inscribed within the walls of the heart. Yes, Rekha now knew, Manjooran's sin was he had thought it would last forever. Well, if not forever, at least until he was there, so long as he walked the face of the earth. The possibility of Sosha dying before he did, had never ever really struck him. It was his destiny to go first, of that he had been ever so certain. Rekha was sure he had but a vague and fuzzy comprehension of what would have happened thereafter. Perhaps, Alice would have taken Sosha in, or perhaps George, in faraway Mumbai.

Rekha now understood what really distinguished this proud old man who had wept out his sorrow in her presence was just exactly that: that he had wept out his sorrow before her astonished eyes. That he had not minded the tears brimming over in his eyes as he told his story. No idiot's tale this; no sound and fury signifying nothing. This was the real thing; sorrow recollected in troubled reality. But why her? Why did he seek to find in her the right sympathetic ear for his outpourings? She had to think this out.

Daddy, her beloved Brigadier, was lying among the tombstones, in his own special place under the neem trees, the marble now stained dark with moss and lichen. She had placed her bunch of flowers on the stone and stood in silent prayer for a man who had loved her as a father should, when her own father had become an unrecognizable stranger. In a somber mood, prayers over, she had raised her eyes and seen Manjooran, a little away, lying on the grass, gazing up at the sky. It was a curious sight and she was intrigued. Surely, he had not sought her out in this chance meeting amidst the headstones and the tombs. Had it been a coincidence that made her visit the graveyard that day? and let him pour out his heart? But surely, she too

had been eager to talk to him, wondering why he was all alone in this quiet corner of the graveyard, though she had instinctively known why. But what was quite surprising to her was this gentle prompting within her, propelling her towards him. And letting him talk to her. And she had listened, first with growing curiosity and then with a deep compassion that filled her heart and turned her eyes moist.

She had mulled over it so much in the course of the next day that she turned pensive and quiet and even her colleagues at the hospital noticed and wondered why. They did not ask her, for she had a kind of quiet watchfulness that seemed to say, keep off, I'm thinking. They knew well by now that she was her own person and had her own reasons for her conduct. And surely she was not required to explain why she behaved in a certain fashion. She found it strange that her mind played and replayed the conversation over and over again. She saw before her very eyes, as it were, the face of the handsome, gray-haired man, lined with sorrow, tears pouring down the furrowed cheeks. But yet there had been no pathetic beating of the chest, no maudlin sentiments. It was dignified, even his tears were graceful and restrained and most of all, it was the truth, the whole truth, the naked, troubled truth. He spoke through the anguish of his words, the wetness of his eyes and the strength of his character. In the days and the nights that followed, he seemed to walk with her like a gentle spirit, who spoke to her in words and gestures that remained with her for long, even when she forced her mind to forget or be diverted by other simpler and mundane memories.

So it was surprising that, one Saturday evening, not more than a week after the incident at the cemetery, she saw him again. It was a coincidence that was beyond normal probability. It was evening and the place was the fish counter at the super market again. Their mutual interest in fish was indeed getting to be fishy, she smilingly mused to herself. But this time there was a growing sense of a satisfaction in her: how good it was to meet him again, without appearing to be too formal, or too sensitive, as the two previous meetings had been.

“What a coincidence,” he said, “even the fish must be surprised!” She was glad to notice that he was cheerful now, and she smiled back and ad-libbed, in one of her foolish repartees, “At least we are not fishing in troubled waters.” He laughed with more gaiety than the remark merited, but she was glad he did so. It gave them both a feeling of amused contentment. And the excuse to continue with the conversation. Both made their purchases, with Rekha taking care not to bargain too much, fearing it would reveal to Manjooran a certain avoidable display of parsimony. And with the packets neatly packed away in newspapers and tucked into plastic bags, they moved on to the restaurant, where it was the most natural thing to order coffee and biscuits. It was six in the evening and not a bad time for a leisurely cuppa. More, it was also another opportunity to talk to each other, in what was certainly becoming a pleasant exercise for both of them.

“I guess I shouldn't have burdened you with morbid tales of my personal sorrows that day: it was certainly not my intention to do so.” There were some signs of an acute embarrassment he was trying hard to conceal.

Rekha looked away. “Of course not, I was just a friendly ear for you to pour your thoughts into. And don't worry about that, I am glad I was there to listen.”

She smiled back at him and everything was all right. There was a pause that threatened to linger on too long, but the waiter interrupted the silence with the clatter of cups and plates. And then, over the coffee and the biscuits, the conversation went on. It was natural and spontaneous and there was the right chicory blend of humour and concern. They talked of his children and the life that he was living now, full of memories and expectant wonder about where the rest of his days were leading to.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she realized that theirs was an unequal relationship. He had unburdened his very soul to her. She knew all that was there to know; his worries and anxieties had been laid bare. But on the other hand, there was nothing of her own private self she had exposed to him. Not that there was any reason for her to do so, not that she was particularly compelled to bare her heart to him. But the thought bothered her, though she knew it did so unnecessarily. If this relationship was to go on, and there was no reason for it to move beyond the present level of pleasant familiarity into something more, then she may be,

just may be, able to keep going on as it was now. But she knew too in her heart it could not be so. There would be inevitable questions about her, about her life, her family, the very nature of her singular singleness. She was sure it was coming, and she was not sure how she would confront the questions Manjooran would certainly raise.

But that was not to be at this moment. That would come later. For now, he asked her about her work at the hospital, her colleagues, her daily schedule, the agonies and sufferings of her many patients. There was a tacit understanding on his part that at the present level of their acquaintance, he would not probe deeper than the permitted degree of curiosity. She could feel him pausing and veering away whenever the conversation seemed to be getting too personal. Perhaps Alice had told him she was not married. It had come out in some conversation when Alice was waiting it out at the hospital when Manjooran had been admitted to her ward. It was he who always pulled away when he felt it turning uncomfortably close. And that was nice, she thought to herself. It revealed the sensitivity of a man who knew his fences, self-imposed restraints to polite conversation between two adults, who had just come to know each other.

And so she spoke to him of her everyday mornings, how she got ready for office and the drive in her old Padmini car to the hospital, how she sat down at her chair and allowed the nurse to summon the first patient in. They came in all sizes and shapes, from all financial and social backgrounds, from all castes and communities. Disease struck them all, waiting for no clearances or genetic passwords before entering the body and wreaking ravage in their bodies. Disease was a great leveler, one that wore a face very similar to his elder brother, the grim-faced reaper. Sure, a few would be passed on to the graver sibling, despite all the efforts she made to stop him in his tracks. But there were many whom she would pull back into the world of the living and the blessed.

She spoke of the thrill and the exultation she would feel as she outwitted the disease that had been, but a few days earlier, torturing the body of some little, beautiful girl or a poor, old woman. It was her victory over a malevolent God whose many faces she knew so very well. And she notched up each of her victories one by one, savouring in the delight of them. Of course, she did not tell Manjooran of her own personal ongoing battle with the good Lord and how she had won many a battle for herself, destroying the all powerful, omnipotent image He had cultivated all this while. Only she knew how she had managed to outwit Him many a time, with courage and teeth-crunching grit. This was her way of thumbing her nose at the Omnipotent One Who had ruined her life and her rightful claim to happiness, all in the space of a few seconds a couple of decades ago. She had more scores to settle, but that was between she and Him, wasn't it? Why bring this good man into the combat and scare him away with the ferocity of her rage. Surely, he had his own demons to contend with.

And so she skirted the subject and blotted out the personal details of her life, giving him only the shining image of herself, the antiseptic, clean and whitewashed self, nice and sweet smelling, gentle and pleasant. She spoke of her home not far from the hospital and Daniel, her man Friday, who had cared for her all these many years. She spoke of the need to expand the facilities of the hospital, of bringing in finances to improve the quality of medical care in the hospital. She spoke too of the gross carelessness of the government and the unabashed way in which officials and staff misused the system, at the cost of the poor patient, for their own aggrandizement. She spoke too of the nexus between doctors and the medical companies and diagnostic clinics, of the disgust she felt as corruption ate into the innards of the medical structure. But she had grown to accept them all as inevitable parts of a system that functioned only because of the inner goodness of a few, a few good men and women, who would not allow it to degenerate completely. It was not the system that sustained itself; it was a few good people that kept it going.

And Manjooran sat before her and heard her as she spoke, his mind filling with a growing admiration for this woman who seemed to be all there, all glowing inside, all determined and courageous, all full of a noble resolve to set the world right, to right the wrongs, to tilt at the dragons that growled and bared their teeth at

her. And yet, in the balance, coming out more or less victorious in the end. In the life that it was his to lead, he had not met many women who had come shining through this way. Sure he knew the domesticated women who flitted about in social circles, the Annammas and the Lizakutties and the Philomenas and the Mariammas, the good housewives of his colleagues or friends, responsible women for whom the family was everything, who would give their right arm to see their children did not come to any harm, to see them prosper and grow in the big, bad world outside. Sure, there were the usual domestic intrigues, the whispers behind the back, the bad talk and the poisonous rumours, so very characteristic of Christian family life in Kerala. He knew that and had loved his Sosha, his precious little Sosha, for steering away from machinations and intrigues. He knew too of career women who had been at the periphery of his world when he had been working, women stenographers or clerks, maybe even a low level management trainee or an Assistant Manager, who would come to him with the papers he had to sign, with whom he would hardly exchange a couple of words. They had all seemed so remote from the real world, the living, boisterous, everyday world, the hard-won domain of men, the male of the species.

He knew too of women like his Alice, who had their own space in his ken, who wished to keep themselves busy by taking on a job, not so much to supplement the family income, but to find some measure of fulfillment. And he knew too of ones like Teresa, who spent their lives in the pursuit of knowledge, although he really did not have a clue as to what they did with all that knowledge they so painstakingly acquired. And so this woman, this articulate, and perhaps even hardheaded, woman, who talked to him as his equal in the dealings of the world, was a revelation he found fascinating. Could a woman be actually fashioned in such a manner, he wondered, and if so, why had he not come across them within the circumference of his life?

As he watched her speak, as he watched her lips move in the articulation of her thoughts about her hospital and the ways of the world of medicine, as he saw the emotions and feelings that moved as a cloud over her face, reflecting inquisitiveness, empathy, disgust, and even anger, he knew this was a woman very much her own person. She was not someone's wife parroting her husband's views to the social circle around. She was not someone's dutiful daughter standing in the shadow of her father and nodding her head to what he was saying. She was not even a mere working woman who took to the profession because she wanted the money and the social status to tell the world that there, she had breached a man's universe and was now an earning member of the family. What she really was, was a woman who had found the perfect way to stand alongside a man and not feel she was standing a step behind. This woman was all woman; she was no inferior, no subordinate of lesser standing grown from Adam's rib. She stood as his equal and she would give no quarter to protect her place in a man's world that she had, with such ferocity, clawed her way into. And not that she was all ferocity alone, for in the words she spoke, Manjooran had seen compassion and loving and a sense of the wondrous responsibility it was her joy to fulfill, the deep commitment she felt in the fulfillment of her destiny.

And yet he was reluctant to go beyond the present circumference of their growing acquaintanceship, when the boundaries of personal friendship were just being opened up to each other. Sure, he had revealed himself in an awkward manner that evening under the quiet murmur of the trees at the cemetery. Still, he did not find this the right moment to ask her about herself, her family, the little intimate details which when known, would turn the quality of the relationship from one of personal affability, to a close kindness, an erasing of reservations and reticence, an opening of inner veils and curtains that brought hearts and minds close to each other. Sure, he remembered Alice telling him the doctor was single; and his daughter had, with her usual maturity, not probed further. He now wished she had had, for it is easier for a woman to pierce the shield of anonymity of another woman, without causing ruffled feathers in their own mutual relationship. Doesn't matter, he said to himself, there will come a time, sure enough it will. He was surprised for a moment, why he thought that way.

He noticed too a certain sense of watchfulness in Rekha's expression, an appraisal, as it were, a weighing of the situation, a mental probing of the potential of the moment, the quizzical wonderment of the possibilities hidden in the present. He wondered what this reflective pause meant, a hiatus that seemed to be growing even as they spoke. He shook his head and paid attention to the question she was asking him.

“And, how do you spend your evenings?” She wondered if the question would be a little painful, but then realized it would not, now that he had revealed all that had been pent up within in the outpourings of that last evening. Yet, she still noted a somberness that fell across his face as he replied.

“You know, how to spend the time at my disposal, is the one single, persistent thought in my mind, every moment of the day. Only now, after about a year of this kind of existence, am I coming to learn how to handle the tedium of it, the endlessness of it, and believe me, the terror of it.”

She nodded. No words were necessary. She waited for him to continue.

“Well, as far as possible, you try not to let your mind float into the past. You learn to focus on the task at hand. When you brush your teeth, you are brushing your teeth in your mind too, not just moving your brush in a circular motion across your teeth. All your senses are focused on the task at hand. You count the hundred times the bristles have to brush against the incisors and the molars.”

He counted the brush strokes for he did not want to be thinking of the way Sosha would have squeezed the toothpaste out on to the brush and the way she would stand around and chatter about the vegetables in the market and the price of sugar. Or when she would come up to him from behind and wordlessly throw her arms around his chest, as he tried to gargle through the froth in his mouth that she should wait till he was through.

“When you read your newspapers, you read every letter, every word and let the meaning of each one of them sink in, without allowing a single stray thought to rustle through your mind. You can say my knowledge of current affairs is better than any young aspirant for the Civil Services exam!”

This way he could be sure he would not think of the cup of tea she would have brought out to him, just the way he wanted it, the temperature just so, the taste faultless. And wondering if she would stop chattering so he could look at the headlines or read the editorial. Keep talking Sosha, I wish you were still talking, interfering in my reading, making me frown at your prattle.

“Sometimes I write my letters to Teresa and George, or once in a while, on their birthdays or anniversaries, talk to them long distance. Or my usual once-a-day conversation with Alice and Hari. Buying little trinkets for the twins. And reading: something I had not been doing for years now. I am a member of most of the libraries and I enjoy reading some of the old classics, biographies and so on.”

Things he had not done, for he did not need to. Every letter, every card, every telephone call; these were tasks delegated to Sosha. She missed not one of them. He did not read books, for Sosha was all he had had to read. She gave him all the news he had ever wanted to know. She was all the books he had ever wanted to read.

“And thus the day passes, from tea to breakfast to lunch to tea to dinner. The evenings are difficult and the hours before sleep often take me down to some black cavern from where I rise with much effort. But sleep is blessed. My memories are good, of the days I spent in my youth and in my middle age, and even to the last days with Sosha. And thus I live from day to day.”

Rekha watched, her face reflecting the compassion she felt for this man. How could one not feel for him, having heard his story from his own lips, having known the grief and sorrow he had felt. It so very close to the anguish she had herself gone through. And yet so different. Manjooran’s memories were all good, except the end when Sosha had bid goodbye. And the two years of estrangement from his daughter. Everything else for him seemed to be ablaze in a golden light. But hers were at the other end of the scale: all dark and clanging, all full of shadows and bruises, fogging the mind and leaving her moody and bemused for days on end. She had to have an iron will when these moods overcame her, though by now, in the haze of the last two decades, the terrible memories were fading and the good moments were slowly outnumbering the bad.

From the restaurant windows, they could see the sky outside. The monsoons were expected any time now. The heavens were overcast and there were rumblings above their heads. Distant flashes of light momentarily brightened the clouds. The evening outside was rapidly turning darker and through the window of the restaurant, they could see the streetlights coming on and the parking lot filling up with the younger, late evening shoppers. They would come in around this time and spend an hour shopping and then move to the watering hole for a quick meal of junk food and aerated soft drinks before going back home. Some of the more adventurous ones would then move on to the cinema for the night show before finally landing up back at their homes in the early hours of the morning, bleary eyed and weary. But that was the life for them.

So it was time to rise. She glanced at her watch and was amazed to know she had spent an hour and a half here in the restaurant with Manjooran. She called for the bill and the waiter hurried up with the plate. She was amused to see him taking it straight to Manjooran, assuming him to be the head of the house, the breadwinner, the payer of bills. She crooked her finger at him and was not surprised to notice Manjooran starting to protest. One should have expected him to. She smiled and shook her head.

“It’s all right. The next time you pay, Mr. Manjooran, when it’s a larger bill, a much larger bill!” He smiled too. The remark committed them to more of their coincidental meetings. It was a promise and a guarantee. It was a fitting moment to end the evening with, to move out of the restaurant into the parking lot and to find their respective cars and drive off into the late evening. It was last day of the month of May and the first spring rains of the year suddenly burst in a shower over their heads, falling in long silver streaks through the failing light. The monsoons had arrived; not late, not early, but just about on time.

CONFESSION

A week is a long time in life. Or it is short. Depends on how you look at it.

For Manjooran, there were many moments of deep introspection after he came back late from the supermarket. He had enjoyed the evening with the lady doctor. It was as simple as that. But how much more complicated could it get. He lay back in bed and stared at the ceiling. The empty sheets at his side stared back at him and asked him the obvious questions. Oddly enough, they whispered in his mind with Sosha's voice.

At first there was shocked denial. Of course not, he told the voice inside: this is nothing of the kind of thing you are hinting at, Sosha. Nothing at all. You know me. There has never been anything of that kind with me, you know that. Not when you were alive, not now that you are gone.

Then there was a whine in his pleadings. Who asked you to leave me and go: right when we were enjoying our retirement. When we could have looked forward to at least another twenty years: twenty years of bliss, unalloyed and pristine. Sosha, there was so much we could have done together, so many walks in the evening, so many stories to tell, so many fond memories to relive. And you had to go and spoil it all. By winging away. By leaving me behind here.

And then there was reassurance. Don't worry, Sosha: I will always be yours and be sure, there is no threat to the loyalty I had sworn to you so many years ago in that little church at Kottayam. I'll be joining you one day, I know that. And whatever the hereafter means, we'll enjoy it together.

The musings in his mind made him somber and pensive for the rest of the day. He pottered about the house silently. Puss trailed at his feet, meowing plaintively, wondering why she was being ignored. Kamala wondered if he were going into some form of depression again. He nibbled at his toast and pushed away the omelets. Lunch was rice and vegetables and he chewed at them tastelessly. He went to sleep after that, closing the bedroom door behind him. It sent alarm bells ringing in Kamala's head. She wondered if she should ring up Alice Kochamma and tell her. But she would be calling up anyway at about three-thirty in the evening when her classes ended. It was her normal schedule, rigorously followed for every day now. She would enquire about her father and then give directions on what Kamala should prepare for dinner and for lunch the next day. Most days she would herself turn up about six in the evening, on her way to the market, just to check up on her father and to enquire what he would like her to fetch from there.

So when Alice did ring her up, exactly at three-thirty, she found Kamala in something of a tizzy. She had been toying with the idea of knocking on her master's door, though she knew he normally slept for about a couple of hours in the afternoons after lunch. In fact, it was just about time for him to get up. Nevertheless, when Alice Kochamma rang up, she had to reveal her worries. The alarm bells went off in Alice's head too. She asked, directed, commanded Kamala to march up to the closed bedroom and knock on it, saying that she, Alice, wanted to speak to him. And don't hang up the phone while you are doing that, she ordered. Kamala dutifully went off, relieved she had confessed her worries to Alice Kochamma. She now had clear directions from her on what she should do. So she placed the phone down on the table, walked up to the bedroom door and tentatively knocked on it. For a few seconds there was no response at all. She plucked up her courage and knocked again, this time a little louder.

"Who is it?" Manjooran's voice called out from inside.

"It is I, Kamala," she replied. "Alice Kochamma wants to speak to you."

With huge relief rushing through her, she could hear his movements from inside, as he got up, opened the door sleepily and moved to the telephone.

“Yes, Alice, what is it?” he mumbled into the phone.

Alice’s sigh of relief was audible over the telephone line. She didn’t miss a beat, though. “Papa, I was wondering if we could all go out for a bite to eat this evening. After all, it’s been some time since we have been out for dinner. And of course, you’ll be paying the bill for all of us.”

“Of course, I’ll pay the bill. I knew that was coming”, he replied good-humouredly.

They chatted idly for a few minutes more, Manjooran wondering why his Alice sounded so light of heart, so full of some silly humour that had taken over her normally serious demeanour. Anyway, it was always pleasant to talk to her. He placed the phone down on the hook and called out to Kamala for coffee.

In the evening, he went out for an early walk before Alice and Hari and the twins came in for the promised dinner. He took his usual path to the Corporation park and the long, clay track for serious walkers. There were already quite a few people there, serious exercisers who kept themselves in shape, the determined evening walkers. There was Mr. Carl Lewis, jogger extraordinaire, swinging by, breathing heavily, tall and muscular, running to catch the next flight for the Olympics. Here comes Mr. Groucho, face like thunder with sharp lines and frowns on his forehead: Manjooran saw him every day and passed by him very warily. Mrs. Slouch, shoulders stooped and bent over, comes by not far behind. Is she wife of Groucho, or is she stalking him? He waved his hands to Mr. IAS officer, but he was too busy with his thoughts to return the greetings. Then there are two young girls, Miss Jeans and Miss Cardigan, slim and slender, beautiful to behold. Do they require any exercise at all? Mrs. Smiley is not here today; she always had a vague smile lighting up her face. At the corner shop, just outside the park, tea is ready for Mr. Pensioner on the stone bench, waiting for the cup that cheers, reading the afternoon newspaper.

Manjooran walked too, a trim, large headed man, with a robust body and clear sparkling eyes, who, at a glance, made it obvious that he exuded good health and vigour. He had a leonine head of hair, now coloured pepper-and-salt and a round, flat, full face that made one give him a second look. He walked surprisingly light of foot for such a big body. The years of having been at the top of a large company had given him the dignity and character that made even a stranger look at him with some measure of respect.

But with all his handsome looks and force of personality, Manjooran was a worried man today. The welter of thoughts scattering through his confused mind for the last couple of days had left him tired and angry, on the point of melancholy. For a man who thought he knew himself well, who had prided himself on being clearheaded, both in official and personal matters, he was now finding himself lost, in completely uncharted territory. He had entered a continent of which he had no comprehension at all. For him, marriage had been everything, the mainstay of his personal world, the strong foundation of hearth and home, an inalienable part of his life, his consciousness, of every waking, breathing, sleeping moment it had been his privilege to live. It was the underpinning, the anchor, the foundation, the beginning and the end of everything. Which everything had come to an end at two-thirty in the early hours of a cool November morning. Could there be existence after that, he had asked himself over and over again, many a time in the last many months. He was positive that there could not be. No, there could not be any meaningful life after that.

But as the days passed and as the soreness at his side, on that side of his body where the empty bed lay, increased more and more, he realized this was a life-long condition he was facing, the condition of growing old alone. The thought of it, the sheer, numbing horror of it, struck him one morning as he looked out of the window, a couple of months after Sosha had gone, just about a fortnight since he had come back from the hospital. The sky was blue and cloudless. There was a bird, a tiny sparrow in the lawn outside, flitting from the grass in the garden to the window and then back again, endlessly, untiringly. He looked out from the corner of the window to see where the bird was flying to, fluttering about hither and thither. In the corner of the space behind the window, at the edge of the coppice of the wall, in the tiny crook with hardly any space for even a matchbox, the little bird had started, painfully, tirelessly, to build a nest, a small scruff of twigs and odds and ends, now taking shape as a curved space where the fragile eggs could be laid.

The power of the thought, the sheer enormity of that tiny, fluttering, little body building a home, struck him like a thunderbolt and he staggered back into his bed with a gasp. For a moment he could not even fathom

the reason why the sheer pain was riding through his body like a shaft of harsh light. For a moment he saw no connection between the tiny bird nest and the appalling condition of his life. For a moment he had to remind himself to calm down and not let the waters flow over his head again. No, he would never ever allow himself to fall off the abyss like the last time. But he knew the anguish of his loneliness would strike him again and again and again in the days to come. It would crash like a blow from a knuckled fist between his eyes, giving no prior intimation before its assault.

But he was vaguely aware of the fact, which he noticed but refused to acknowledge, that with each passing day, the sharp turn of the knife twisting within, when the unpredictable blow hit him in his guts, now and then at odd moments, had eased just a little each time it hit him in the succeeding months. He finally had to acknowledge the fact that the keenness of memory blurs in the passage of time and anguish and pain dull to a bearable ache, just about perceivable in the hollow behind the bones in his chest or the temples above the sides of his eyes. It was hard to bear, for he had come to expect the hot pain that was always waiting behind his forehead. It was a grief he had come to live by, to expect standing just around the corner, a harsh-tongued friend who would always be there. He had come to expect the keenness of the tragedy to be ever with him, in the course of the days that it was now his fate to live.

But surely that hard, sharp blade had dulled in the months it had been exposed to his life. It was almost as if the wind and the rain and the summer sun, the passing seasons had taken the piercing shine off its surface, leaving it scratched and hazy in the light it reflected. The razor-sharp severity of its blade had blunted. It was hard to contemplate that his was but an ordinary and minor tragedy in the cosmic order of things, that he would have to live with the ordinariness of the sorrow, for was it not but the common sorrow of an ordinary man who had lost his ordinary wife. A million other husbands had lost their wives too, hadn't they? That thought had struck him hard and he had finally come to know the truth, the non-unique, non-singular nature of his grief. That he would have to spend his life in the nondescript identity of an average widower who missed his ordinary, departed wife.

Two days later, waiting in his car at the petrol pump for the vehicle ahead to move on, he turned his head to his left and received the surprising benefaction of Dr. Rekha Kurien's smile. It was five in the evening and he was on his way back from a trip to his old office for some papers related to an old provident fund account. He was happy, for the office had informed they owed him another ten thousand rupees that had been his, but had been forgotten to be paid to him when he had retired more than two years ago. Understandably, he was happy. He wondered what he could do with this sudden windfall. Should he buy the twins some extravagant gift? Or maybe invest it in some kind of a trust fund for them? In casual thought, considering the options before him, he turned his head around waiting for the vehicle ahead to move on, so he could slide his car into the slot where the attendant would fill up his car.

She was sitting in her old Padmini, not more than twenty feet away, buying a can of engine oil from the attendant. She had turned her head at some intuitive call in her ear and found Manjooran waiting for his turn in the queue to fill up on petrol. She smiled. Probably the smile was some kind of a psychic trumpet call, for he had turned, unknowingly, unwittingly and had received its full force on his face, the extraordinary blast of her pleasantly surprised smile. He was momentarily taken aback and then, within a blink of an eye, completely astonished, to find himself inexplicably, and suddenly, filled with a joy that defied definition. He waved his hand, called out to her and smiled broadly when she waved back. He shut down the engine of his car, opened the door and walked over to her. Not even close, from a good ten feet away, he called out, "and how are we today, doctor. I seem to be bumping into you every now and then."

"At least its not fishy business any more," Rekha smiled. The she laughed and, pointing to the can of engine oil in her hand said, "but it sure is oily business, just the same!" Another one of her poor jokes, but it was apt enough, she thought to herself. She was glad Manjooran saw the humour of it, for he too was laughing, a little louder perhaps than he should have, but he had certainly enjoyed her remark.

"And where are you off to?"

“Going back home,” she smiled. “It’s been a long day at the hospital, but I must say a good day, when things turned out all right for most of my patients.”

“That’s great. I can see it’s been a good day for you from the smile.”

“You seem to have done not too badly also, that too is obvious from the way you seem to be happy.”

“A windfall! Some money I wasn’t expecting came my way today. And I was wondering what to do with it.”

“Wow,” she burst out. And she was genuinely glad for him. “And how much, may I ask, if is it not too much of a secret.

“Enough for the day,” he replied. “Certainly enough to treat you to a cup of coffee!”

“Do you mean that? Don’t be too confident, for I might take you up on that and it might prove to be too costly for you, even with your windfall.”

“Done,” he smiled back, even as the attendant called out to him to get his car moving into the slot in front of the pump.

But she had not finished yet. “No,” she called out to him. “This time I’m taking you to see my place. It’s not far from here. You have to be satisfied with the kind of coffee I make and Daniel’s homemade biscuits. Follow me in your car.”

There was an air of finality, even peremptoriness, in the tenor of her words. She did mean it and Manjooran was happy to know he was being invited in. Invited into a place where, he was sure, not many had been invited before. He trotted back to his car, turned his head to her and called out, “Drive slow. I’ll fill up on petrol and follow you straight away.”

As she drove slowly down the busy thoroughfare, keeping an eye on the rear view mirror for Manjooran’s car, Rekha suddenly realized things were moving too fast for her. And although it was she herself who had made the impromptu invitation to Manjooran, she now found herself worrying about the pace of the developing events. She had not really thought out the complicated steps that had gone into her invitation. It must have been ages, she pondered, this invitation on her part to invite a male into the precincts of her own home. And what had prompted this sudden crumbling of the walls she had built around herself?

Walls are built, stone by stone. It takes time for the edifice to rise, for the cement to bind them all together. Once built, it will block the view of the home behind the walls. You can be sure it will stand the test of time. The blows and knocks of each passing day cannot break it down. With the passage of time, moss and lichen will form a thin outer layer of green, wet slime that will cover the face of the wall with a beautiful quilt of lovely green hues. Soon, the wall becomes more fascinating than the home within its perimeter. It requires either a cataclysmic earthquake to shatter it or a slow melting of the binding material that bit by bit, shall loosen each stone. The stones will then shiver themselves free and fall away, leaving the walls happily breached and the house finally exposed to public view.

Did she dare? Did she dare let the walls fall away, crumbling down brick by brick? The walls she had never, ever allowed to tremble and weaken. The walls had stood firm and rigid, immobile and hard, an obdurate barricade. Not one, not one single person around her, at work and at the place she called home, could have ever divined the existence of these walls, that they concealed an ocean of unspent anger and undissolved tears. Who could guess that the sweet smile she had on every day of her life was but a fragile mask that would flake away in bits and pieces if one knew the way to get the walls down. She had been sure that there was no one, not one person who could ever possibly have done that. With the possible exception of Chetan. Surely, she had not, to this day, come across anyone who had the power to do just that.

And now this man, this almost-child who had been like putty in her hands when she had first met him at the hospital, this strangely cynical and abrasive patient who had warned her off from stepping into his private

territory, this good man and father who had smiled indulgently at the party held for him at his house, basking in the affection and love of the people around him, this eager, wide-eyed man who had approached her at the hotel like a stranger who wanted company, and finally, the ludicrously weeping man she had talked to at the cemetery, who had poured out his heart and soul to one who was almost a stranger to him. Who was this man who seemed to be groping in some darkness of spirit, some hiatus in the movement of his life, searching for some desperate affinity, for something lasting and permanent, to sustain him in the days it was his lot to live.

It was the thought of this complex spirit and the strange hunch she had about him that set the wheels turning in her mind. A hunch that refused to die down and prompted her in some unbidden manner that here was the road to some form of heaven that would not disappear, as it had the last time she was in the proximity of happiness. When she and a small car and a mutilated man had come together in a macabre dance, in a diabolic intersection between space and time, leaving her alone and shattered and thoroughly destroyed. Could she dare to hope that here was a moiety of salvation that she could reach out her hands for? This strong and proud man, who, though broken, did not cringe while exposing his wounds to her, who had cried his heart out and blubbered like a child while he told her his story. Who had not felt embarrassed the next time he met her, but had sought her out like a friend. Could he understand the particular nature of the torments she had gone through and not turn away? How could she even begin to consider that here was a chance for happiness, when both of them, if fortunate beyond belief, could find the healing they needed so much. And what made her think this gray-haired man too desperately sought the same measure of happiness she was seeking?

And then there was the small matter of their ages. A year ago he was sixty-two, that she knew for a fact for she had read it on the admission card in the hospital, as Alice had hurriedly filled it out when he had been brought in. That means he should be about sixty-three now. And she was on the verge of being fifty-three, just about a couple of years to go for retirement from this comfortable government job that had sustained her in the life she had led so far. One thought of love in the twenties and enjoyed its bliss; or, in the thirties, and learnt to exult in it or hate it; in the forties one went on to live one's life in ecstatic happiness or the hell that a marriage provided; and in the fifties, you settled down to its enjoyment or its daily bitterness. In the sixties, whether happy or otherwise, one was more aware of aches and pains that creep on you like a dark cloud, almost bewitching you with its slowness, leaving you older and strained each day you live. That is unless you have found the secret elixir of life that transforms your lives. Can one hope for bliss at this age?

Not that these thoughts moved like an electric current through her mind as she ushered in Manjooran into the house. They only waved about like a lacy curtain flowing in the breeze wafting in from the window. Daniel at the door smiled at his mistress and then seemed to hesitate when he saw Manjooran's tall figure behind her. Who was this, he wondered? He gave him a long, cool appraising look, before opening the door wide and stepping aside for them to move in. The drawing room was, to Manjooran's eyes, a trifle close and commodious. The sofas were large and comfortable. There were books strewn around, there were small peg tables in the corners of the room and a large thick carpet covered the floor from wall to wall. The walls were bare and the small side table held only odds and ends, keys, paper and pencils, the day's newspapers and the like. He searched for photographs in the room, but found none. It left him a little disappointed.

Rekha pulled out the chair for him while she turned and went to the kitchen to fetch the promised cup of coffee and the biscuits. He sat alone for a couple of minutes in her absence and looked around the room again, searching for a setting in which he could place her, some face of a family member or a friend to give her a backdrop, to flesh her out, to know the context where she could lie like a jewel against the satin background. He glanced at the books that were everywhere. He saw poetry collections, some Victorian novels, erudite readings on philosophy and religion, even some comics, and books of authors he had never heard of. There was nothing that could have given him a handle on the kind of person she was.

What was he doing in this woman's house, this woman about whom he knew nothing, whose demeanour and manner, whose empathy and grace had lured him to her like a moth to a candle, whose light and warmth he may or may not have judged correctly. For a moment there was fleeting remorse, some passing twinge of

guilt, and the face of the well-loved woman who had been his wife swept through his memory. But he knew that that was all right, she would always be there, through his good days and bad. And as long as she did come around now and then, he was sure he would do nothing wrong. But he sure did want to know more of this Dr. Rekha Kurien and he was sure that this day promised much. He had been invited; he had not sought it, but the invitation was welcome. Now he would make the most of it. He would delve into the person of this woman who was now each day more and more in his thoughts. Perhaps more than he had bargained for.

The clink of cups on a tray brought him out of his short reverie as Daniel carried in the coffee and the promised biscuits. Rekha sat down on the sofa next to him and poured it out black and followed it with the milk and waited for him to say enough.

“That’s enough”, he said, “I prefer to have the biscuits than the coffee.”

He reached out for the plate. The biscuits had been warmed in the microwave. They were soft and crumbly and full of butter and unexpectedly wonderful to taste. He complimented the hostess and the cook and grabbed for another. Rekha smiled: there was something childlike in this aging man that brought a sudden flush of pensive nostalgia to her mind. It showed in the sad smile she gave him. Where had the days of her youth fled to, when she would have given him one of her bright repartees and made him squirm. Or flaunt a smile that would have made him eager for more. All things pass. She knew that, but she had to be reminded every time it was necessary, every time someone said or did something that took her back to her youth.

“You seem amused, doctor”, he said, smiling back.

She shook her head, not daring to speak. She looked down at the cup in her hand, not wishing to raise her head, not wanting him to see her face for fear it would reveal too much. There was a moment of silence as Manjooran enjoyed his third biscuit. Rekha struggled to set her face into that mask of polite equanimity she was so practiced at. Then she released the words that she had so wanted to speak, wanted desperately to utter, to get them out of her throat and damn the consequences.

“It seems we meet a quarter of a century too late.” The words hung heavy and shimmering like a mirage before their eyes. Manjooran almost didn’t hear, for he was intent on getting the best out of Daniel’s home cooking. But the stupendous significance of the words, spoken in such a lighthearted manner, suddenly pierced through his superfluous concentration on the biscuit. He raised his head and looked straight into Rekha’s eyes. He was startled and bemused and did not know what to say. He had to turn away his gaze, suddenly and awkwardly, for he saw more there than he was prepared to see, more than he had ever thought possible. Her eyes; her dark, dark eyes, those glistening, deep pools of black light, hiding much and revealing more. He was flustered and he caught his breath. There was a sudden flush of sweat on his brows. He shook his head to quieten the buzzing in his ears.

“Mr. Manjooran, there is so much I know about you, and so very little you do know about me. It is a kind of unequal relationship and I intend to set that right today. And although these complicated thoughts were not in my mind when I called out to you today, now that you are here, I must tell you more about myself.” The formal flow of the words she was trying to utter could not continue, for it was not a formal situation. Not when you are trying to confess the sins and foibles of a lifetime, the sadness and the joy, the highs and the lows. This was no proper official speech she was making. This was the unabridged, unexpurgated version of the life and times of Dr. Rekha Kurien. It would be spoken in fits and starts, in gasps and moans, in giggles and tears, in all the sounds and textures of the spoken word, tortured by emotions too strong to be kept in check.

Manjooran nodded; he did not have a clue where this conversation would lead to, nor was he in a position to say a word in protest, to stem the flood of words he knew was coming. In the quiet afternoon, sitting back on the sofa chair, in the shaded tranquility of her sitting room, with the coffee and the biscuits presiding over them, he nodded silently, not wanting to sully the mood now fallen over Rekha. He was watchful, cautious,

worried and uncertain not only for what was coming but also for the lady, who sat querulous and distracted, almost unfocussed, her hands on the point of trembling, her lips quivering. She halted for a moment, seeming to gather her strength for the test to come. He waited. Then she began to speak.

It was long in the telling. Now it was slow and steady, now troubled and hurried, and now again, incoherent and confused. It was disordered, unarranged, non-linear, but at every moment of the telling it was a passionate outpouring of hidden emotions, suppressed rage, anger unexpressed, pulled out of crevices and niches where the sunlight had not been for ages. She faltered at times. There were moments of silences, moments when only her harsh breathing could be heard. Manjooran sat still, not daring to speak, not wishing to break the spell of the confessional, wishing her to tell it all, to cleanse the poison from her mind, to wash away the acids in the catharsis of the words rushing out from her lips.

She spoke of her brother and the treacherous sequence of events that left him a bitter, anguished man when he was denied the love of his life, of his unflinching determination to remain unmarried for the rest of his life. She spoke of her mother who had lived in a haze of philosophy and literature avoiding even the simple decisions of daily life, of what dishes are to be cooked for the day, or when to chastise an errant son or daughter, or even when to hug them or laugh with them at the silly games that children play. She spoke, and the words caught at her throat, of her father who had violated all the rules of man and God, who had won his cases with lies and deceit, who had given his all for mammon, and the devil take the hindmost. She told him tales of her life as a doctor, of her days at small towns and smaller villages before she moved on to the bigger cities, as she grew from a young intern to a caring, compassionate doctor.

And then she spoke of the brief, false spell of joy she had lived, the couple of years she had had with Simon, when the dawn of every day was like a harbinger of such bliss and happiness. Too brief they had been, flickering like a bad, black-and-white movie print in a darkened hall. And the horror of the crash, the oozing of the blood from between her legs, the crumpled mass of flesh that was her wise and crinkly-eyed father-in-law, crushed in the mangled steel and rubber. His little, mutilated body lay by her side, the remains of the most wonderful man she had had the privilege to know, a surrogate father who had replaced the real one in her mind. She spoke of the pain and agony at the hospital, the mind-numbing sorrow she had fallen into, the horror of coming out of it, the incomprehensible way in which Simon had treated her after the accident, the slow dribbling away of her domestic bliss, and finally, the end of happiness. She spoke of her life in the two decades after, when she summoned up every ounce of her strength to combat the darkness and the stupefying stasis of mind and spirit that ate into her, of how she fought every inch of the way to retain her compassion and empathy for the patients she cared for every day of her life. She spoke of her personal, unending combat, her daily struggle to comprehend the ways of an incomprehensible God, Who refused to let her see the meaning of life, Who refused to let her understand that life is more than the living of the allotted days of one's life. If that was all there was to it, then how are we better than the birds and beasts that inhabit our planet? She spoke in confusion of how difficult it was to distinguish between the acts of a malevolent God or an implacable Devil. And how she had this running battle every day as she tried to save each of her patients from the fate assigned to him by one of the two. Each one saved was one notched up in her account, one she had snatched away from the sure death that God, or the Devil, had allotted for him.

And when she was done, she felt stripped, naked, bereft of all her disguises and masks. And Manjooran looked at her with a deep understanding and love that surpassed all the emotions she had ever seen in the eyes of those she had met. There was a moment of silence, a brief, still moment that seemed to stretch on forever. There was no sound in the cool room, except the ticking of the clock. Then Manjooran stretched out his hand and touched the wet cheeks of this woman who had bared her very soul to him, cupped her chin in his hand and said the words that he had wanted to speak, wanted desperately to utter, to get them out of his throat and damn the consequences.

“Don't weep, for together we shall find happiness again.”

ALICE KNOWS....

Two months after. There were days when the possibilities of the new life Manjooran was embarking upon, would fill him with a wonder and amazement he had never known possible. The enormity of the thought of it, the staggering idea that there could be a life for him again, made Manjooran dizzy with excitement. At other times, he would be awash with feelings of guilt, rendering him morose and unapproachable for days on end. Both moods were extreme: he knew that and he hated the need to confront that truth every day of his life. In the late evenings, getting ready for bed, switching off the lights and waiting for sleep to come, knowing full well that it would not, well, that was the least of his worries. What he had problems with was the clamour of the restless thoughts crowding through his mind. If he allowed them to ride him to where they would, he would be left floating over a strange land of mental construction, turning him dizzy with delight, full of the amazement of a young child. He would shake his head and smile ruefully and pull himself out of that bright, glowing world where he had been led by his willing thoughts. And then he would start to slide the other way, into some dark and gloomy territory, a murky marshland of echoes and whispers filled with shadowy figures and indistinct outlines. Invariably, it brought him up sick with anxiety and inexplicable worry.

There were times when he was transported into some kind of a crazy cloud-and-cuckoo land where everything ordinary and everyday acquired a shadowy aura. Objects and perceptions became unclear, indistinct, and not-so-obvious. In the mornings, when he woke up, he would evaluate the sleep he had had: was it good, deep and soothing, dreamless and placid, filling him with a quiet energy, readying him for the coming day? Or was it disturbed and cloudy, with ominous dreams of swaying shapes and dark shadows and low, sibilant voices warning him of perils in his path. He could hardly discern the way ahead, twisting away into the gathering gloom of the twilight. It was always twilight for him, in these unquiet dreams that filled his head as he lay in bed.

At other times, when at his table reading the newspaper or lying back in the armchair sipping a cup of tea, he could feel himself lose contact with the sentient world outside. He was left staring into space, hardly aware of the passing of the hours and the bleeding of the light from the sky. Until some sound in the kitchen, or the cawing of a crow on the electric line outside the house, startled him and brought him back to reality. He wondered where the time had fled; where had he been these past hours? He found it difficult to remember what he had been thinking of.

His contact with George and Teresa was infrequent, some irregular letters, some rare telephone calls. He needed only to know they were in good health, and for the rest he depended on Alice to update him with their news. George and Sheeba's little boy would sometimes come on line and lisp out some rehearsed poem for his grandfather. He found he was unexpectedly filled with joy as the child's words sang across the miles over the telephone lines. There were too the Christmas cards, bright, commercially written verses that appeared to be so genuine, but were really mass-manufactured for fond old people like him. It was a cynical worldview he was more than willing to accept. As for Teresa, he now found her more patient, more willing to spend time over her monthly calls, to ask him how he was and enquire about his health, or how he spent his evenings. Before Sosha had departed, she had been impatient, eager to finish her duty call and get back to her own life. Now she would wait for him talk to her, linger over the words, and finally end the conversation only when both of them were done. He was dimly aware that somewhere in her there was some kind of change under way. At that point of time, both were unaware of how dramatic that transformation would be.

Some evenings, Koya would come by, trying to tempt him out for a late dinner and a night out in the city bars. He politely refused, but would insist that he join him for a quick drink before Koya left for the uncertain joys of the foot-loose widower. The Nairs would also visit, at least once a month, usually after the new batch of cakes was baked or when some special goodies had been prepared. Mrs. Nair had biscuits and

brownies always ready for him. He was overwhelmed by the limitless kindness shown to him by all who came his way.

Once breakfast was ready, he would get dressed for the day and then stroll out of the house to his old car, start the engine, back it into the road outside and then be on his way. He would drive aimlessly for an hour or two, through the crowded market areas and then into the quieter by-lanes of the newer part of the city. Sometimes he would drive on into the suburbs, a good fifteen, twenty kilometers away from the house, not knowing what he was searching for, or even what he would do when he found it. Bored, he would then drive back desultorily, despondently, filled with strange forebodings. He was sure, completely and fully persuaded without a shadow of doubt, in fact with an unflinching certainty which defied comprehension, that momentous changes were on their way, changes that would profoundly affect him and his family. There would be words spoken by those around him, there would be a difficult discussion on matters not clearly understood. He must ready himself for that; he must find the stiffness of spine to carry his destiny onwards to where he was sure it was waiting for him.

In the evenings he would be of a clearer purpose, more focused and put together. This time, around five in the evening he would drive, without any meandering diversions here and there, straight to the City hospital where he would wait in the parking lot. When the shift changed and most of the patients had been attended to, when the rigours of the day were ending, the doctors and nurses would find their way out of the hospital, into their vehicles. Then he would wait, breathless and filled with a growing excitement, for the familiar, sari-clad, white-coated figure who would come out into the porch and with eager eyes look for him, knowing fully well he would be there. She would raise her hand to him, the hand that held the car keys, and walk up to her own car. She would drive out of the parking lot, smiling at him as she watched and waited for him to pull up behind her. Then they would be off, pulling up together at the red lights, or speeding when the road ahead was clear, a twosome, sticking close to each other, her undoubtedly old Padmini and his Ambassador of uncertain age, like best friends and faithful companions, driving together till they turned off the main street and into the quiet side road and right up to the house at the end of the lane. Daniel would be waiting to open the gate and let the two cars in. The old house, the government hospital quarters, had been built at a time when there was more space and larger dimensions to fit your architectural visions into. At some point of time in the early part of the last century, it had housed a British doctor who had sailed into the port of Cochin from Bombay, filled with some idealistic dreams to do good for the subjects of his monarch who ruled over the vastest empire the world had ever known. It was now, the more or less dilapidated home of Dr. Rekha Kurien, Additional Superintendent of the Kochi City Hospital.

The inside was definitely better than the outside, she would say with a smile. The first time she had stated the obvious, he realized it was a comment to describe the both of them too. He tried to make a joke of it and was happy to know that she could smile at such flippancy. He had first seen the drawing room and the lounge some two months ago when his world had been suddenly suffused with an unexpected light. When from her tremulous lips had spilled the astounding words she had spoken. The room was airy, filled with the passing sea wind that billowed the curtains and brought the coolness in. The inevitable coffee and Daniels' fresh batch of biscuits: they were the very staple on which their love grew and spread like a luxuriant tree.

They were not children, not dizzy teenagers unconscious of the position they were in; indeed, they knew there were some rules of convention being broken here. They talked of things trite and extraordinary, commonplace recollections and wonderful, entrancing, fleeting memories, hidden somewhere in their minds till this moment, when jiggled by a passing word or thought, the old images had come alive. They smiled and laughed and told each other stories, simple tales of childhood days, of things gone by. There were many somber moments too, when the past would catch up with them and the daylight outside turned dark and moody. They would lapse into a quiet silence that stretched on for some moments, the clock ticking in the background like a metronome, waiting for the beat to pick up the movement again.

He could not wait for long at her home, much as he would have liked to. There were some truths that must now be revealed to people close to him. Only then could he commit himself fully to the course he knew he

would have to adopt soon. And until then, until the time he had navigated the course he must travel, he would have to live in this nowhere land, neither here nor there, between a sad world with beautiful memories, and a new one beckoning with unrevealed promises and waiting perils. He was poised between the two; he knew he could lean and fall either way.

By about seven in the evening, he would leave from her house for his home and be there in time for the traditional cup of tea when Alice would arrive for the daily, or the almost-daily chat, on her way to the market to stock up on groceries. Of course, she had a good enough market close to her own home, but she preferred to drive out this way, some kilometers away from her normal route, to catch up on things at her father's place, to tell him, in turn, of her lectures at college, the new batch of students, some diverting escapades of the twins and the progress that Hari was making in his dissertation. He would be submitting his thesis for the Ph.D soon enough.

For some days now, Alice had been noticing the small changes in her father. To say the least, she found them perplexing. She noticed the wide swings in his moods and wondered what was churning in his head. At times it would seem he was once again his own boisterous self, the one she had known and loved, the silly jokes and the loud laughter and all, so normal, so wonderful, when everything had been what a home should be. Of course, that was before she had met her Hari and had torn her home asunder and the smile had disappeared from her mother's face, turning her brooding and nervous, hands twitching and trembling. She knew what her mother had gone through in the days and months and years since she had walked out of her house, bitter and angry and filled with an utterly stubborn determination she had never known she was capable of. She had fretted over the news in Teresa's letters, which had mentioned in passing, how drawn their mother's face was, how aloof she had looked the last time she had come for her holiday from England. Teresa had not visited Alice and Hari the last time she had come home on leave, deferring to her father's stubborn commands that she should not. Alice had some scores to settle over Teresa's submission to Manjooran's dictates.

At other times, he was nervously childish, frowning at things that did not merit a frown, spilling the glass with its water onto the table, looking mysteriously at her as if he were seeing things never noticed about her earlier. She saw the way his fingers moved on the table as he waited for the tea to be served. They were uncertain and diffident, searching for familiar outlines and patterns, but not finding them under his fingers. He would tickle Puss over the ears and absentmindedly listen to her contented purring. Then she would catch him smiling to himself when he was sure she was not looking. Some secret, mysterious smile that refused to be identified, which he would shrug away when she happened to ask him what he was amused about. There were too the moments when she saw the deep anguish move within him, as if he were being carried away in a wave of emotion sweeping like a tornado through his body. She saw his hands tremble, she saw an emotion more powerful than even the grief that was now a silent, constant companion to him. Something was sorely tormenting him again, and she prayed it was not the recurrence of the blind whirlpool that would drag him under once more.

She would, at times, bring the children with her in the evenings, more often when she guessed he needed cheering up. And, duly instructed, the children would chat with him and raise their voices in feigned anger and sibling rivalry and push and pull at each other with such vigour, that Appachan, their grandfather, would laugh loud and tell them to keep quiet and then make them sit down to a fine story. He told the tale with detail and embellishment, with such artistry and elegance that would have shamed a professional storyteller to tears. Alice would sit back and heave a sigh of thanksgiving: no, there was nothing wrong here with her father; he was all right, just that he needed to get out of the house and take in the air and be a part of the family. And she would vow to bring the children more often and really make him feel a grandfather again. Almost as alive and wonderful as the time when she, bruised from her first marriage, had been a much-loved and cared for daughter of the house. Of course, that was before she had marched into the rainy evening, leaving her home for a stranger's dwelling. If only she had had been able to get back once, just once, when her mother had been alive; that would have been the very heaven itself.

It was not very long after this, she was sitting down at her home to start evaluating the assignments of her students, when she realized she needed some stationery. She needed A4 size papers and a good, red-coloured ball pen to score through the atrocious grammar and pitiful sentences her students, in fact most of them, strung together in the half-yearly test papers at college. Fretting at herself for not remembering to buy it on her way back from work that day, she decided, on the spur of the moment, to make a quick dash to the market. Hari was at his favourite table, writing out long hand, in that immaculate, sloping handwriting he could keep going for hours on end, the introduction to his doctoral thesis that would finally complete the work he had started some three years ago. She called out to him as she grabbed the keys and rushed out to open the gates, start the car and drive out. He looked out from the windows, called out to her to be careful, that she did not need to drive like a speed maniac, and went back to his chair by the verandah.

She had then slowed down, not that she was ever too fast and careless to endanger her life. But she did take a hold on herself then and breathed deeper to put away her irritation at herself. She should have remembered to buy the paper and pens when she knew she needed them. Okay, cool it, smell the coffee, take a slow easy drive, she told herself, it's a bonus in an ordinary day's existence. And so she exhaled again and settled down to enjoy the evening. She drove slowly through the lane into the main road and then into the late evening traffic. She passed the old market with its narrow alleys where the customers jostled with each other, moving from one stall to the other. And then she had passed through the brightly lit roads on the seafront, where the crowds were alive and boisterous. The ships in the distance appeared ghostly and mysterious and there was again the kind of magic she would never fail to notice.

Not far from the pier was her favorite stationery shop and she eased the car into the side of the road looking for a place to park. She found it quickly enough and she was thrilled; in the evening, Kochi was as bad as any other big city where parking space was difficult to come by. Funny, she still called it Cochin, and not the new version of Kochi. She stepped out of the driver's seat, closed the door behind her, locked it and then moved out into the road to cross to the other side. It was then she noticed the familiar old car she knew so well, right behind an ancient Padmini car, moving slowly in the evening traffic, not more than about twenty feet away. Her father's car was unmistakable, for how could she not know it, the light blue car she had traveled in so often. Almost every day she saw it lying in the porch at her Papa's house. And of course, there he was, at the driver's seat, watching the road very carefully, not diverted by the hand she raised to him in the hope he would notice. He did not, and he drove on, staring at the road ahead and the car in front of him. She noticed too that the old Padmini ahead looked vaguely familiar. She looked hard at the woman driver, immediately recognizing the good lady doctor.

Amazing, she said to herself, what a coincidence, to find doctor and patient together, one behind the other, in the middle of the traffic on a Cochin evening. As the cars moved away, she smiled to herself: it almost looked as if they were driving away together somewhere, for this was certainly too much of a coincidence. Her father did, in fact, go out now and then in the evenings, but rarely in this direction. And Dr. Kurien would be returning from work at this time. Well, she mused to herself, I hope he is ok, I hope he had not felt ill and had gone to see her at the hospital. No, that couldn't be, for she had met her father only the previous evening and he had looked great.

She had thought no more of it and had bought her paper and her pens and a couple of Cadbury bars for the children and was back in the house in no time. She was at her table and working away at the test papers for an hour till it was time to get up and fix dinner. Before she did just that, she needed to check up on her father once again; she had not met him that day. Each day she needed the consolation of having talked to him, of assuring herself he was ok, that he was on the mend again, that he did not need anything special for his dinner or for his larder or whether she could do anything to ease the sorrow of this proud and wonderful man she was now, after an interregnum of two painful years, privileged to call her Papa.

She picked up the phone and dialed the familiar number only to hear it ring and ring and ring again. Perhaps he was in the bathroom, she would ring again after a few minutes and talk to him, she thought to herself.

She busied herself in the kitchen as Hari came up behind her and crushed her to himself in a powerful embrace that almost took her breath away. She leaned back into his body and allowed a moment of peace to seep into her from the spare and tender body of her man. Then she pulled away with a smile and tossed him the tomatoes and the onions and told him, ordered him, to make the salad to accompany the meat dish she had just about finished preparing. He smiled. He would obey his mistress, he said, bowing to the ground.

When she finally did manage to speak to her father, it was late evening. He seemed cheerful enough, as Alice measured his mood against the barometer she kept in her mind. She had a standard she kept referring to: some approximation of the general nature of her father as she had known him in the old days when Amma was alive and things were fine and there was no dissension in the house on petty matters such as errant daughters and re-marriage, when the family was all together with no dying mother to leave empty spaces that refused to be filled up.

“And how was your trip to the market,” she enquired, more out of the need to keep the chatter going on, than to find out what he had been up to.

There was a pause: the telephone lines quietly humming in her ears.

“What trip, when...”, he asked. There was some kind of a rush in his words and he seemed to be distracted.

“I saw you this evening, at the market near the pier. Driving the car. And I waved to you: you did not see me, you know. And did you notice, you were just behind Dr. Rekha’s car? But you seemed too intent on the driving, maybe you did not notice that.”

A complete cessation of sound. Almost as if her father had stopped breathing. And then a re-ordering, a lower change of gear, some rearranging in the mind. The forced words, came across the distance, almost reluctantly, seemingly cheerful.

“Yes, I had gone out for a drive”. There was nothing more. No explanations, no reference to the possible meeting with Dr. Rekha. And then, “how are the children, tell them I’ll give them a treat if they do well in their class exams.”

“Sure, you can tell them yourself”, and she called out to the twins for their customary telephonic hellos and laughter with their grandfather. She had noticed the small gap in the flow of the words when she had drawn reference to seeing him at the market. There had been a disconnect in the construct of his words. And it had almost seemed as he were changing the subject. But she had paid no more attention to it. It was gone out of her mind the very next instant.

For Manjooran, it had been an uncomfortable moment, and he despised himself for the very fact of it. That he had to conceal what was not spoken, that he had to divert attention from the subject at hand to something more innocuous and even trivial, it made him shake his head and curse himself. This subterfuge had to end and end quickly. He would do his best to resolve these tremulous questions soon, very soon.

There was another occasion, not much later. This time Alice was at her father’s place, spending the customary few minutes after her shopping, before her drive back to her home. The phone rang. She saw her father start from the armchair and stride to the peg table a few feet away. But she was nearer the instrument and, with no particular thought in her mind, she reached out and picked it up.

“Hello, Mr. Manjooran’s residence.” It was a small act of punctiliousness. She was correct and proper. She had always believed that one had to reveal one’s identity whenever the phone rang. There was a small gasp at the other end. And a long moment of silence.

“Hello, who is this?” There was a measure of asperity in her tone. She hated these blank calls. She used to receive them in the days before she married Hari, when she was a divorcee, feeling alone and vulnerable in the college she had just joined as a young teacher. Much later she learnt to make light of it. She realized then it must have been some of her young students, boys with the testosterone flowing hard through their growing young bodies.

“Hello, its Alice isn’t it? This is Dr. Kurien, Dr. Rekha Kurien.”

“Oh, hello doctor, it is great to hear your voice. And how are you?” They chatted for a few moments and then she asked the question, that later she realized was redundant, foolish to the point of being absurd.

“You want to talk to my father?”

“Yes, please.”

She turned around to meet her father’s eyes. She saw the close attention he was paying to her conversation. He strode towards her and reached for the phone. She saw him lift the receiver and cradle it in his hands. There was a light that flashed in his eyes then, and the smile that lifted up his lips and made him look really happy. He glanced at Alice watching him and he turned away. With his back to her, he talked animatedly and Alice remarked to herself that he certainly was well on the way to a contented life once more. Rarely had she seen him, after her mother’s death, so pleasantly engaged in conversation with another.

And then she was on her way out, with her grocery bags and her car keys and calling back into the house, “Papa, I’m off.” She did not want to hear the conversation, for she knew instinctively he would not want her to overhear. Later, she did realize it was because her mind was already processing the information, this new piece of data and she was consciously not yet ready to accept the awesome import of it. She was then on her way, driving carefully in the darkening evening light, wanting to get back home as early as possible.

A couple of miles from her home and five minutes from when she had left her father’s place, something clicked within her head. In a flash she saw things fall into place. Suddenly, she was startled at the conjecture her mind had figured out. She slowed the car down to a crawl. Then, with confusing thoughts crowding into her, she took the vehicle to the side of the road and halted. There, she leaned back into her seat, while the engine idled. She took a deep breath. She needed to think this out. This was more that she could handle all of a sudden. The coincidental encounter a week earlier at the market place when she had seen the two cars, one following the other closely, and now, the chance interception of a telephone call for her father from the good lady doctor. It could have all been a harmless coincidence, but with a certainty that she could not explain, she knew. She knew this was not a coincidence, not a casual exchange between acquaintances. There was a dimension to it she could not fathom.

Suddenly she was very afraid. What is this, what is this, she kept repeating to herself. She needed to get back home and hold her precious Hari to herself. She needed to unburden the fears suddenly sweeping through her mind.

When she reached home a few minutes later, Hari opened the door for her. He looked at her face and immediately knew something was wrong. She was on the point of tears, filled with a growing uncertainty whether her fears were but a figment of a suddenly fevered imagination, or whether she had instinctively turned her mind to the truth waiting to be grasped. Hari pulled her to himself, not knowing what had happened, but divining only too well that she needed the solidity of a close, hard embrace. She stayed unmoving for a full minute, soaking in his strength and his goodness, searching for words to tell him all she feared.

She pulled him into the bedroom, admonished him not to move as she went to make them both a cup of tea. She rushed to kitchen, set the kettle on the gas stove and poured in the water to boil. The tea leaves were thrown in and then the milk and then it was all boiling and bubbling away in a moment. The cups were brought in and she poured the boiling tea out and rushed with it to the bedroom, closing the door behind her. The twins watched in surprise as she rushed away, for rarely was their bedroom barred to them. She turned

just before the door was closed and told them she had something to discuss with their father, that she would be out soon enough and that there were mangoes in the basket she had brought back from the market and that they were free to eat as much as they wanted. And then, before their very astonished eyes, the door was bolted and that was that.

She lay on the bed and blurted out her fantastic story, her eyes pleading with him, asking him, directing him, to tell her he did not believe a word of what she had said. She wanted him to scoff at her, rubbish away her premonitions of great, crashing calamities falling down on their heads. When she had done, sipping at her cup and feeling the soft caressing fingers of Hari ruffling her hair, she wondered if she had been possibly mistaken. But then again, she was not one to be easily led away by a flighty imagination. She knew she had common sense written in every pore of her body, every ounce of her blood spoke the truth as she saw it. She had seen the expression on her father's face as he had talked on the phone to Dr. Rekha. It was not just the bland expression one wore during a casual conversation with an acquaintance. It had revealed depth of feeling, genuine warmth for one known very well. And the sight some days earlier? When she had seen her father's car trail the doctor's as if he were following her, to some place where they could be together; a tryst, a rendezvous? And though she had paid no heed to that obvious fact at that very instant, it had struck her like a bolt of white lightning as she was driving back home. And now she feared she was imagining more than she should from the known facts.

Hari was calm and meditative, as he contemplated the situation. Rekha could not be wrong; he had complete faith in her judgment. He knew what she had guessed intuitively had to be the truth. But, nevertheless, it needed confirmation. It was too momentous an event to be left unheeded, to be left to conjectures and guesses. He was reluctant to interfere, and this was something that he would have to face yet again with his wife. The long estrangement that had soured all relationship between Alice and her father had indeed soured his own with his father-in-law. It had taken the death of a simple woman for Manjooran to realize the importance of family and the meaning of forgiveness. Despite that, and that was the rub of it, despite that, Hari had not been as easily forgiving as Manjooran had been. He had not returned the atonement in that same measure, the same generosity extended to him. That day at the hospital, when Manjooran had spoken, in words that had brought tears into his eyes, he had accepted the indisputable fact that it takes a big man to make such an unconditional apology. And though the air had considerably cleared between the both of them, the ruins of the crumbling animosity still lay mouldering deep in Hari's chest. He had not been able to clear out the debris and throw them away from body and mind.

And this was indeed the matter of some distress between him and Alice. Of course, he did not make it an issue. It would have been petulant on his part to have nursed that particular grudge, especially when the old man had been good enough to tell him how very mistaken he had been, how he had wronged both him and Alice in the two years of their discord. But it remained somewhere in the background of their mutual relationship with each other; never fully brought out into the open, but never fully buried and forgotten.

And so he was reluctant to intervene in what he considered to be a personal matter of choice for his strong-willed father-in-law. If the old man felt lonely after the death of his wife, though the bereavement was but a year ago, well then, so be it. If he had met somebody to soothe away his pain, well then, who are Hari and Alice to make a fuss about it? Even as he thought about it, he knew he was wrong, terribly wrong. If he did not pull himself out of his personal prejudices, then he would surely be bruised by it. And so he mused awhile before finally speaking. Alice, straining to hear what he would say, looked up into his eyes with a prayer, wordlessly pleading that he would wave some kind of a magic wand and make everything all right again.

"No, Alice, I don't think you are mistaken: I know you to be the sane, rational woman that you are. In fact, that is the very essence of your self. But we have got to know the real facts and confirm them so there's no room for error. Only then will you be able to deal with the problem. There is no point in dueling with shadows and mirages. So, and I know you are going to balk at the idea, I guess you should ask him. Ask him if it's true or not."

“Ask him?” she repeated, not getting the import of what he was telling her. It took her a moment for the words to sink in. “Ask him? You mean go up to him and ask him if he is having a relationship with Dr. Rekha Kurien?”

The incredulity on her face was worth photographing for posterity and Hari told her exactly that. He smiled, “You know, I could capture that look on your face with the new camera you bought for the children and enlarge it and put it up on the wall. And entitle it ‘An incredulous look.’ There would be no further need to define what incredulity is all about.”

And then she was smiling too. And there were too tears in her eyes that glistened and broke from the margins of her eyes and spilt over into her face. He wiped them away with the palm of his hand. He kissed her gently and whispered, “don’t be sad, woman, give your father a chance to reach for happiness too. Like we did, remember? Just let him be, perhaps he’ll tell us soon enough what it is all about.”

Her eyes were glistening. She held her breath, wondering once again how she could have been so lucky with this man. “Be who you are, Hari, just be exactly the way you are, always and always; don’t change. Don’t change a bit or you’ll have me coming after you with a knife!”

And so they decided, in that little bedroom, over the biscuits and the cooling cups of tea, to give Manjooran the space to make a decision for himself, if at all that was what he wanted. They would know when it was time to talk about it, for surely, Manjooran would then tell them what he wanted to declare. It was time to let things lie for a bit. When it came, if it did, all that Alice prayed for was that her father would be happy. And that all of them would not be washed away in the deluge that would follow.

....AND SO DO SOME OTHERS

For Rekha it was a different wave she was riding on. Mostly positive and happy, she could feel the exciting hum in her ear, the cool breeze flowing in through the windows shuttered till now. Sometimes though, she would be set a-wondering what kind of a maze she had led Manjooran into. For her it was a venture of considerable risk, but not as grave as the one Manjooran had taken upon himself. She was a single woman who had nothing to lose if things did not turn out right between them; maybe, just maybe, she could walk away with nothing more than a bitter heart. Manjooran, on the other hand, was playing dice not with his life alone, but with those of his three children too. And if this second chance faltered and petered out, there would be bleeding bodies scattered on the highway. It was a sobering reality check.

She had not yet been introduced in her new avatar to his family: not that of a friendly doctor who had once treated their father, but as an individual, a good, close friend, as almost one of the family. And one who could indeed become one. The thought took her breath away.

In the weeks gone by, she too had made a decision. It was time she let others know. Right away she should inform Chetan, her brother and friend, who had watched in sorrow as she had morphed, in one single week, from marital bliss to a horrific disaster that had ripped out the growing baby from within her and taken away the life of the impish, lovable man she had been proud to call her Daddy. The Brigadier, the saucy, little man she had adopted as father, had swept away the memories of the parent-brute who had dominated her childhood and destroyed the happiness of her Chetan, the one person she loved as much as life itself. She still remembered with horror the moment when the oily-haired black-hearted toad sitting before her in the late evening at the dinner table had, without compunction or conscience, quietly crushed under his feet, the dreams Chetan had had for a life with Mini. Doesn't matter; it's a fool who mourns for events past; that's how Rekha had looked at her own self. And she wished Chetan had the same damn-all attitude she was proud to display.

But it does not work that way; she knew that. Chetan had disappeared into a world where he was the only resident, coming out briefly to talk to her. For the rest of the time, he quietly went about nurturing his business. He had perked up a bit after his father had passed away, inheriting the legal empire of which he was now sole master. He had swept away all the intrigue, the evil and the manipulation that had ruled in the black heart of its erstwhile lord. Many of the servants of the devil were shown the door. Soon enough, he had set up an office now regarded with respect and honour, one responsive, sensitive and humane.

So it was to him that she first went. She took a day off from her hospital, saying goodbye to Manjooran after she explained to him the reasons for her journey. They both understood they would not let events override them. Nor was it time to commit themselves to a permanent arrangement, when they themselves did not comprehend the processes they were going through. Still, they were getting somewhere. Now she needed to consult the best friend and advisor she had.

And so one morning, she took the train from Kochi and set on her way to Trivandrum. Somebody had decreed that it would henceforth be known as Thiruvananthapuram. A late night telephone call had warned Chetan that she would be there by about noon the next day. A puzzled Chetan had not asked her the reason for this unexpected visit. But he said he would be there to receive her. She had walked her way through the crowded station and found the reserved carriage and identified her seat. She had settled down with a book of poems she had picked up from the store on the pier only two days ago. Fortunately, the coach was not crowded. She had the space to stretch out her legs and relax. The book had a wide selection of Haiku, that

most complex of poetic forms. Not that she was very savvy about poetry. She glanced through the pages and her eyes fell on one of them.

*Raindrops fall silently
As asterisks to decorate
Dreams with.*

She could see in her eye the splash, as the raindrop falling from the sky, from so high up, left its imprint on the floor. What about her dreams? Could she hope for asterisks? She glanced through the pages and then gradually lost interest. There were more things to think about. She closed her eyes and leaned back in the seat.

What did it mean, this magic rising in her as she met with Manjooran almost every day now in the evenings. They had talked endlessly; opening up the secrets of the heart, until every carefully guarded mystery, concealed over the years, had been stripped of its disguise and brought out into the open. They had analyzed their greatest fears and probed and prodded at worries and anxieties. Manjooran had talked for hours on end about his life with Sosha and the wonder of the daily gift that she had given him, simply by being his wife. He had talked about her constancy, her unconditional love, her suffering of his pride and his obdurate stubbornness, her unquestioning acceptance of the man that he was, with all his faults and blemishes. Of how he had taken her for granted, had abused her quiet timidity, had forced her on paths she knew was wrong. She did not have the firmness of mind to confront him and tell him in no uncertain terms that he was a fool, an insensitive braggart who did not know the workings of the human heart. He talked of the loneliness that had confronted him like a blank and featureless brick wall every minute of the time he spent at home, in his room, in his lonely bed, in the many hours of the day when he had only himself to contend with, tossed about within the perimeter of his empty house.

He talked about the expulsion of his first child from the precincts of his home, the one who had been the apple of his eyes, of how he had closed his heart to the healing magic of forgiveness and understanding. He talked too of his other two children, his impatience with his son George and his uncertain feelings for the kind of daughter that Teresa was growing into, distant and indifferent. Of course, of late she seemed to have matured, now wishing to extend the weekly telephone conversation with questions of home and his health and how Alice and George were. The rasp of impatience had gone from her voice. Of these and other things he opened his mind to Rekha.

She talked too. About her growing up with Chetan, the walks in the sweeping lawns of the house, the trees looming over their heads and the dried leaves under their feet, the small fishes that swam in the pond at the corner of the grounds. About Chetan's understanding of fate and destiny and the personal sorrow of his own life. She spoke about her antagonism with her father, the unforgivable crimes he had committed every day of his life, the evil advocate who had sold his soul to the devil, the deliberate destruction of the dreams of her brother, of the relief she felt when her father finally moved on to a darker world presided over by Satan himself, from where he could not plague them with his unspeakable amorality. She delighted in telling him about her friends, Mini and Abha and the close friendship they had nurtured for all these years, the sisterhood they shared, the intimacy that sustained them through the many years of their bonding. She then spoke to him, in halting and fumbling words, of her meeting Simon, of her growing love for this man who had taken over her affections, the brief courtship and the wonder of the first few months of her marriage to him, and the ecstasy that had coursed through her as she had known that she was carrying his, their, child. And how the couple of seconds of a blasted morning had shattered her joy and wrecked her vision of life. Of how the bliss of marriage had fled in the course of a single week, leaving her blighted, twisted in mind and irreparably maimed. Of how she mourned for the Brigadier and the love of a father he had showered on her.

She spoke too of the months she took to recover, to find within her a newfound equanimity, to pick up the pieces again. Life as a divorcee, a single body not tied down to another, was a life she took on her own terms

refusing to be cowed down, as she fought to keep her dignity. When every casual comment made seemed to be a personal assault on her honour. She would hit back with a biting fury, with words that would leave others shocked and in a daze. When she had to huddle in a corner of the bed and wait for the morning sun, for the night was filled with demons that grinned at her and showed her their terrible, sharpened teeth. She found refuge in her work and her precious patients.

She spoke fleetingly of the men she had known in the many years since then, after she had found the sense of balance in the life that she was now determined to lead with grace and courage. There were, now and then, some who had seemed to possess integrity of character, largely out of place in a world grown crass and commercial. But their glitter, as she ultimately found out, was not gold. They thought they had found in her a person with whom they could strike up an acquaintance and then work themselves into her affections and finally into her bed. Two of them had come quickly, one after the other, and when she knew what they were up to, when their designs were finally revealed, she had thrown them out, making no bones about her disgust for their pretended concern and sympathy. The news spread, as it was bound to, in the closed community of doctors in the hospital, and soon there was more respect for her, an understanding that she wore this signboard on her forehead that clearly spelt the words, out of bounds. Of course, being a good doctor had helped, she said, smiling up at Manjooran who sat in absorbed silence. And then, she had grown into her job. As she reached the prime of her life, at the fascinating age of about forty-five, she had looked like a woman of incomparable strength and dignity, not beautiful or even pretty, but filled with a grace and a sense of purpose that radiated from her eyes and every pore of her body. She felt exalted with humility at the thought of the enormous gift she possessed, that of healing and saving lives. Surely that should not be undervalued and turned to avarice.

And she talked too of the loneliness she was heir to. At breakfast in the morning, sitting alone at the head of the table, looking at something as innocuous as the toast on her plate, could make the tears prickle in her eyes. When the glimpse of an amorous couple at the market place could make her draw her breath in a painful, empty gasp. When the shower in her bathroom raining warm water down on her body could make dangerous thoughts crawl like spiders against her skin. When the cold weather made her curl into the bed and there was no solace there. When the wakefulness in the dead of night would not let sleep come and the clock ticked like a dynamite about to explode and she could no longer keep control and she would weep like a broken woman who has lost everything in life. She spoke of all this and had let the tears flow onto her face. Manjooran had watched and felt helpless and miserable and could do nothing but hold her close and whisper that she needed to let these thoughts go, to allow them to disappear with the tears.

And she had heard too the words that Manjooran had spoken and felt drawn into the swamp of fears he was drowning in. It was Sосha who had him entrapped, who had left him caught between the past and the future. She was gone, he knew that and the presence he used to feel, as a shadow, as an almost-caress, as a whisper in his ears, was now not as immediate as it once had been. Her fading presence; it was this that tortured him like an acid wash over his skin, burning, bruising him. There was the weight of an awesome guilt, the corroding thought that with her departure, he had left behind loyalty and fidelity at the graveyard and had moved on to the next woman in his life. It sounded terrible even to him. Like a betrayal. Of course, he knew it was more than that, much more complex and confusing. And the horrifying, sickening thought that clang like a warning siren in his mind: what will the people say? How would he wipe the smirks off their face or refuse to hear the exaggerated gasps of incredulity they would be only too happy to utter. There would be loss of credibility and the outraged collective face of Christendom shouting into his face that he was an unfaithful husband and a disgrace to civilized Christian society.

Society he could face or maybe run away from; he could escape into some faraway world where he would not be seen, where there was none to mock him. The real thing was the small matter of his own conscience, the slow dripping away of his sense of loyalty to his now departed wife, his soon-to-be-forgotten wife. Forget society, he said to himself, but can you look at yourself in the mirror and say you have done the right thing, that you have been fair to the memory of your dead wife, lying quite dead, six feet deep in the ground,

in the cemetery behind the church. If he has to move on with his life, that is the question he had to face, to examine its terrors and nightmares, to confront it with strength and courage. He spoke to Rekha of his uncertainty, where this would all lead to between the two of them. He fervently prayed that whatever they decided, it would be the best for both of them and for all the ones around them. And through it all, the awful emptiness growing within him that shaved away his insides, lining by lining, leaving him seeping blood from his multitudinous tears and scratches, one day by bitterly lonely day. With the sick feeling at the pit of his stomach, he pondered over the awesome plight he was in.

As she lay back in her seat in the coach, she let the thoughts crowd in. She felt too the excitement of the relationship rise in her like a balmy rain-cloud. Her thoughts were all good and relaxing and she could feel the warmth glowing within. She drifted between half sleep and distracted thoughts for a while, the rhythm of the train wheels like a quiet, muffled drum roll in her ears. For a moment she was disturbed by the arrival of another passenger looking for a seat, who tried to sit in the one next to her. She glared at him, pointed at other vacant seats and shooed him away in that direction. No, if she could help it, she would not let her own corner of the train be disturbed.

The coffee boy came around and she helped herself to a cup. He asked for five rupees. She knew she was being overcharged, but smiled at the young lad as she handed over the coin. This was no time to be petty over trifles. This was the time to set unsettled things right, to plan for the rest of her life, to aim for big goals, to search for happiness, for that was the one elusive thing she longed to get her arms around. She tried to count the stages of her life and categorize them in terms of happiness achieved. Her childhood: happy. Her teens: indifferent. Her youth: horrible with the malevolence of her father sitting like a troglodyte on her shoulders. Her early days of her career: happy. Her marriage: wonderful. The accident and thereafter: terrible and full of pain. Her life after that: a mixed bag, reflecting both the long ordinary spell of a desultory personal life, and the wonders of the work she was doing at the hospital. And now: could she hope for bliss? Surely, the pursuit of bliss was a fundamental right.

The train eased into Thiruvananthapuram Station. She looked out of the window and saw Chetan waiting for her, tall and dark and gaunt. He had pared himself and his life down to just the essentials: he was the minimalist man; with a thin cotton shirt and a dhoti and rubber sandals. That was all. As she stepped out, her overnighter in her hand, he rushed to her and clasped her to himself, smiling down at her with a joy so clearly shining in his eyes. With his hand on her shoulder, he walked her through the jostling crowd to the main gates of the station and then to the car park, where the sturdy old station wagon was waiting for them. The drive home was filled with what they called catching-up conversation. They had not met for about a year now, both of them caught up in their own respective lives. There was no mention of the reason why she had come for this visit and Chetan did not wish to press her just at that moment. He knew she would reveal what she wanted to say, exactly when she wanted to say it. So they talked of other things.

They remembered their mother, now gone on to some elusive metaphysical literary world, peopled with philosophers and poets. Her room was left exactly as she had kept it when she was alive, dimly lit and mystical, filled with the ghosts of men of letters. The legal business was doing very well indeed. Chetan was reticent to expand it further. It had to be personally managed; he did not like it to be a faceless empire where persons were treated as commodities and bargained over for monetary considerations. They talked of their old retainers and the wrinkled old servant who still insisted that he serve them both with his own hands. And then they had reached the gates of the white, sprawling bungalow with its green doors and windows and the tall trees and the sprawling green grounds. Familiar territory that brought up mixed feelings each time she saw it; it gladdened and depressed her both at the same time.

She went into her old room, where the servants had changed the sheets on the bed with fresh linen. The room smelt wonderful, as if the lime trees outside had lent their perfume just for her visit. A quick bath and then on for lunch where she and Chetan helped themselves to fried fish and rice and curds and vegetables stirred in coconut oil. Kuttichetan, their old retainer, feeble and a little doddering by now, plied them with the curries

and the extra spoonfuls of rice they could not possibly eat. He did not know that they were no longer young children with endless appetites. There was some *prathamam* as sweet dish. They both laughed at the memory of children fighting over the last spoonfuls at the bottom of the dish in the good old days when they were younger and the world had not grown as complicated as it was now. They washed their hands at the old porcelain sink at the corner of the dining room and moved to the lounge.

It had now become impossible to postpone the inevitable any longer. And so she told him. She told him all that there was to be told, neither embellishing the facts nor diminishing them. The facts as they are, cold, clear and unvarnished. And he listened. The intensity of the emotions he was going through showed on his face. It revealed his anxieties for his little sister, now come to him with a trust and devotion too poignant to contemplate. Much as a young child with a broken toy plane who knew with certainty he would set it right and make it fly again. And when the telling was done, he sat back into his armchair and breathed a deep, weary sigh of uncertain emotion, closing his eyes for a moment. He knew the contours of the dangerous ground she was treading. He had explored such uncharted planets some eons ago.

“I have to think, Mol, give me a minute,” he smiled wearily and then went into a kind of trance from where he roused himself out and asked her questions; penetrating, pointed questions, about Manjooran’s children, and whether she had met them and what she thought of their possible reactions to her presence in their midst and what kind of ripples the news was likely to stir in the social circles she moved in at Kochi. Rekha smiled to herself: she did not need to explain the complexities of the situation, for Chetan’s mind was already traversing the length and breadth of the conundrum she had unraveled for him.

And when he had done, he turned to her and said: “Do what your heart tells you to do, Mol, for you have your own life to lead. I was only worrying about what your actions could have on the world around you and what that world could do to make you miserable. I also considered the way his family would react to the situation and intervene in your lives. Ultimately, the decision is yours, but you have my full blessings for the course of action you finally decide. I shall stand by you through very hell itself should someone cross you. I can’t think of another person who has more of a right to search for happiness than you do.”

This was what Rekha had known he would finally say. In her heart of hearts she was confident Chetan would be her knight in shining armor. She knew too it would not be blind acceptance of the situation, but a stand he would adopt after having judged the pros and cons thoroughly. Chetan had studied the issue presented using his legal skills, but more, the love he bore for his sister. He had decided he would go along with her on the difficult path ahead, standing one step to her side, with bludgeon and sword to dispel all intruders with evil on their minds. There were imponderables he had not considered, not because he would not, but because he could not, without all the facts in his possession. As far as his beloved sister was concerned, she did not have to think of anybody else, but him, Chetan, and he had assured her of his full support. But he had no clue whatsoever of the other side, Manjooran’s side of the unfolding story. Would there be obstacles there on the thorny path they would have to traverse? He did not know and he could not factor in unknown complications into the calculations.

Then there was all the time to sit and talk about this and that, about the past and the present, about the possibilities of the future. She spoke about the sorrow she had gleaned out of Manjooran’s past and how he was battling every day and night with the ghost of his past life with Sosha. And how that past stood in the way of his yearning to find happiness in the days it was now his to live. How there was anxiety and courage, guilt and optimism. They talked long into the late afternoon and as evening fell, they moved out of the house into the cool grounds next to the building, where the trees had grown even taller. The dried leaves strewn about crunched under their feet. The birds were returning home to their nests, cooing and cawing in the cooling night. They saw the first stars emerge and the uncommon, everyday sight of darkness falling across the horizon, like a dark cloak over their shoulders.

Then it was time to go in and have a light dinner before retiring for the night. The food was delicious, and Kuttichetan had prepared a lovely fish curry with fragrant *appams* and a vegetable side dish that brought

back so many memories from days gone by, memories sweet and poignant, dark and brooding. The past hung over them like a cloud, bright in parts, but mostly lowing and murky. There had been so much unhappiness for both of them in this house, illumined rarely with rays of light that flitted like a good spirit, sent by a sympathetic god, determined to ensure that the days of one's childhood were not all bleak and irredeemable.

And then when the meal was over, she smiled at her brother and announced she would retire for the night. She was to leave the early next morning and she wanted a good night's rest before the train journey back to Kochi. In the morning there would be no time for more conversation, just enough for a quick cup of tea and a hurried drive to the Railway Station before catching the train back. She gave him a hug, in gratitude for his patience and his quiet ear. She meant to thank him for being there, but that was not necessary, for he would always, always be there, even if he were not in her sight. For a moment, there were some warm tears that rose into her eyes, but she brushed them away quickly. Chetan smiled sadly; there was no need to say much more. And then she had turned and gone back to her room.

As she lay in bed and pondered over the many questions she had to face in the days to come, there was now a certain reassurance. Whatever the outcome of the particular predicament she and Manjooran were in, at least they would have taken the road they intended to travel after all the thought and consideration possible. They would not jump to a decision like raw young lovers on a headlong collision course with a painful destiny. They would be mature and reasoned. They would keep their own best interests in mind, and if possible, the best interests of the others too. On that note she did not find it hard to fall asleep.

The next morning came quickly and she was on her way to the Station and then into the train. Soon enough, she was back at her Kochi home. Certain things had been clarified, certain things had to be explored further. But then, who knows for certain what the future might bring for both of them.

In the next few days, she set about arranging another meeting amongst some special old friends. This too had to be gone through, not only because it was necessary, but because she felt good in the gathering of these old mates of hers, soul sisters as she liked to call them. Abha was on leave from her job in the Middle East and it was easy to get Mini to agree to come over for the long weekend of the Onam holidays. They promised each other a good time, but hearing Rekha's voice over the telephone, they both divined that this was not just an ordinary meeting to catch up on old memories, no mere get-together of old friends. It took a couple of days to arrange the date and time to the mutual satisfaction of all concerned. And then in a kind of magical moment that comes rarely, there they were again, the three of them together, once more chatting and pulling each other's legs, regaling themselves with long forgotten stories of days gone by, of camaraderie and college pranks and examination papers and the all too quick passage of time. It was strange and wonderful, how the best of friends can pick up the threads again with no difficulty at all, even though the years flown by may be decades or more. But there was no need for formal re-introductions and the cautious opening of conversation. It all came back so quickly, so naturally, so very wonderfully.

Daniel was at his best. He had laid out a spread unrivalled in culinary excellence. It reminded him once more of the dinners his old master, the Brigadier used to organize, in the good old days when he was whole and well, before he had lost his limb in battle. In the couple of days that the three of them stayed together, there was a virtual cornucopia of tantalizing dishes that teased and tingled the palate, leaving them groaning. They had never eaten so much in their lives and were left complaining that all their stout resolutions to reduce weight and eat less of fat and grease had been completely compromised, that they would get obese and unrecognizable by the time that they were done with Daniel. There were dosas and idlis in the morning, there was for lunch a huge repast of fried fish and vegetables simmering in a sea of coconut oil and in the evenings there were samosas and pastries and lemon tea. The night was undiluted hedonism; the chicken and the meat dishes were delectable and left them uncomfortably full in the stomach. But they did not complain too much.

And then in the evening there was time, enough time for the three of them to lean back in the corner of the warm sitting room and sit down to a good old chat, as they had had done, so many, many times in those golden days of their youth, just some eons ago, when there was no such thing invented as marriage and heartbreak. And they listened, as only friends know how. Quiet, patient, full of encompassing empathy, leaving each other more courageous and stronger, merely in the telling of the story. And then there were

gentle questions asked, some warm hugs and the wiping away of tears. There was a hearkening back to an almost, but not quite, forgotten incident, when Mini had grieved with the love of a heart not permitted requital, the many searing moments of which were known to all three of them. But that was another tale which needs not be re-awakened now; the scab had grown well, the wound was now not weeping. And Rekha grasped Mini to herself and vowed that she would never ever allow herself to be defeated in her inalienable right to happiness, and that she would defy the very heavens to grasp that shining glory in her fist. Then she would mock her Enemy sitting on His throne in the stars and tell him that she had won yet another prize, right from under His nose.

It took some time to fill them in all the details. It was now clear that Rekha knew which way the path ahead lay. She had her brother's unquestioning nod of approval and her friends' unconditional, everlasting assurance to stand by her till the very end. She had confidence now that her face was pointed in the right direction. She smiled at them and that was enough. They knew she was happy in their companionship, their friendship.

Then it was time to sit down again to another groaning table filled with the wondrous delights Daniel's imagination could summon up. There was fun and laughter and light-hearted ribbing of each other and the settling down in their minds of the black clouds that had appeared from time to time in the years when they had not met; when confidences waiting to be unburdened could not be let loose, when the pain grown in the individual lives they had led knew no release in the rough and tumble of their not-so-frequent camaraderie. Mini had found happiness in the fine man that it was her fortune to marry at a time when it had seemed the universe had conspired to snatch ecstasy from her very fingers. She had known much joy with him in the years gone by and in the childrening of two fine boys who now threatened to grow into men before her very eyes.

Abha had had her share of misfortune, but she had determined that there would be no man alive who would deprive her of her allotted task of the ministry of the ill and deprived, in the daily joy of which she reveled. She had grown from the mousy, double-plaited girl she had once been, to a blousy, big-bosomed, bluff and hard-headed woman. In a foreign land, so far from the narrow confines of the strait-laced society of middle-class Kerala, it was easy to delineate a set of new moral laws applicable to her life and hers alone; some form of a modified ten commandments that she enforced with rigid discipline which suffered no laxity when applied to one and all. Indeed there were some men, but those men had then been sent on their way at the slightest indication that they were taking more than a purely physical interest in her or were looking for a long-term relationship. Anything beyond the bed was strictly out of bounds for any one who would dare impose a different paradigm on the nature of their transient relationship. Ships that came and went in the night and that was that. She never thought of these interludes in terms other than this. She wished her friends could learn a trick or two from her.

In the night before Mini and Abha were to leave, they finished their dinner early, sent Daniel on his way and sat down to some serious drinking that went on and on until the wee hours of the morning. It was a necessary ritual and one that would once again place the seal of eternal friendship on the special relationship it was their joy to be part of. They talked of college days, of colleagues gone their separate ways, of friends who had moved on from this world to a better one, of those who had made good of their lives and those who had not. It all seemed so long ago now. And then it was time to break up. They hugged each other goodnight in an alcoholic haze of good cheer and went to their separate beds a couple of hours before the harsh sunlight woke them up again and forced them to break their idyllic and all too brief sojourn. It was now time to get back to the everyday business of life.

ALICE IS TOLD

Ultimately Alice did not need to ask. There was an awkward evening at her father's some three months later, when the truth, the whole, incomprehensible, staggering truth came out, in a rush of words that seemed to last for ever and ever. There were some meanderings, some distractions and deviations, there were some deliberate stops and possible distortions; but Alice and Hari did not interrupt. They allowed the words to flow down like a mountain stream, like a shower of rain that swept the yellow leaves aside and left the earth tingling fresh and radiant. Alice knew this was needed, this outpouring of words that had to be spoken, a confession that took courage in the telling of it.

Hari's suggestion was that she question her father straight out what the whole damned mystery was all about, whether there was any truth in the staggering conjecture she had arrived at, and to make her father speak the truth simply by asking him straight to his face. It didn't really work that way, she sighed. Indeed, there were times when she was tempted to take the reins in her hand and stare her father in the eyes and ask: all right, its truth time, out with it: what is your relationship with Dr. Rekha Kurien? But she moved back at the last moment just as the words were forming in her mouth. She was aghast at the sheer audacity of that potential question. Could she ever have the grit to ask her father that? Each time she went back home, defeated once more by her sense of daughterly propriety. And each time she spoke to her Hari yet again about her failure, he simply smiled and shrugged his shoulders. She felt she was becoming more accomplice than interrogator, more of a co-accused in a crime about to be committed than a law enforcer ready to lift baton and mace to prevent a travesty of justice.

So she was indeed more than happy to hear her father ask her on the telephone for both of them to come over, for he had something important to tell her. "It's been some weeks since we had some time together, Mol. And I have something to tell you and Hari. Something important. I need you both to listen to me. Okay? So it's settled. We met in two hours from now, and I shall get Kamala to make the lamb curry you like so much."

When Alice conveyed the news to Hari, he was immediately sure that what was in the offing was a confession of sorts. He was certain about it. And relieved that Alice did not have to go through the onerous task of questioning her father on his relationship with the good lady doctor.

She knew then that it was coming and for a moment she faltered. Then she gathered her strength once again. She knew it required more courage on her father's part to tell the story than she did in the hearing of it. She said a prayer to herself then, that whatever was coming would end well for all of them, would leave no bloody footprints around. There were too many parties in the playing out of the coming events. Papa certainly would face the brunt of it. But so would she and Hari and the children, being the closest to her father, not merely in geographical terms but also in the distances and nearnesses of the heart. Then there was Teresa, so far away, and these days farther than the mere miles seemed to indicate. And finally George, the son and heir, who would probably crinkle his eyes, smile blandly and make no comment at all. Sheeba and their son did not come into her reckoning at all, not because she did not think of them, but because she thought they would go by what George said and thought. And that was not much in any way. Then there were the upright citizens of the town, the strong and powerful opinion makers, the moral fabric of the Catholic Church, the smirkers and jokesters, the frowners and sarcastic comment-makers. For them she had contempt in her heart. But she knew too that they could be quite a handful when aroused and cause untold mischief that would never come to an end until her father had been made a laughing stock and thrown out of the community.

The dinner was laid out by the time Alice and Hari reached her father's house. The twins had been given an early dinner and tucked away in bed with the admonition that they should be fast asleep within half an hour. Papa and Mama had something important to discuss with Appachan and would be back latest by ten-thirty or so. Kamala had volunteered to stay on a bit longer than usual to help with the dinner and by the time they sat down at the table, it was close to nine in the evening. All three of them understood that nothing would be said as long as Kamala was hanging around. Unconsciously they hurried with the meal. The rice and the chapattis with the lamb curry and the vegetable mix were being pushed from one end of the table to the other. Her father was full of smiles and laughter and cracking jokes at small little things that had happened many years ago, anecdotes about Alice and her childhood and the little joys and heartaches of the children growing up. Puss made a nuisance of herself, getting under Kamala's feet and mewing for scraps from the table.

At the end there was a sweet dish of ripe bananas fried in ghee and sprinkled with nutmeg and sugar that left a wonderful aftertaste in the mouth long after the dinner was over. Hari wondered if this were deliberate; to sweeten the mood before the bitter news was revealed. Till that time there was not a word about what the real agenda for this evening was all about. The talk continued, frothy and light. Now it was all about the twins and their escapades and how they made Alice and Hari laugh at their antics and their genuine love and affection for each other and their irrepressible antics which turned the house upside down. As the evening progressed, however, Manjooran seemed to withdraw into himself. He talked less and less and seemed to be creeping into some place within himself. He was full of inward thoughts he tried to suppress. Now and then he revived interest in the conversation, trying to force a little gaiety into the chatter. There was a scrupulous avoidance of any subject that had even the remotest connection with Sosha.

And then Kamala had washed out all the dishes and begged leave to go home. She was sent on her way with the extra food that had not been consumed. Then the three of them were alone in the house. They sat down in the comfortable sofas in the drawing room. Alice tucked her legs under her and leaned back in her chair, while Hari sat formally and straight next to her. Manjooran was in his favorite rocking chair and he was now quite worried and abstracted, in an awkward mood that made him uncomfortable. He leaned back reclining into his chair saying almost nothing, but talking of the weather and the rising crime graph in the city and how the police were not doing anything about it.

The minutes ticked by. The loud clock on the wall spoke to them about the passage of time, not in a philosophical manner about the frailty of man and his helplessness in the face of an all consuming fate, but in the immediate context of why both of them had been invited for dinner. Manjooran had something important to say but it seemed it was not immediately forthcoming. Had he decided not to reveal anything at all, Alice wondered.. Had he suddenly developed cold feet? Hari was more analytical and watched Manjooran carefully. What was the old man up to? When would he say something? Hari was sure Manjooran had no clue that both of them did have an inkling of what was hapenning.. So he waited and watched. But there was not a word of the main import of that evening's appointment. Time was moving along and there was no revelation waiting to be divulged. Manjooran seemed restless, uncertain, his hands constantly moving, furrows on his forehead, looking down, unable to look them in the eye and speak the truth. He seemed to be now full of introspective thoughts, hardly looking up at them, lost in some nether world where he was drowning in the waves of deep, cloudy thoughts. Finally it was left to Alice to break the monotony of the faltering conversation and ask the all-important question.

"What is it, Papa? You wanted to tell us something." Manjooran stared up at her with glazed eyes. He nodded and then was silent again. He regretted now that he had called them at all, that he had announced his intention of making an announcement on some matter of importance. Perhaps he needed to have thought it out more carefully before calling Alice and Hari over.

And then the question he least expected was fired at him, like a bullet into the head. And this time it was Hari. Hari had wanted Alice to be saved from asking the inevitable question, the delicate nature of which would have been embarrassing for a daughter to throw at her father. And so he had taken the task upon himself. He did not realize it was a moment of high poetic justice. Some three years ago, in this very room, Manjooran had hurled upon his unsuspecting head the very choicest of abuses and had kicked him out of the house for having had the temerity, the audacity, of having fallen in love with his daughter. It had enormous consequences for their lives in the years ahead, when the family would be split asunder and the iron would enter the heart of the man now sitting helpless and tongue-tied before him. When a daughter would leave her father's house in anger. It was an act that would hasten the death of a simple, loving woman. And so, even though Hari did not realize it at that moment, the words he said were the rounding off of a complex algebraic calculation. Now the equation was balanced.

"Is it about Dr. Rekha?" he asked.

Manjooran's head jerked up as if he had been pulled sharply by a halter around his neck. He was suddenly gasping for air. He was lost and floundering in the waters that seemed to rise up to his neck here in the drawing room of his own home. There was a long silence. Finally he smiled, foolishly, uncertainly, tenuously. Hari and Alice waited. There was something like pity in Hari's eyes. Alice seemed to be on the verge of tears, her eyes glistening at the sight of her proud father brought to his knees by a truth he dared not utter, a truth he could not keep secret within his chest a minute longer.

"What's that you said?" If there were any means by which he could keep from uttering the words he knew would spread like a thunderous flood through the family, then he would try to hang on to that last vestige of self-respect.

There were only blank stares to meet his words. Surely, Hari and Alice could not do much to help him out here. And why should they: he had invited them tonight with the clear understanding he had something of importance to tell them. And here he was, gasping like a beached whale, the air in his lungs sucked out as though he had been kicked in the solar plexus. Then he looked down and prayed for equanimity and took a deep breath and began.

"Okay, I do have something to tell you. And it is about Dr. Rekha Kurien. And it's about me. It's about both of us. I do not know how and why you asked me about her. I am sure I gave you no cause to think it. But if you did, then I may either have been lax in my cover-up of the facts of this case, or you have been too clever for me." There was a thin smile returning to his face. The reference to his failed attempt to hide the facts in the face of their cunning, brought to both Hari and Alice too, a glimmer of good cheer. Alice rose from her chair and hugged her father tight. She spoke movingly, "Papa, whatever brings you happiness makes us happy too."

Hari spoke up from his place on the sofa behind her, "I am so glad that you understand the meaning of love."

There was a pause that hung for a quiet moment like an unexplained question mark. There were unplumbed depths in that small sentence. Sure, there was happiness that echoed Alice's more apparent statement. But more, Hari had thrown a small challenge at him. The reference to the past was again raised in his face. There was a resonance to the words, an echo to the moment some three years ago, when Manjooran had hurled the foulest of curses at him and kicked him out. Hari's crime was that he had, in a not unreasonable manner, asked for the hand of Manjooran's daughter. Both Hari and Alice were younger then and not much older than they were today. Love is the business of the young, is it not? Then what was this old man doing in a young man's domain? This was the challenge thrown across the room towards Manjooran in the words that Hari spoke so casually, so innocuously.

The import of the words was not lost on Alice, for she turned sharply towards Hari and raised her eyebrows, questioningly, wonderingly. What was this man doing, this man she loved so much, for whom she had forsaken home and hearth, what the hell was he up to? Who could have known Hari better? She knew exactly

what he meant. She knew too that uncharacteristically, he had spoken out in this manner simply to win for himself a small victory over the old man sitting before him. A sort of settling of accounts. There was a quiet glint in his eyes, a small moment of triumph that glowed and then faded. This sort of mood was not something Alice had ever noticed in him earlier. She was not quite sure if she approved of the manner in which he had spoken. She got back to her place next to him and placed her hand on his arm. It was a small gesture of intimacy, but it was also a restraint, a quiet warning that he had said enough. He had made his point and whether he had scored or not in her father's heart was something she would never be able to tell. For Manjooran did not seem to hear. That was comfort enough for her.

But at the back of her mind, a sudden thought struck at her, raising uneasiness and alarm. If the mere revelation of Papa's relationship with Rekha could raise a response as the one she had seen just now in Hari, then she feared what the coming days would bring. The sudden flush of disquiet she had first felt starting in the pit of her stomach, while seated in her car on the day she had guessed the truth, now seemed to rise up once more inside her. She brushed her thoughts away and leaned forward and said, "Papa tell us what you wanted to say. We are here for you. And we shall help as much as we can."

She feared for her father and prayed he would come out from the stress of the days ahead with his pride intact and his smile still in place. And she listened. Manjooran's words spelt out all she had suspected. She knew most of the import, though little of the actual facts and circumstances of the events she heard unfold from the suddenly dry and quivering lips of the man she had known as her proud and strong father. Papa had commanded the Manjooran household for the many years she had grown up under his tutelage and protection. He had been the strong and irresistible force that had driven her most of her life. But he was too, the heartless avenging demon, who for the brief two years she had left the protection of the four walls of the house, had been an implacable enemy, an unforgiving dictator who refused to condone her sin of having loved one not recognized and acknowledged by him. John Manjooran was monarch of all he surveyed and bitter enemy of recalcitrant daughters who stepped out of line.

But she listened. She listened to the plaintive stammering of words that tried to justify where there were no justifications. Manjooran tried to plumb the depth and intensity of the love he still felt for Sosha, tried to explain the horrifying ghastliness of the loneliness he had fallen into, when every day seemed to beckon him to the edge of a singular madness that had once pushed him beyond the edge of reason, when he had stood poised between life and death, the sharp shaving blade held poised over the green veins of his hand.

And he spoke of how he had met the doctor as he was recovering. Surely, Alice would remember the kindness with which she had looked after him in the hospital. And how later she had come for the homecoming party Alice had held in celebration for his recovery and how Rekha had then been so graceful and friendly. And the many meetings that both of them had had, hidden from the sight of their respective families. Of how he had had many a time considered the question of revealing the nature of the growing tenderness between both of them, first to Alice and then to the other two children, but how he had shied away, for the thought of what he was contemplating was too awesome for him to absorb. How could he then expect his children to understand what he was doing. Oh, how he had agonized over the wisdom of his actions. How he had recited over and over again the arguments that made it undeniably clear that this was a union he should never enter into. That it would never be endorsed, not only by the pillars of the society he belonged too, and he was sure he did not care a damn about them, but by his very children. How he had shunned away from the thought of it all and had many a time resolved to put an end to the tairy tale romance he had written himself into.

But each time, each single time he decided he would pull back, the prospect of his unending loneliness, the stretching of his days into an eternity of mornings and nights, the nightmare of growing into a feeble and senile old man, kept forming in the shadows of his mind. And he knew that he would be damned before he would slip into being a doddering, old fool he was bound to be some day. And the thought of Rekha would rise once again before his eyes and the prospect of growing old was once more not so horrifying. The thought

of a companion, a woman who had seen the agonies of life and had not been defeated, stood as a beacon in the darkness ahead, beckoning like a wonderful angel, standing between himself and a horrifyingly slow, withering away of life. With her there, he could go gentle into that good night.

And he spoke too of how he was convinced, of how sure he was of the rightness of his act, of how Sosha too would endorse what he was contemplating. And how that contemplation had become a certainty, and how that certainty had become a resolve, an inflexible determination that he would not stand and be mocked at. Manjooran's voice rose. His declaration was as clear as a statement made in the light of reason and logic. Once more it seemed to Alice that her father had become a younger man, as she had known him once to be, the chief executive of a company, taking a decision after considering all odds and circumstances, all risks and criticisms, knowing there was no other course that could be taken. Emotion may surely have been the beginning of the process taking him on the path he was now treading, but it was reason that was now holding up the decision for him.

And then he was done. There was a pause and she saw her father look up and stare both of them in the eye. There was a plea in there somewhere, a pleading even, for understanding, for acceptance of his decision. There was too defiance, a stubborn resolve not to be diverted from the path he had chosen. Alice saw that her Papa was once more the very unquestionable foundation of the Manjooran household, the one who had taken the family along with his masterly management, how he was always in the right and that nobody else, nothing else mattered but that he should get what he wanted. Imperceptibly, she almost shook her head and smiled. These were the very rocks against which her boat had floundered not so long ago. When she had last been on the point of capsizing on the sharp edges of the Manjooran rock, she had gathered herself and resolved that she would not let herself be wrecked on them, she would not allow herself to be bullied into a course of action she did not find acceptable. Indeed, she would find happiness for herself beyond the comfort of the household. Who was her father to stand between her and her chosen path? Surely, she had been her father's daughter then, a diamond to cut a diamond. And now here she was, seeing the same arguments in play, more composed now than she had been then, for she was forewarned and forearmed about events in store. More, it was not she, but her father who was taking a decision that would have all kinds of consequences impossible now to foresee.

To Hari, the very irony of it was amusing. To think that not so long ago, this man had abused him in such a manner as to make him walk out of the house and that now, without even realising he was committing the same crime he had once accused him of, was seeking approbation from both of them, the very ones he had thrown out. Hari was on the point of laughing out loud. Should he mention it, he wondered. Should he mock him with the very irony of the situation? And see him fumble and search for subtle distinctions and differences, seeking some way to make his situation look different from the one in which Alice had put him. Or should he just let it be. The temptation was too strong to resist for the situation was too similar to ignore. And so he let him get a taste of what he had been through in those momentous days.

"I seem to recall a similar incident played out in this very room some years ago, when it was I who was doing the talking and Amma was pleading on Alice's behalf and you had turned into a stranger whom I did not recognize. You do remember that, don't you?" There was some cruelty in those words, he realized. He spoke, not to get back at Alice's father for what he had done them, but more to test the strength of Manjooran's resolve, to assess the extent to which he would go to get what he wanted.

There was a pause. In the small stillness, Puss made a moaning sound in her throat that sounded loud and disturbing. It seemed as if she could feel the distress of her master. Manjooran had his back to Hari as he said those words and he saw his shoulders slump into a dejected acceptance of the fact. The fact was that he had once been a man who had lacked all understanding when he had spoken as he had to Hari that rainy evening some years ago. When he had not had the equanimity and maturity to call Alice back when she was ready to leave. He had sat in a stony silence and heard the taxi at the gate, while she had grabbed her hastily packed backs and left with the children in tow.

But Manjooran, being Manjooran, roused himself up from his despondency, squared his shoulders again and threw back the words at Hari, “There was no need to bring that up now, was there?” he snorted and there was some asperity in his voice. Here he was, telling them of the cataclysmic event that would change all he had held dear, and Hari turns on him and reminds him what an ass he had once been.

Alice, shocked at this second breach of family etiquette rushed in to calm things down. She did not want another civil war in the house. She knew what reparation had been given to end the first one. The cost of peace was the death of her mother. That she would not see repeated now. She needed to tell Hari some things very clearly. But for now, the waters had to be calmed.

“You need to tell all about this to George and Teresa too, Papa. They need to know too before you go any further in this. I hope you will speak to them soon.”

“Speak? I think it would be better to write my thoughts out. I would not be able to convey all this over the telephone.”

“Then do so immediately. Once they get your letter, I’ll speak to them too. Don’t worry too much. Things will turn out all right.”

And then it was time to rise and say the right things and move out of the house to the car and wave their hands in goodbye. Manjooran was left all alone in the house to gather his thoughts, to get down to the task of writing out the long explanatory letters to his two other children. There was the matter of timing. It would be good they both learn the developments at the same time. Perhaps he should e-mail Teresa a few days later so she would know about it the same time the letter to George reached him. It was not clear why Manjooran wanted both of his other children to simultaneously get to know the conundrum that was now in the making. Perhaps it was just Manjooran’s need to bring symmetry into the chaos frothing all around him. Perhaps he thought to himself, let them both come to know of it at the same time. George, he knew, would have nothing much to say, he would blink and accept whatever was given to him. But it was Teresa he was worried about. She could be critical and outspoken and he was not sure if he could handle that.

The letter to George was written, tucked into the envelope and sent on its way the next day. A few days later, he copied it out slowly into the computer and sent off the e-mail to Teresa in far off England. The mode of the staggered dispatch of the news, analogue and digital, had enormous consequences. There would be regrets and heartbreak that this simple differentiation in communication would cause. Had the electronic mail been sent out even a day earlier, the results would have been unbelievably different. Life itself would have been dramatically different, happier, unimaginably altered. But Manjooran had no clue about the crime he had just committed, his last, blundering gigantic error that would haunt him forever and ever. The die was cast. The future would reveal all.

CHANGE OF HEART

Evening at the University is a time for reflection. The hustle and bustle of the day is over. Dinner is not ready yet, but you have drunk your cup of tea and you are lounging in bed with the morning newspaper, rarely ever read in the mornings. The stereo is playing 'oldies but goldies'. It is seven in the evening.

Campus life is varied and exhilarating. There was a lively theatre that featured movies, plays and song sessions. Debates and discussion groups enlivened the evenings. Eager young men from Europe and Asia gathered here, searching for the elusive key to success. While student fees were exorbitant, there was a consummate joy in achievements made in scholastic efforts. There were some Indians too; with their own exclusive social groups where Holi and Deepavali were celebrated, with songs and spicy food and much energetic dancing. There was a forced frenzy in the celebrations, a mad affirmation of things Indian in a land where the very air was bleak and strange. It was almost like being back home. She smiled over the expatriate life she was leading.

From her window, Teresa could see the snow falling outside, while she is snug and warm with a rug across her legs. She was going through the mail. Nothing seemed to be of any particular interest to her. The normal fliers for books from publishers, her credit card bills, some invitations for campus entertainment. The tea was already tepid and she had to get through some of her reading for the next day's classes. Living in rented quarters imposed a certain kind of discipline on life. Getting up in the morning, making her breakfast, usually boiled eggs and toast, getting dressed and rushing out from the warmth of her room, bundling up for the cold outside and then swiftly striding the half mile to the University campus and her classes. She did not prefer the bicycle some of the students on the campus used. Walking was more efficient and she did not need to look after the bike and its maintenance. The lesser the things to take care of, the better.

And then it was time to check her mail on the net. She had kept up a lively communication with old friends from back home. She looked forward to hearing from them as often as possible. Lekha and Pavitra from her old college days still kept in touch with her. One had become a software engineer in the US; the other was a housewife with a penchant for writing, whose weekly column in the local Sunday newspaper brought her a modicum of fame. The in-box had the usual spam, she noted with disgust. But it was with some surprise she saw mail from Papa. He had hardly ever corresponded to her over the net; this was a rare one indeed. She read the first paragraph, a non-committal recital of recent events, though he had begun by saying he had something of great importance to tell her. He kept her waiting while he approached the subject from an oblique angle. The burden of the letter was soon revealed, dribbling out in fits and starts, now apologetic, now defiant. As Teresa read it, she could almost feel the slow crawl of a cold hand along her nape.

In the few years she had been at the University, and especially in the last few months, and indeed ever since she came back from her mother's funeral, she had felt a disconnection with all things around her, even with her studies, even with her Paul. All things seemed to have lost their colour; she was living in a black and white world, with at best, differing shades of gray to highlight her sharply vacillating moods. Now, however, she felt the crashing impact of her father's message, falling on her with a sudden shock as of icy water. Later, much later, when all things that had to happen had happened, when the world was starting to spin again, she would look back at this very moment and remember how she had been leaning back in her chair and staring at the computer screen; the staggering news had struck her like a blow on her jaw. This moment ended one life of hers. At this precise second, another began. This was the instant that split past from future.

The e-mail shattered, in a cataclysmic moment, the self-contained bubble she had been living in these past many months. She closed her eyes and let the import of the message sink into her. Marrying a divorcee, a decade younger than he, at a time when he should have been reconciling himself to the loss of Amma and

confronting the prospect of living a solitary life for the rest of his days. Some do it with prayer, others by diversion, and yet others by drowning themselves in liquor. Papa was not so much the religious kind and she could never think of him sitting for hours in the church or joining prayer groups. Nor was he a man who would resort to liquor to knock himself out.

She had hoped he would find the energy to travel and perhaps visit her now and then, or go out around the country and see places he had read about, tourist spots he would really enjoy. Could he travel alone, she wondered, though he was healthy and robust enough to do that. It would depend on Alice, she guessed and Alice would use her wisdom to decide; she probably would permit him to go ahead. But this, Papa, what are you doing? A second marriage to drown out the sorrow of the first? And what about Amma, what about her? Did you consider what your children would have to say? I hope you realize the consequences of your course of action, Papa.

Of the Manjooran household, Teresa was the least traditional, the least reverential about convention and conduct. She was not the one to grumble about something not in conformity with the ways of her family. And the fact she had lived the last few years in England made her even more willing to accept new thoughts and the manner in which she should live her life. But this, this was more than she could accept. This was not like changing over to a new flavour of ice cream.

The moment would define her life ahead; for it was then that it happened. As if a switch had been turned on in her head. And for the life of her, she could not even make a guess what had happened, what had brought about this sudden flash of lightning in her mind. Everything was suddenly so clear and distinct. The fog lifted from her mind and the world was as washed clean in the rain. Without hesitation, she knew what she wanted to do. She knew the road she would travel. Without a shadow of doubt in her mind, with all the conviction she could summon, she now knew it was time to go home. Teresa paused; she rose from her seat and started to pace up and down the length of her room. She wondered fleetingly about the mystery sweeping through her. But she had no time to pause and consider the reasons for the transformation. She only knew she had to leave now and rush back home. It was as definitive, as conclusive, and as final as that.

Papa's letter had done more than make her realize she was far away from the only home she had had, that she needed to be by her father in the days ahead, to know for herself what was moving him to take such a dramatic, unforeseen decision. She could never have contemplated that Papa could ever take such a step. She did not question that Alice would be there to help Papa, but she was more sure than ever that Alice and Hari would have their own set of problems to take care of, their own children, their own jobs. At this moment her Papa would need someone just to be around. She knew he needed her around, so that she could be just that someone to whom he can talk to, to be that someone on whom he could bounce off his worries, someone to pour out his secrets to. Someone to lead him to a decision.

All of a sudden, this ambition to get a degree from a foreign University seemed to pall. What was she doing here in this distant land, the snow falling outside and nothing but white-skinned students and teachers around her, every single day of the year? What had she to do with questions of Anglo-Saxon history, the impact of British colonialism on modern South Asian economies, and write a doctoral thesis, when all she needed was to get back home and be with family and loved ones. What did she really know about Paul and his family? How could she have ever contemplated that she and Paul could have a life together, far away from the green lands and blue waters of Kerala.

She was blown away by this sudden change sweeping through her. What had happened to her, what was the reason for this transformation washing her downstream, cleaning out the mess grown inside her these many years. What complex mental processes had changed her mind now in a flash, when all these years and months she had been walking around in a haze?

She had been completely sure of the life she had wanted to lead; a life of academia, of the pursuit of knowledge, to live in the rarified atmosphere of learning, to rub shoulders with scribes and professors, in the

midst of the best minds of Western universities. It had seemed such a blessed thing to do. And in the midst of it all, there was Paul, sensitive and kind and loving and courageous and big-hearted. She could not deny that companionship with him had given her solace and comfort in this foreign land where everything had seemed new and unexpected. In the initial days, even buying groceries from the stores was a task she had to contend with. Worse, to handle the incomprehensible accent of the Briton was not easy for one brought up on the Malayalam staple.

Then there was the daily routine of preparing breakfast and getting ready and attending classes and taking the notes and reading endlessly at the libraries. On subjects such as the British supremacy in the eighteenth century and the impact of colonialism and the far-reaching influence of these elements on modern nations now independent of the British yoke. Now, at this epiphanical moment, when her vision turned and cleared, once again she was struck with the thought of how distanced she was from reality. She should be back home, her feet on the ground, with her people, her kith and kin, with the ones whose blood matched hers, with her father at this moment of great change when he was on the point of committing himself to a new future. She needed to be sure he was really doing the right thing. Or at best, try to prevent him from a foolish act he was on the verge of committing. What was she doing here, desultorily reading research documents and weighty tomes on subjects so distant and remote from what she should actually be doing?

And for a moment she realized the bewilderment she was in for so long arose from the very conundrum she had been thrown in. Her mind had been processing contradictory impulses these past few months and had gone into a stand-by mode. That was the reason she had been seeing all things as if through a wall of water. Nothing was getting through; all things were blurred and unfocussed. She had lost all interest in the very act of thinking. Any passing wind which blew her to where she had to think, to weigh the pros and cons, to make a conscious decision, had diverted her into some drawer in her mind, where cotton walls deadened sound, where colour was drained out and things moved in a grotesque slow motion, conveying no meaning at all. Had she lost all her senses of taste, touch and feeling?

It seemed impossible to believe it had taken her so long to come to a final decision. And why did it happen at this instant, so swiftly, so suddenly. And why did Papa's letter spark off this realization? Why did the lightning bolt of realization strike now, and in such a manner; such clarity and comprehension in one second of blinding understanding. Great God above, why did it take so long?

She knew, instantly and without a doubt, what she had to do. There would be many regrets, some recriminations. But she had to go, of that she was sure. Paul, sweet Paul, I have to go. I have to go back home, Paul, back home to where I belong, back to my coconut groves and my freshwater lakes, back to my people, whose colour is the same as mine. I am sorry if I led you to believe that you and I had a future together. But now it is time for me to say goodbye.

And Teresa went back to her bed and switched off the light and lay in a shallow doze for the many hours before dawn. She floated between sleep and waking. Her thoughts were all about her Papa and that she should somehow be there with him, to be sure he was taking the right steps. Not really to dissuade him, but to make doubly sure that the reason for taking this sudden step was the right one. And she could see that in the mood that he would be this moment, recovering from the sudden void of his life a little more than a year ago, he could be taking this faltering step without knowing the implications, without understanding its impact on his family, going where his blind, worried heart was leading him. She wished to see who this doctor was who had swayed her father's heart. She wanted to talk to her, to discover who she was, to be certain she was taking the decision after a full appraisal of the facts. Papa had not described her well and she did not even have a clear picture in her mind as to how she looked or dressed or talked or smiled. Alice had mentioned her in one of her letters soon after he had been ill and brought back from the hospital. That was so long ago now. She wondered too how she, Teresa, could ever see her in the place of her own mother. Could the good doctor ever hope to wipe out the memory of their mother from their hearts and minds, by walking

into their house as an aging wife to the aging John Manjooran. She warned herself not to be too censorious without even knowing the reasons bringing these two people together. She would keep an open mind and then do what had to be done.

At the same time she knew her Papa would not take such a momentous step without having thought it out. He was not an ardent, foolhardy lover boy swayed by his passion, ready to go traipsing after another woman. And by the sound of it, this Dr. Rekha Kurien also did not seem to be an adventurous social climber. Papa had hinted about her being a divorcee, and that could mean anything. Moreover, Alice would also have taken umbrage if this were an act of wild romance. Now that was another thing; why had Alice not mentioned a word so far about the matter. Or was she waiting for Papa to broach the subject first before she herself would talk to her. Well, she needed to talk to Alice very soon.

But then there was another part of her that was moving on another plane; that of retrospection and even worry as to the course of her life ahead. She was certain her decision to get back home was the right one. But then, if this decision were right, it could only mean that the years she had spent here were wrong. Nothing had come out of it. She had a year to go to obtain her doctoral degree. To go now would mean the loss of these years. She had no clue what kind of credits she would get when and if she tried to join some University back in India. She could even now, lying back in her bed, wryly smile at the kind of bureaucratic hassles the matter would raise. Well, she would sort out those things when there was a need for that. Right now, nothing was more important than reaching home and there were a hundred and one things she had to do before she got there.

On yet another plane, she was wondering, how she would break the news to Paul. She was horrified to think that, with her decision now taken, she felt not more than a passing affection for Paul. It seemed difficult to believe she had fancied herself almost in love with him this past one year. Sweet as he was, he lived in a different world altogether. And she was on another planet. She wondered why she had even considered the possibility of such a relationship. And most importantly, she was at a loss to even begin to consider why this letter come from out of the blue, could have made her change her mind in such a dramatic fashion, in such a short time. There would be time for all that analysis later. For the moment, she had to think of her air tickets and booking the first flight out to India. She had to terminate the lease of her flat and make some excuse to her professor at the University and then leave. Never to return.

During all these whirling thoughts, she could feel an exhausted slumber falling over her. She kept pushing it away; there were too many troubling distractions flitting like bats in her mind and they would not permit her to sleep. She dreamed she was floating into a huge cavernous hole in a volcanic mountain where the gritty sand bit into her heels. She looked across the clear sky into the distances filled with a soft and inviting light. A big furry bird with a loud screech whirled over her head and she was so startled that she slipped and fell into a deep crevasse from where she was unable to rise. But a strange creature, half bird, half animal, watching at the edge of the precipice, stretched out its paws and pulled her back.

She woke up again, knowing fully well that she would now not be able to sleep. It was four in the early morning by her watch and she got out of bed and walked barefoot over the cold floor into the kitchen where she made herself a cup of hot chocolate. And then with pencil and paper in hand, she sat down to list out things to do. A. Get tickets for trip back home. B. Pack bag to carry home. C. Pack books into carton to ship back home. D. Talk to the landlord and terminate lease (might have to pay rent in lieu of notice period). E. Meet Prof. Morton for permission to leave; inform University Office to clear dues. F. Talk to Paul over dinner. (Public place where there can be no tears or recriminations). G. Leave old clothes/things for the boot market at Brighton.

She read over the list once again. She was appalled to see that Paul figured just above the old clothes, second last on the list. How could this change of heart be so drastic, she wondered. And where had fled the sweetness they had shared? He would be hurt, that she could gather, for there were no real explanations she

had to offer. What if her father was getting married: sure, it was a significant development in her family, but how was that related to Paul and her and their relationship. She had to talk to him, explain what this was all about, and why she had to leave, why she would never come back. And God knows, how she would explain all this to him, for she was not too sure of the reasons herself. But first, she had to correct the priority order of her list; she should place Paul right at the top.

And so she did. Then she began to pull out her large suitcase and start packing. First, the sets of clothes she needed to carry back, some papers and her notes, essential documents she would need for her travel. She knew she was not even sure when exactly she would get her tickets booked, but it could be anytime between now and the next three days. She was shocked to see how little she really needed. The rest was superfluous. She could do without them. One could do without so many things one had once though essential. Even Paul.

By then it was daylight: time for another cuppa. And time to ring up Paul, though he would be surprised at the early hour. So, sipping at the tea and dialing the phone with her free hand, she grit her teeth and rehearsed the words she had to say. Could one rehearse heartbreak? It was a sleepy Paul who answered and he was truly astounded at her call. The strangeness of her voice made him catch his breath. For a moment he wondered if she were ill, whether she needed medical assistance.

“Yes, Teresa, anything the matter. You sound a little strange. I hope you are ok?”

“I am, but I need to talk to you.”

“What is it, you are making me worried.”

“I must talk to you; lets meet for breakfast at the University café. Will you be there? At eight?”

“Certainly, but I wish you would tell me what this is all about.”

“Soon. We’ll talk soon. See you there.”

It was a diffident Teresa that Paul saw at the café, just about an hour after they had talked on the phone. She had walked to the café from her tiny flat, rehearsing what she would need to say. It had started snowing again, but this time the flakes were powdery and soft, brushing against her hair and her cheeks like a gentle caress. It was cold, very cold and her feet within her shoes were chilled to the bone. The short walk to the café was enough to freeze her. At the glass door to the café, she paused and peered in. There was not a single person within, except for the portly waitress. She walked in and sat down at the farthest table. She raised her hand for the waitress and ordered two cups of coffee. She closed her eyes wearily. She was exhausted, the sleepless night had made her tired and scatter-brained. Then she took a deep breath and counted till ten. When she opened her eyes, there was Paul at the door. He was looking disheveled and bleary-eyed. His long hair was tied back with a ponytail. This early morning call had disturbed him. He was used to sleeping late in the mornings. He rushed in, almost knocking over the chair before he sat down and anxiously looked at Teresa.

“What is it, Teresa? Why did you call me over? At this time of the morning?”

Teresa lifted her hand and caressed his cheek. There was genuine affection for him in her touch. But little else more than that. Any love she may have had had fled, blown away by the mail the wind had brought to her door yesterday. And poor Paul had nothing to do with the falling away of love.

Paul had seen her dark, brown eyes and her black hair and had fallen in love with the exotic vision of a country his mother had known and admired for so long. In a quaint, imagined manner, he was searching for his mother’s dreams in this quiet, sensitive woman, sitting before him. His eyes searched her face and found it distraught, worried. Her touch had been gentle and Paul was surprised beyond words. It was never Teresa’s style to display emotion so publicly. He held her hand in his own, close to his face and looked at her with wonder and fear. There was something amiss, he knew that now for Teresa’s face was sombre and dark. He was moved beyond words for this was something he had not expected; this was a side of Teresa he had never known.

“Paul, I have to leave; the time has come for me to move on, to return to my own land. My father calls me and I have to go”.

There was a complete consternation on his face. He was left wordless. He looked up in a kind of stupor; in his dismay he crushed the hand he held in his.

“What does that mean, you are going home? What about your doctorate? What about you and me? Teresa, what you are saying makes no sense to me!”

She knew that, she was really not making any sense at all to him. She barely made sense to herself. He was suddenly cast adrift, without an anchor in an unknown sea, not knowing where the winds were taking him. He glanced around him, but at this time of the morning, there was none else in the café, none ready to offer succour.

Teresa held on to his hand, and there were now tears in her eyes. She turned her face away. This was not the place or time for Paul to see her cry.

“Wait for a minute, Paul, give me time to get my thoughts in order. I have so many things to tell you.”

The coffee had come and Teresa spoke to Paul as she had never spoken to him before. All the reticence and the withholding she had been prey to in the many months they had known each other were gone now. She spoke from her heart, from the pit of her soul. She spoke of her home and her father and her departed mother and her family and all that they meant to her. She spoke of the green, green land that was her matchless abode, its seashore and its backwaters and the wonderful time she had growing up. She spoke of the gentle heart her mother possessed until she was taken away in the middle of the night. She spoke of the loneliness of her father and the manner in which, after a lifetime of living with his dear Sosha, he had fallen under the weight of that terrible singleness. The collapse of all reason and logic in the afternoon of that dreadful day when he had tried to slit the veins in his wrist. She spoke of Alice and her defeat at the hands of a treacherous husband and her own brand of loneliness she bore for some years before finding her Hari. And the walls that grew up overnight between father and daughter. She spoke of her infinitely complex brother George and the life he was living. And she spoke of her own insularity and distance from all that the family should mean. And how her eyes had been opened in the instant when the e-mail from her father had arrived. How she had known, with all the certainty that she could possess, known instantly and without a trace of doubt, that it was time to fly over the walls she had built around herself. She should be family again. To be back in the land where she had been born. To touch and feel the flesh and bones of the ones she called her own. And to bridge the yawning gulf grown between her and her kin all through these years.

And in time, she ran out of words to say, but the wet gleam in her eyes said it all to Paul. Teresa had found the foundation of her life and she must go. He knew there was no way he could keep her back. That she would go, try as he might to hold her back. And that Paul must now live without Teresa.

He looked at her. She could not look into his eyes. She glanced away, staring at wall and table, at coffee cup and mantelpiece, anywhere but at him. He shivered, his voice trembling, his brow hot and flushed.

“I have nothing to say, but all the selfish things you know are brimming over in my heart. To make you feel guilty so that you will stay. To remind you of the good times we had; that we can surely make a future together. I had dreamed about it these past months and had seen you and I growing old together. But that picture is already fading from my mind. So I will not speak the words that will hurt both you and me. I see that your mind is made up and that even as you are sitting in this café this cold morning and talking to me, you are already winging your way back to your country and your people. I cannot stop you. So I will not.”

There were tears in his eyes, and as he brushed them away, Teresa felt her heart lurch into her mouth. So much pain; she had caused him so much pain. She felt she was being a cad, a cheating, lying trickster who had led this good man into believing she would be by his side all her life. And then, without notice, without warning, she was suddenly flying off, not caring for the simple heart she had wounded and left bleeding behind.

“I am sorry, Paul, I am sorry beyond words. I have let my personal dreams destroy yours. I wish there was something I could do about it. I am sorry. That is all I can say.”

Paul was standing up and blindly groping his way to the door. And Teresa did not even have the strength to lift her hand and call for him back. There was no point in doing that. She watched distraught as he ran out of the door, into the falling snow and then vanished from her view. Teresa was left with her cup of cold coffee, her heart beating like a weary drum, knowing she had wronged someone very dear to her. The waitress was the only witness to what had happened. The good soul she was, she moved up to her and said: “Everything ok, hon?”

Teresa shook her head; she couldn't say a word. And then she stood up, dropped the coins on the table and walked out into the cold, just as the sun came out from behind the clouds and lit up the skies with a blaze of glory. She would have to atone for this sin in the days to come. She knew the scene would be played out in her mind forever. And she would never forget this moment as long as she lived. She heaved a deep sigh and shook her head. Goodbye Paul, for I'll never see you again. Goodbye and I am truly sorry.

And now it is time to go. She steeled her heart and felt all the agony of a sinner knowing the grievous hurt the sin has caused. No apology would bring forgiveness. She bit her lips until she could feel the blood on her tongue. But she was moved by a power she could barely comprehend. She was swept away by a flood that had washed clean the debris of a mind weakened by loss of commitment. Today she could feel the full force of that loyalty, the strong constancy to hearth and home, to country and blood, suffuse through her body. And now she would fly back home, fly like a homing pigeon traversing the oceans and the continents, back to the green, green grass of home.

GEORGE IN FURY

The letter came in the afternoon of a Saturday when George was home. Sheeba and their son were away to the departmental stores for groceries. He was alone, the long leisurely holiday had made him sleepy and relaxed.

He was reclining on the sofa, cushion under his head, leafing through the newspaper. He loved Saturdays, perhaps even more than Sundays. All the city was awake and vibrant on Saturdays; every shop was open, the markets throbbing with people, the streets alive with the movement of cars, the roar of the traffic. Sundays were boring, people just wanted to laze about at home, in their pajamas, unshaven, gorging on food.

In the quiet part of his mind, he had a dark, dank place where his worst fears lay, like slumbering, muttering, restless dogs. They rose on their haunches and growled in their throats whenever there was talk of his home, or his father, things that pointed to the inadequacy of him, the insufficiency of him. For some time now the dogs had been quiet. Ever since he had left home for good, an independent, married man in his own right, with Sheeba at his side, he had felt whole and recovered. The curs were now chained and tied to stakes in places where they could not be seen. Now they growled only when he went home for his annual leave. The last was when Amma had passed away. That was neither the time nor the occasion for Papa's scorn. The force of a providence too large, even for Papa, had destroyed him.

Alice's smooth re-entry into the Manjooran household, from where she had walked out a bare two years ago, had shaken him. Papa had shown his need for Alice that had again set the dogs baring their pointed teeth at him. And how easily she had walked in; he could not imagine Papa's logic in the acceptance of her. In the immediate aftermath of Alice's repudiation of the family, he had heard his father shout, tight-faced and abusive of a daughter he wished he had never had, her stubborn idiocy, her treachery towards the Church, her casual dismissal of family values. And now in a trice, at the summons of a single telephone call, she was back; back home, back in her father's heart. As if she had never left. And George was once again the middling child, an on-looker, an also-ran, a witness to the event, never a player or a participant.

Families thrive on guilt, this he had learnt early enough. Why did you do that, why did you say this, why did you not do or say this or that. See what she has done, you could have done the same. See how thoughtful she was, why did you not think of it? Guilt is fostered, nurtured and allowed to grow into a monstrous banyan tree, sprawling over all of your life, all your years and months and days, casting huge shadows over your path. The enormity of the injustice of it all was staggering. But he had learnt to live with it.

He was in a troubled mood now, that he realized. But what he was about to learn, would take his very breath away. As he picked up the envelope, he recognized the handwriting from the words on the envelope. A letter from Papa? That was unusual. Their contacts had been limited to infrequent telephone calls and birthday cards or Christmas greetings. Especially after Amma's death, there were times when he had felt the need to keep a closer contact and to tell his father, by word and deed, that the family would be there for him, would stand by him, would be comforting and supportive in these moments of loneliness. But of course, such words were never spoken, never uttered with heart-felt truth; other thoughts got in the way and soured the mood. So this letter was something of a surprise indeed. Much later, someone would ask the question why George had been sent a letter, when Teresa, so far away in England was sent an e-mail by Manjooran. For George came to know the news he was now to read, with much shock and incredulity, a good week after Teresa came to know of it.

He ripped open the envelope and pulled out the two sheets of closely written words. And began, with growing incredulity, to read and comprehend the meaning of the words seeping into his mind. What was this, what in the name of all that was holy, was this? His father, falling in love with a gray-haired lady doctor?

And wanting his consent for their marriage? Is that what he wanted to convey through this letter? Was his father seeking his permission? Or merely informing him? That part of the missive was not clear at all. And why a letter? Could he not have telephoned him? Had his father suddenly turned a coward, unable to face the prospect of a direct telephone call, father to son, man to man? He shook his head, trying to grasp the import of the staggeringly important news the letter conveyed. It was like a blow in the face, a clenched fist suddenly struck with terrifying suddenness into his teeth.

He sank back into his chair and allowed his mind to absorb the meaning of it all. His mother was gone but a little more than a year now. From the enormity of the grief that had engulfed his father, he had assumed that their marriage had been a holy union of two souls, now ripped asunder by a death that had taken away his dear, simple-hearted mother. And so it had seemed, especially after the nervous breakdown that laid low Papa very soon after. Don't tell me that the old man had fallen prey to the roving affections of whoever this social-climber, fortune-seeking lady doctor was? And who was this Dr. Rekha after all? Papa had written he had come to know her during his brief hospitalization a year ago and that his affection and respect for the doctor had grown thereafter. That the two lonely people had found some measure of comfort and happiness in each other.

George looked up from his letter, and smiled. It was a smile that defied definition. Why was Papa attempting to explain? When he had never waited for explanations himself. Where were you, Papa, when I had sought explanations, or when I had wanted to offer them, when I had burnt within, with the jibes and taunts you so very casually tossed my way every day, caring not a whit for me and my simmering feelings, the seeping wounds within. When I had clamped up finally, vowing to keep them all within and to never, ever let them out. Where were you then? And do you expect me to understand you now, when the time and the occasion is over, when the lights have been doused and everybody has gone home and there is no one left to play the game.

And so he thought to himself, and as the old doors came open one by one, he felt the sullenness grow within. The old scars were being scratched at, the familiar, wet ooze of congealed bitterness rose again. Again he felt his chest constrict, his breath growing shallow and fast in his mouth. Again the dogs were pulling at their chains, deep growls echoing in their secret place, like the distant rumble of thunder. He needed Sheeba now; now, at this moment. He needed her to be with him, to hold his hand, to feel wanted and loved, to feel as if he mattered. He wanted to hear the familiar noises of his son pottering around the flat, to smell the wok of vegetables cooking in the kitchen, to feel he was at home, that he was far away from the days of his life when he had hid behind the bland face of mediocrity. He closed his eyes, willing the pictures rising up from within to blank out. He prayed to them to stop their teasing, their pulling at his sleeve, their long nails scratching at his face, frightening him with the depth of the feelings they summoned up, even after so many years.

At such a moment, he could be falling into a deep, deep well somewhere within him, falling without a parachute. But that was all right, because there was no ground below where he would crash. He would only fall endlessly, forever, as he had been doing all the years when the black moods gripped him. He smiled again, this time with less of the acid. Well, this is indeed news; this is indeed something to talk about. He wondered, whatever happened to all that immaculate Manjooran ideals, the glorious tradition of the old, Catholic family history. Did the Pope endorse an old man's remarriage, and that too with an ageing divorcee? Amazing! Like a youth in a madly tripping love that sweeps him off his feet, his father had left them behind, all the precious moments of his years with Amma, all the shared memories, flying into a marriage with someone who had looked after him in a hospital. Oh, come on, this is not a Mills and Boon romance! Or had they started a new Silhouette series for retired and lonely lovers. A lonely hearts' club band. And how was he going to explain this to his friends, his associates at the office. Wonderful, Papa! You get the prize for the best bombshell category.

And then the long pent up misery and bitterness welled up in him. Unexpectedly, there were tears spilling from his eyes. He raised his hands to them and was stunned to feel the wetness moisten his cheeks. He had

not cried in the many years of his adult life and now here he was, child again, the abandoned, rejected child of the Manjooran family, whom none wanted, whom everyone chided at, and who was of no use to anyone at all. He was the incongruent fraction of a whole that did not need him, which could function without him. The world was perfect in all ways, even without him. He angrily wiped away the tears and stood up. It would not do to greet Sheeba back in the house, face all ugly and swollen. His son would be frightened and confused. He went to the bathroom, cupped the water from the washbasin faucet and dashed it on to his face. The coolness brought a sense of sanity back to his distracted mind. He needed to feel the bland serenity of a well-controlled expression back on his face. And that he would do, he was sure of that; after all he had many years of practice, didn't he? He wiped his face on the towel, steeled himself inside and then walked out again, just as the doorbell rang. Sheeba had returned, son in tow. The smile on his wife's face, the chuckle that his little boy gave him as he looked up at him, it was almost enough to bring him back to serenity again. Almost back to sanity.

The letter he hid in the pocket of his shirt. He would wait until after dinner, when it was time for bed and Sheeba would be alone with him, the little boy asleep in the next room. But for now, for the next couple of hours, he would pretend the letter had never arrived, blank out from his mind the appalling knowledge the letter carried in its scrawled words. He would think of things, normal things, everyday things to keep him occupied and serene.

The evening moved slowly, crawling like a snail over glass, every little sound and action magnified and exaggerated. Sheeba's voice and the child's laughter slowed down to an indistinguishable drawl, grating in the quietness of the evening. He kept the placid smile on his face, talking when unavoidable, smiling when required to, helping hurriedly in the kitchen and at the table, for that was the best thing to do to keep his mind away from anguished thoughts. From even the forbidden curses he could so easily shout out. Abuses hurled at his father far away in sylvan Kerala, with the devil woman who had stolen him away in such an audacious manner.

Thankfully, it was time for dinner. The plates were on the table, the dishes warm and steaming, the dark chicken curry spicy, hot and wholesome. The chapattis were fresh, and the rice fragrant and soft. A most normal evening, where man, wife and son could enjoy the comforts of a home with all the love and affection they had in their hearts. This was how he had spent his evenings in his years at Mumbai, far away from the criss-cross of worries his home in Kerala would raise in his mind. There he was once again the little diminished boy he had always been, though there were no words now spoken to taunt him, to torture him, to make him feel small. But the family home somehow seemed to revive the old taunts tossed his way. The terminology of humiliation. They had seeped into the walls of the rooms and were waiting for his return to seep out again.

Sheeba tried her best to make Mon eat more than he could possibly have; but once he had had enough, there was no power on earth that could make him swallow more. There was the usual good-natured ribbing from Sheeba about Mon growing thin from lack of nutrition, and Mon in her smiling chatter tossing it back to her that he did not want to be as chubby as his mother was. Mon, however, did have just enough space in his tummy for a gulab jamun from the fridge and then he had blown a quick kiss to both of them and had gone to his room. Within a moment, he had changed into his nightgown and he was tucked in and fast asleep. There was a night lamp kept burning in the room, a zero-watt bulb, dim and reassuring, a simple device to keep Mon's bad dreams away, so his parents may peep in and see him sleeping in a profound calm astonishing to behold, the quiet peace of a child's sleep blissful beyond belief. And finally it was time for the both of them to move on to their bedroom. The kitchen sink was left overflowing with used dishes and glasses and leftovers, all in an untidy mess. That was something the maid would set right the next day morning. It was time to bed down for the night. They took turns at the bathroom, the last ablutions and the brushing of teeth, the change of clothes and the final mental tally of things done, not done, undone, in the course of yet another day spent in the unreeling of the lives allotted to them.

Reclining in bed with the drowsy Sheeba next to him, at a moment when the contentment of the evening should have been the defining emotion in his mind, he pulled out the letter from the pocket and pushed it at Sheeba's face. She was querulous and bemused to the point of being startled.

"What is this", she asked.

"The end of reason, the start of the season of madness."

"And what does that mean?" She was starting to get worried for George's face betrayed a stress of an unknown kind she had never ever seen in their lives together. There were times in the recent past, when he had poured out much of the agonies of his feelings towards his family. She had slowly started to get a feel of the complex emotions he was going through. For the most part she had felt he was making too much of the many years of perceived indifference he had experienced, growing up in the Manjooran household. She had cheered him often enough, reminding him that present happiness was more than consolation for past injustices.

George grabbed at the letter and spoke through the thick fog of anguish in his throat. He was moved beyond the bounds of the studied placidity he displayed so well in his everyday encounters with the world outside.

"You will not believe this, you will not even begin to comprehend the absurd madness the Manjooran household is about to witness".

And then he read out the letter, line by line, pausing now and then to turns to her, so she could see the incredulity on his face, the blood beneath the skin suffusing his complexion, threatening to blow him away into some newfound country for the insane. It was something of a bombshell for Sheeba too. She had regarded her father-in-law as the very epitome of rectitude and probity. Yes, a little too sure of himself, at least before Amma had passed away, but a man who would not do something as crazy as falling in love. And at his age! Papa marrying again, and that too a divorcee. Amazing! He was, she knew, a proud man, and would not let little proprieties and courtesies prevent him from saying, or doing, what was on his mind. But not this, certainly not this.

But even as she thought about it, the voice of reason, perhaps of compassion, spoke in her again. She wondered why George was making such a huge thing about it. Let the old man find happiness for himself, if that was what he wanted. True, the society he belonged to would snigger and make a comment or two; but that was for him to face, wasn't it? And surely, he was harming no one, he was not eloping with someone else's wife, was he? And who the hell could prevent him from doing exactly what he wanted? It was by mutual consent, wasn't it? Why should one deny them the joy they desired? Even as George was finishing the letter, and his emotions were getting the better of him again, Sheeba knew this was a moment she needed to deal with, with sensitivity and patience. It was obvious that George was in a frazzle, completely upset with the news the letter carried. It was clear too that he was going through some form of disturbing experience almost threatening his very sanity. She needed to think about it before she addressed it.

"It would be a good idea to sleep over it for now," she smiled, "it would certainly look better tomorrow." She gently pulled out the letter from his fingers, folded it twice, slipped it between the pages of a book lying on the table next to the bed. She turned back to him and clasped him in a tight embrace. He smiled in confusion at her. She brought to him the little bit of sanity that balanced out his life. The dark light around the perimeter of his life may swirl and swell, but she would not let its floodwaters reach his feet.

The somber clouds in George's mind receded a little. But they lay brooding on the horizon, grumbling like a dangerous hurricane ready to explode into a mad frenzy. As Sheeba lay dozing next to him, he pulled out the letter once more to read and wonder at its awful significance. He shook his head at the sadness of it all, the mess of disturbing thoughts that consumed every second of his sorry life and the dark, brooding person he had somehow become. He folded it back again and slid it into his shirt pocket. It was a simple unconscious act that would have untold consequences of such magnitude it would change lives forever. But that would be later. He thought he would have trouble getting to sleep, but it was not so. Sleep came easy and he felt

himself floating away. He did not dream of flying, as he normally did. But that too would come later, just as the sun rose the next day. For now, he slid easily into a slumber that took him to places he had never known existed; unknown, exotic landscapes never visited and peopled with strange, long-necked men and mustachioed women who mocked at him for being the wimp he knew he had been all his life. Then, thankfully, they too were gone and he was away into a dreamless, blissful stupor that lasted till the early morning hours.

When he wakes up, he looks at the luminous dial of his watch. It is five-thirty and he quietly slips out of bed and tiptoes his way to the bathroom. His mind is clear and unruffled. He knows precisely what he has to do. For once there are no doubts or questions rattling around in his skull. The way ahead lies true and dark like a tarred road in the middle of the desert. He pisses into the bowl of the commode, taking care to see the stream fell onto the inside of the porcelain and not into the water. He doesn't want Sheeba woken up. He pulls on a tee shirt and slips on his sandals. He walks into the next room where his son lies on his stomach, blanket slipping off his legs. His curly hair is a dark ruffled halo around his screwed up face. He pulls up the blanket off the floor and tucks it around him. Then he shakes his head ruefully and says goodbye in a way that is, had he himself observed it, strangely piquant and forlorn. There is a stifled gasp as he struggles to silence a sob.

Once more, he goes to the bedroom and peeps in to see Sheeba's sleepy half-opened eyes looking at him. There is surprise in them, for it is too early to rise. He smiles at her and gestures; keep sleeping, Sheeba, keep sleeping. Close your eyes and get on with your sleep. She seems to hear his unspoken words and her eyes close again; she slips back into the sleep that envelops her once again. There is regret too as he looks at her. But now it is time. No kisses, he tells himself, it will only wake her up.

Then he moves to the front door and quietly pulls it open. It is necessary that he make no sound now. That would put an end to all his plans. He slips outside and closes the door, again soundlessly, behind him. Then he moves to the lift in the foyer and presses the button for the terrace. The lift pulls him up to the top floor, twenty-four floors above the untidy lawns that surround the apartment complex. He breathes in the cool morning air, unsullied and clear, free from the smog that in a few hours will cloud the atmosphere. From where he stands, he can see most of south Mumbai. The roads that lie like a network of arteries all around are slow and almost lifeless. The few cars that move at this time of the morning seem like tiny beetles searching for food, sluggish and dawdling.

He walks to the edge of the terrace and climbs over the protective railings at the rim of the concrete. He steps forward. Now he is perilously close to the border between safety and insanity. But still he paces forward. Till his feet are at the very margin of the terrace. He closes his eyes and breathes in the air again; his lungs are full and bursting. He sees behind his closed eyelids the face of Papa, his father, who had tormented him in his childhood, insulted him as he grew up and then ignored him when he was married and away. He sees the terrible logic of the action he is about to undertake. He knows that for once in the thoroughly mediocre and boringly average life he has led, he is about to make a single statement that will raise him forever above his destiny. He will sing in a voice ringing so loud in the vastness of the desert of his life, in a roar that will rise from the dust-strewn concrete plains of Mumbai down to the green and lovely stream-laden lands of his forebears. He would astound the family that had always been ashamed of him. He would make them sit up and take notice. This was an act that would be talked about, thought about, puzzled on, cried over, so long as there was breath in the lungs of people who knew him one way or the other.

He sees behind his closed lids Amma's face, but the outlines are not clear; she is barely identifiable. Then with infinite patience, he leans forward. Sheeba's face fleetingly trips through his mind; his son's stays on a little longer. But really, he has not much thought for them now. What he is about to do is much more important than they would ever know. One last thought struck him with a logic that was unexplainable. The son would do now what the father had once attempted and did not have the guts to carry through. The taking of one's own life. Papa, in the end you did not have the grit to bring down the blade onto the living veins under the skin of your hand and see the blood flow, and feel the slow seeping away of life. Now watch me,

as I fly through the air. And finally end the life you and Amma had given me. I do it with more aplomb and flair than you have ever shown in the thing called life that we have both shared.

He spreads his arms above his head, clenched fists raised to the skies. And then the tilt of his body is overcome by gravity. His feet can no longer cling to the edge of the parapet. For a moment he wonders why he seems to be soaring high. Have his wondrous dreams of flying come true? He is a bird in the sky. But he isn't. He falls downwards in what seems to be forever. He sees the light from the early morning sky blazing in his eyes. It fades to a small point behind his forehead, much before he hits the ground.

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

When news of the last spectacular flight of George arrived home, John Manjooran was with Rekha at her home. It was ten in the morning of a lovely Sunday and the cup of tea was welcome after the rains of the night. It was Alice who telephoned him from her home. But he could make no sense of what she spoke. She could not utter the words to convey her meaning. A moan rose from her throat that sang like a plaint through the telephone lines right into his ear. And finally, it conveyed the terrible dread of it all to her father at the other end of the line. His face blanched and Rekha watching him felt the same dread creep into the pit of her stomach.

“What is it, what is it, Mol?” His words were jumbled and he couldn’t think. Even before the news burst like a thunderclap in his ear, he knew something terrible had happened. Alice could not say a word and her groans were like knives piercing into Manjooran’s ears. It was left to Hari Prasad to take up the phone himself and tell the father of his wife, that George, John Manjooran’s only son, had gone and done the unthinkable. It did not make any sense, no sense at all. And he was left smiling meaninglessly, as if a gigantic joke was being played on him, too grotesque for him to absorb, skimming off the surface of his consciousness like a tennis ball grazing off the top of the net. Rekha grabbed the phone and spoke to Hari Prasad: they both knew it was the first time they were speaking to each other. But the awfulness of the news was so harrowing, that this was neither the time nor the place to make a nice point of it. She quickly comprehended the fearful meaning of the message and clapped her hand over her mouth as the message sunk in.

The phone slipped from her hands and she had to bend down and lift it off the floor and place it back on the hook. And then it was her terrible duty to look Manjooran in the eye and tell him the truth that could no longer be postponed or disguised in pretty euphemisms. George was dead, having jumped off the twenty-fourth floor of his condominium, his body splattered at the base of the skyscraper, leaving behind his gentle wife and a lovely son, leaving them crazed beyond reason and logic. It was an apartment dweller living on the same floor as theirs who had conveyed the news of the death. Sheeba’s father, Chacko had requested him to convey the news to family and friends, to all persons who mattered, including Manjooran, while he himself got busy with the arrangements and the final rites. The police were at the apartment with the confused neighbours milling around and they were making the final investigations to rule out foul play. Chacko had conveyed the news that someone from there should come immediately. The police were as sympathetic as they could be under the circumstances, but they had to get the paper work done before going on to the more demanding duties the city offered. A suicide was a simple affair, for it was a singular act with no one else involved. And it would be all wrapped up in a couple of hours. The funeral would be in the local parish church at Mumbai itself the next day morning. So this concerned neighbour had sat on the telephone for the past hour, ringing up all those on the list given him. Over the last couple of hours, he had tried Manjooran’s phone many times, before he was informed of Alice’s number. And it was there that the news was finally delivered over the impersonal medium of the telephone.

The stranger at the end of the line had been polite, but not more than that. It helped because the message was, therefore, all the more clear and distinct. Alice had been jolted in an unimaginably horrifying manner, out of the peaceful serenity of a lovely, holiday morning. She had planned to take it easy that day and had just got up out of bed at about nine-thirty. She had been turning the eggs over, exactly as the children loved it, when the phone had rung.

Rekha, in her turn as messenger of the shattering news, had delivered the information as best as she could and for a moment, as the words sank in, she feared that Manjooran would keel over and collapse. His face had turned gray and his hands were trembling. He gave a groan that rent through him like a knife cutting

through flesh. He covered his face in his hands and said: “When will he give me some peace, that stupid idiot!”

Rekha did not know what he meant by that, but it was inappropriate for the occasion, of that she was sure. She went over to him, clasped him in her strong arms and held him for a time, gently rocking his body. There was a calming pulse in their joint movement together that brought some measure of peace to the tortured Manjooran. He felt himself shuddering with the final acceptance that his son, his only son, his stupid fool of a son had jumped off some bloody building in Mumbai and killed himself. With no thought as to how his wife and daughter would survive, or how his father and his sisters would live in the knowledge of it, the unavoidable truth that the suicide exposed terrible truths never known or revealed, that it demonstrated some fatal flaw in the family left behind for not having seen the coming tragedy. There would now be endless debates on why he had done what he had, and what could have been the final goad to push him off the edge.

The blame would start soon, Rekha knew that, but it was now her job to console this grieving man as best as she could and send him on to Alice so that he would be looked after. She knew too that in the blinding grief of the tragedy, she did not have a place for herself in his family. She was the outsider, a woman who would be frowned upon, a woman who was sneaking into the affections of their father. For whatever reasons, she would always be suspect. Rekha was still not family. In families there are secret places, denied to strangers, where one could creep into, a quiet repose, a refuge from the world outside. She felt inadequate and insufficient, incompetent in facing up to the task. Right now, she could not remain with Manjooran here in her house. She had to take him back to Alice’s.

“We must go, I must take you to Alice: she will know what is to be done. You may have to go to Mumbai immediately. I do not know what I can do to help you. But know that I am here if you want me. Come, come with me.”

John Manjooran was a heavy man, but she took his weight as he leaned heavily on her and walked up to the door and out through it into her car. He looked as if he had been shaken in a violent storm and the storm itself was still sweeping through his body. The question kept pumping through his head, is it true, is it true? And why, why did he do this? Rekha brought him to the door of the car and pulled it open. She gently made him sit next to the driver’s seat. Then she walked over to the other side, got in, started the car and drove at a fast, controlled speed all the way to Alice’s house. It was about ten minutes away and all through the drive, she kept talking to Manjooran, without pause, without a moment’s silence. She worried he would slip back into the abyss he had fallen into when Sosha had died in the middle of the night. And she told him to get a hold on himself and be the one to console the rest of the family than being the one demanding consolation. And when she had done, there was silence, an uncomfortable, fragile pause that threatened to break down into sobs at the slightest impulse. She dared not speak, but her mind was filled with ominous forebodings of what the future would bring. For Manjooran and for her.

And soon enough they were at Alice’s. She was at the door waiting and she rushed out with Hari to receive her father and take him in. Rekha noted that Alice had quietly gained control over her emotions and was now ready to console her father. There were plans to be made, and they had to be made soon. Rekha paused at the door as soon as Manjooran had been safely delivered to Alice’s home, wondering what she should do now. She really had no role to play, though she would have been more than happy to be near Manjooran and help him through this tragedy. She was not sure what Alice or Hari would think of her presence at this moment.

It was Alice who resolved this issue, by pulling her into the house and closing the door behind her. There were only the four of them in the drawing room; Alice, Hari, Manjooran and Rekha, with the children peeping in from the next room through the curtains. There were some sobs, both from Alice and from Manjooran, soon stifled and controlled. It was Hari who broke the silence.

“Papa, the funeral is tomorrow morning. I think it would be better if you go there. I will come with you. We should leave on the evening flight.” He left it there and paused so as to know what Manjooran wanted. For a

fleeting moment, he found it odd that it was he who was now springing to his aid, helping him face this moment of grief. But he put that thought away, for it was not the moment to think of old grudges.

“You are right, I should go.” The words were soft and low, and they came after much thought and contemplation. “I’d like to lie down for a moment,” he muttered and Alice was by his side in a second. She gently pulled him to his feet and led him to the inner sitting room where, with a deep groan, he lay face upwards on the cot. Alice’s heart lurched for a moment, and truly, so did Rekha’s. She moved forward nearer to the cot, but hesitated. Then her duties as a doctor took over. She resolutely stepped forward, took his hand in hers and checked the pulse. It was jumping under her fingers like a troubled drumbeat. She needed to calm him down, and if possible without drugs. “Can he have a cup of tea,” she asked aloud, “with lots of sugar?”

Alice jumped to it while Rekha sat at the edge of the bed and massaged Manjooran’s head. She leaned over him and watched his face and his closed eyelids as if her life depended on it. So it was only Hari who saw the dread on Rekha’s face and the desperation she had tried so hard to conceal. Again it was only Hari who saw Manjooran open his eyes and look up at Rekha with the tortured pain of a father now bereft of his son, seeking answers to questions fleeing through his mind like dried leaves in a rainstorm. Rekha raised her hands and touched his face gently and hushed him: “be strong, we’ll go through this together. I will be here for you.” Hari turned his face away. There was too much love there for him to witness unbidden. Embarrassed, he was about to step out of the room when, thankfully, Alice brought in the tea and took it over to her father. He raised himself up on the bed and gratefully gulped it down. It was hot and soothing, calming to his fevered mind.

Then Hari stepped in, determined to make it all businesslike and formal. The trip to Bombay had to be finalized. The flight in the evening was at three and they had to get the tickets. They may have to stay there for at least a couple of days, so their bags would have to be packed with that in mind. Then there was the awful question of Sheeba and that of the suddenly orphaned son. After all, her parents were at Mumbai and she may exercise the option of staying on there. In any case, they could discuss all this and more on their way to the airport and on the journey. If this was all right with him, then he would go ahead with the arrangements.

Manjooran had no strength left to consider the pros and cons of the arguments and he could only nod in silent agreement. Then Hari was off, striding through the door and to his car to rush to the Airlines office and get the tickets. At the moment, it seemed he was the only person who had some measure of the situation, willing to assert himself to bring order in the truly stupefying crisis sprung on them. Then there was only Alice and Rekha left in the room, old friends who had met each other in an earlier crisis, involving the same man they both cared so much about. But the situation had changed between then and now, oh, how it had changed.

The last time they had been around together with Manjooran lying on the bed was in the hospital, with the fog of unreason and terror slowly clearing from his mind. Then Manjooran had been a patient waiting to be administered relief by Dr. Kurien, the duty doctor. She had been mildly inquisitive, and indeed a little intrigued, by this robust gray-haired man who had tried to slit his own wrist. And Alice was the concerned and caring daughter who had talked to Rekha long about her father and the predicament he was going through. There was also a certain kind of kindred feeling between the two women. Both were divorcees, though Alice had later found happiness in her defiant marriage. But, they had both known, in their own way, the horrific period of rejection by their husbands. The knowledge they shared had only brought them closer together.

Now, this time around, Alice’s role had only increased in responsibility. The crisis now before her was even more severe than the last. Her brother was gone and she had still not been able to digest that information. She was aghast he could have gone and committed such an act. It was anger more than sorrow that she was in the grip of. Why, why, the question kept banging in her head. And what of Sheeba and the little boy?

But the biggest change in their relationship between then and now was that of Rekha with Manjooran, her father. What a change there had been wrought in these past few months. A doctor had become a lover, and

who knows whether these two, her father and Rekha, had a physical relationship, hidden from view. She pushed that thought away from her mind and forced herself to think about the present moment. She would not now cry and distress herself and her father. She would be strong. She would be all common sense and practical minded. She needed to get a suitcase together with the things Hari and her father would need on their trip.

And so she got up with a nod to Rekha and busied herself with the ordinary things of everyday. It did not occur to her to go too, for she knew that there in Mumbai, she would only get in the way and make things even more difficult for both her father and her husband. She would not allow herself to do that. Also, there were the twins to think about. She knew she would have been able to help Sheeba and the boy in whatever way it was possible, but she would not have been able to help herself, to keep her own sanity, with the shifting pictures of her brother constantly haunting her mind. The news she had heard over the phone had been enough to shatter her. It was as much as she could do to keep her mind free from the disturbing pictures it churned up every now and then in her mind. She would not think of it now, she vowed to herself. Surely there would be enough time later, in the days and weeks and years ahead when she would have an eternity to get constantly horrified and distraught when the thought of George sprang to her mind. This was one memory that would refuse to die.

And so, as Alice went off to pack the things required for the journey, it was Rekha who was once again left with the shattered man, rousing himself up after the tea had been drunk. It appeared the hot drink had done him some good. He too was resolving to be strong; it would not do to simply fall apart, for that would affect all those around him and cause untold misery. And Rekha was glad to see him slowly get a grip over himself and start doing the things that had to be done.

He needed to tell Teresa now. That was the first thing he would have to do. Teresa must be told. He had stood up and moved to the telephone and was searching in the diary Alice kept for the purpose next to the telephone stand. And finding it, he bent over the telephone and slowly dialed the long number, digit by digit and then waited for the signal to reach across the continents and the oceans to wake up his daughter. It would be early morning there. He composed himself, trying to think of the appropriate words he must say. He remembered, as clear as if it were just yesterday, the last time he had made a similar call, in similar circumstances, the night that Sosha had decided to leave him. He shook his head to clear the thoughts starting to fly around his head. Come on, come on, he thought to himself; the telephone was taking ages to get connected. It must be early morning, about five or so out there. She would be still sleeping, perhaps. But the phone was ringing and ringing and there was no one there to respond. It rang for a good minute and then stopped on its own. He cut the connection and tried the number again. This time the wait was longer but with the same result. The phone was ringing but there was none to pick it up. He tried once again for the last time and then slammed it down, frustrated and helpless.

He then remembered the alternate number that Teresa had given him, that of the Dean of her University, in case she had to be reached and she was not in the flat. Alice would have that number written down somewhere. He walked up to the next room to ask Alice. She was bent over the bed, eyes full of tears, pulling out a suitcase, packing things in. Alice searched through the pages of the diary and found the number in question and pointed it out. There were no words spoken. Both father and daughter were too caught up in the tumultuous thoughts flying about in their minds, ricocheting off one another like so many mad bats in a dark cavern. And then Manjooran went back to the phone and dialed the new number given him. This time too there was an inordinate delay before it started to ring at the other end. But this time someone responded within three rings. The voice was clear and distinct, cultured and quietly dignified. It took Manjooran a moment to identify himself and to tell the person at the other end that he was Teresa's father and that he wished to speak to his daughter for he had some terrible news to tell her. That he had tried her number at her flat and had not received any response and that was the reason why he had to disturb her professor at this odd time in the early morning.

The voice at the other end assured him that the early hour was not a problem. Still, he was surprised that Mr. Manjooran did not know that Teresa had left the previous day for India after having terminated her studies in a most unprofessional way. She had been a very promising student and for the life of him he could not understand why she had suddenly decided to quit.

“Quit? She has quit her studies?” Manjooran could not make head or tail of what was being said to him. He foolishly wondered why everything he had known and taken for granted was suddenly falling around him like a pack of cards. “I am sorry I do not understand, sir. You are telling me Teresa has quit her studies and has flown back to India last night?”

“Yes sir, and I am as surprised as you are now, why she should go and do that. I am also surprised she had not informed you of her decision. She came to me a few days ago and informed me she had had enough of life in this foreign land and that she wanted to get back home. That her eyes had been opened finally. That she knew what she had to do with her own life now, after so many months of dithering and uncertainty. Whatever her reason to go, she was fully convinced of what she had to do. In fact, she should be reaching Mumbai in the next few hours, if I remember her schedule. When you meet her, do tell her that I think she is an obstinate young girl who would have had a great career for herself out here. But also that I respect her decision. Do tell her to keep in touch.”

There was a pause. Then the voice asked again, with more concern, “by the way, what was that news you had to convey to her. Can I be of any assistance?”

Manjooran paused. Could it be she had possibly heard of George’s suicide? No, that could not be, for George had done what he had done this morning and Teresa had decided to come back home some days ago. If that was so, then there was no need to tell this kindly voice at the other end of the line that Teresa’s brother had gone and killed himself.

“No, it’s all right, I’ll tell her myself. Now that she is coming over here, I’ll tell her the news myself.” It always falls on me to tell Teresa the news, right? “Thank you and I am sorry I bothered you this early in the morning.”

No sooner was the line disconnected than Alice asked him for news of Teresa. Manjooran could only add to the confusion by saying he had no clue at all and that this was another mystery they all needed to address. Teresa had left the University for good and was on her way back. He shook his head at Rekha and did not know what to say. At least this was something that would unravel by itself as soon as Teresa would be home. Now what was that all about, Teresa, you have given up your studies? That bit of confusing news, however, could wait. There was a more pressing matter required to be immediately addressed; that of the death of his only son, the widowhood of his only daughter-in-law, the orphaning of his little grandson. Perhaps Teresa would be there at Mumbai and they would help each other confront the news and comprehend its meaning. Come home, Teresa, I need you out here now.

And then things were moving as fast as they could. There was the quick ride back in Rekha’s car to Manjooran’s house to get his things together with Alice in the back seat. The children, quietened by the news that their uncle was dead, were sent to the neighbours for an hour or two, with Alice’s threat ringing in their ears that she would skin them alive if they so much as raised their voices. By which time Hari was informing them he had managed to get the tickets, that they should leave for the airport soon enough after grabbing a bite to eat. Who would think of eating now, Alice mused, but then she knew Hari was right; else they would not have the strength to face the demands of the next couple of days. She roused herself up in the kitchen at her father’s place, where Kamala had fortunately arrived, and after telling the shocked maidservant of the incomprehensible news, she set her to making a quick hot lunch of *kitchidi*, with vegetables thrown in.

She had too the task of informing relatives and close friends, those who needed to be told, of the tragedy that had struck the Manjooran house hold once again, just over a year after the last one. She picked them off the list, one by one, conveying the news as briefly as possible, without too many details, without waiting to

answer the questions thrown at her over the line. She told them the truth, that she did not have the details and that Papa and Hari are flying off to Mumbai straight away. After the shocked and almost panicky initial response, there were solicitous questions about how Manjooran was taking it all. She replied that it was a difficult moment for him, but she would do her best to keep him calm. As if she had no right to lose her own self-control and scream and cry out like any other person who had lost a loved one in inexplicable circumstances. There would be time for all that later, no? When she would be all alone in the next two days, when people would wander in and try to hold her hand and console her and then leave her feeling more miserable than ever. That seemed to be her allotted duty now, she mused to herself.

Rekha during all this was left alone with Manjooran. She noticed he was strong and helpless in turns. She could see him at one moment steeling himself, looking determined, in control of his emotions. But then in the very next instant, his shoulders would collapse and he was on the verge of crying like a child. She was torn between the anguish she felt for him and the overpowering emotion she should protect the man she loved at the moment of his greatest sorrow. If she were alone with him, she could have held him in a tight embrace and whispered to him to face up to the terrible tragedy. And she would have told him she would stand by his side, she would love him with all the strength she possessed, that she would not again let him slide down the road to despair and darkness. But with Alice busying herself in the background and Kamala pottering around, she was self-conscious and unsure. Of course Alice knew, and Kamala too had probably a good idea of Manjooran's relationship with her. Nevertheless, she was circumscribed by unwritten rules of what she could or could not do.

For a moment, for a single moment of selfish concern, she wondered what this would do to the plans both of them had made for themselves. A thought suddenly struck her whether the news Manjooran had conveyed to his son through a letter, of which she had been told before it was dispatched, could have had anything to do with the unthinkable deed he had committed. It was a moment of prescient knowledge that took her thoughts in that direction. But then she put it away from her mind. There would be time to think about all that later.

And then Hari had come. It was time to leave for the airport. The bags were loaded into the trunk of the taxi. Hari had decreed there was no need for Alice or Rekha to come to the airport. Alice looked lost and bewildered; Hari took her aside for a moment, whispering last minute instructions that made her take a deep breath and square up her shoulders. Manjooran too had a long weary look at Rekha before turning away and climbing into the car. And then they were off.

"Let's take a cup of tea together, Dr. Rekha, we both need it," said Alice and she took her hand in her own and led her back into the house. And the two women, alike in so many ways, sat down over their tea and talked about the meaninglessness of what had transpired and the reasons why George could have gone and done something like that. They talked, and they realized they were united in more ways than they had known. Both of them were strong and had faced life and its vicissitudes with untold courage. They had both lifted themselves out of recurring trials and tests to higher levels of equanimity and strength. And thus they sat and talked late into the evening until the telephone brought news that Manjooran and Hari had reached Mumbai and were now on their way to the apartment flats to meet with Chacko and Sheeba and do whatever had to be done. Whatever it took to comprehend the awesome nature of the disaster that had suddenly struck them from out of the blue.

In the plane, both Hari and Manjooran had not talked much to each other, though they sat on adjoining seats. Hari had nothing to say to bring peace to Manjooran. He kept asking, again and again, why, why, why had George done that? The awful word of suicide did not come easy to the tongue, so synonyms, softer sounding alternatives were used, as if the milder euphemisms would reduce the enormity of the catastrophe. At Mumbai airport, Hari had made the quick call over his cell phone to tell Alice that they had reached, that they were on their way to the flat where they would try to make some sense of what had transpired.

The taxi brought them to the apartment after a long and jerky ride. It seemed to halt at every traffic light on the way. Manjooran was testy and irritable and apt to shout at the driver. Hari had to gently restrain him on a couple of occasions. Then Hari quietly told the driver they had come to Mumbai because of the news of the death of a close relative, and the son of the man sitting with him. That seemed to have the right effect on the insouciant driver. From then on, the taxi moved fast and sure through the crowded evening streets. They reached the apartment at almost seven when the lights had drained out of the sky. It seemed as if a lifetime had passed since the morning call that had brought the shattering news. Now it was time to see for themselves, to relive all the horrors they had imagined.

At the door of the flat way up in the apartment buildings, it was Chacko, who greeted them. He was swollen eyed and anguished, but trying his best to keep in control. Chacko's wife had been here all this while but had gone back to their house to ready the place for the guests, Manjooran and Hari, who would be staying with them. Chacko took them inside to the drawing room where neighbours were still sitting, waiting for them to arrive, so that they could hand over the flat and its overpowering odour of grief to somebody responsible, before going back to their own homes and resuming their own lives. In the bedroom, Sheeba lay in a stupor, eyes wide open, tearless in the face of the inexplicable death that had struck her like a bolt of lightning that morning. She did not say a word, but got up from the bed and stood like a statue, eyes lowered and distraught. Manjooran went up to her and enclosed her in a long embrace.

Manjooran could not hold back his emotions a moment longer. It were as if the dam within him had broken. Then the tears were springing to his eyes and he moaned as if he were a child once again. Then Sheeba too was crying and clutching at him. It did not occur to them that in all the days of her marriage to George, she had never been as close to her father-in-law as she was now. It took a death to do that. Hari watching, wondered too: two people brought closer by another death. Chacko at the foot of the bed looked up, his eyes blurred again with unchecked tears and he was glad that his daughter was crying now, for she had not cried at all since the morning. He had been terrified his daughter would lose her mind. Hari stayed back, swept by a strong wave of sorrow. It was good there were tears now, he thought to himself, as he watched them cling to each other. It is good for both of them to wash away the grief as best as possible.

A young police officer sitting in the drawing room, watching all this while, walked up to the door of the bedroom, cleared his throat and waited to be noticed. It was Hari who went up to him and whispered who they were. He enquired what other formalities were required to be completed. The officer noted Hari's comparative self-control. He quickly decided that this was the man who could be given responsibility for whatever had to be done. It was essential to get the paperwork completed before arrangements for the funeral were taken up for the next day morning.

He took Hari aside to the verandah where the evening skies were lit with the bright lights of Mumbai. The traffic was moving down below them, so many tiny bodies in pursuit of their own destinies, unmindful of tragedies sweeping away their own brethren all around them. The body was in the morgue where the post mortem formalities had just been completed. The police had no suspicions of any foul play in the suicide and were ready to hand over the body to the next-of-kin for the funeral. This would require the father of the deceased to come to the morgue and receive the body and sign for it. Actually, it was the widow who would have to do it, but with the father there, she would be spared this horror. He was sorry he had to disturb them at this time of the day after such a long journey to Mumbai. However, he had no choice but to ask them to come with him. Hari was impressed with the polite courtesy this young officer displayed and immediately agreed. He now needed to broach the subject to Manjooran and take him along to the morgue for the formalities. It would be a tough task, but one that couldn't be avoided.

Fortunately, the morgue was not far away and Hari had to prise Manjooran away from Sheeba. He whispered to Chacko he would be back after the formalities had been completed. The police officer was all courtesy once again and offered to take them to the morgue in his vehicle. The red flashing light on the top of the vehicle gave it an authority that was unmistakable and the traffic in front of them seemed to melt away as

they made their way through the streets of evening Mumbai. Within five minutes they were at the morgue. The officer had phoned ahead and it was clear that the staff was ready for their appearance. The body was already in the coffin, and the police officer advised that it should not be opened. The mangled body would be too disturbing for them. Hari agreed and convinced Manjooran with a quiet firm hand that it would be best if it were left alone. The sight of the coffin almost brought Manjooran to his knees. But he turned away, this time promising himself that he had had enough of tears.

Hari was asked if he would like to carry back the clothes in which George had been found. There was a moment of hesitation, but his decision was quick enough. No, the clothes could be disposed off in any manner. As Manjooran signed on the release papers and completed the formalities under the guidance of the police staff at the morgue, the officer took Hari aside for a moment.

“There is one small thing you should know,” he said. “We discussed it amongst ourselves and decided that it is of no direct impact on the case at hand. In the pocket of the deceased, we found a letter that seems to have been written by his father.” He pointed with his baton at Manjooran. He handed over to Hari a paper file: within was a clear plastic cover with a bloodstained paper lying folded inside. “At least you do need to read it and understand its contents. We are sure that there is no foul play in the suicide. It was an act that he committed for whatever reasons that may have tormented him. And we decided that the letter may or may not have added to his miseries, but we are not interested in pursuing this matter further in the police investigations. In Mumbai, there are more important demands on our time than to pursue the matter of an open and shut suicide case. But I do advise you to read it.”

The officer begged leave from him and left. And then it was time for the body to be handed over. The morgue agreed to hold it for them till the funeral next day morning. A shaken Manjooran and a saddened Hari came out. Manjooran did not have a clue what had transpired between the police officer and Hari. The taxi they summoned came quickly and then they were off, back to the apartments where Chacko informed them the funeral would be at ten the next day and that he had made all the arrangements for the same. The priest would meet them all on the parish grounds next to the cemetery and that all their friends and relatives had been informed. There was nothing to do now but to wait for the morning. And he wanted to take Sheeba and the child, and both of them, to his place about half an hour away, where they could spend the night in comparative peace, away from the scene of the horrific incident.

And so it was arranged. Leaving the keys of the flat with a neighbour, all of them, Chacko and Sheeba and the little boy and Manjooran and Hari went down in the slow moving elevator to the ground floor where the car was waiting for them. With Chacko driving, they moved slowly and quietly, without a word, for half an hour finally arriving at the modest house that was his. Sheeba had again slipped into a tearless, numb silence. The little boy clung to her, unable to understand what had happened. There were some people waiting but both Manjooran and Hari did not know any of them. They were taken inside. Everybody was slowly saying their goodbyes and moving away, with fervent pleas to inform them, and not hesitate, for anything, for anything at all. The gruel made for them, with pickle and papadom, was hot and nourishing. Sheeba was forced to eat something before being sent to the bedroom with her mother for company. There were some things that a father could not do and mothers were eminently capable of, such as spending the night with a suddenly bereaved daughter. And then both Manjooran and Hari were shown to their room, a third bedroom with space for just about two mattresses laid out on the floor.

“Try to get some rest, you have had a long day. And there is the agony of tomorrow also to get through.” Chacko was flustered and in pain, but he had to do the right thing by Manjooran and Hari. He knew Manjooran had never considered him his equal in terms of social standing, but he was the last person to bring up such the subject at such a moment. Or at any moment, as a matter of fact. The lights were dimmed and Manjooran fell on to his bed with a long sigh. He would not sleep, he knew that. He despaired how he would spend the next few hours through the night until sunrise. He wanted to get it over with, the long ritual of a

funeral, and go back home, where he could ponder over the mystery of the death of his son, and wonder what had brought the poor, confused boy to such a pass. He lay down and closed his eyes.

Hari had one more thing to do. With the lights dimmed in the room, he went up to the table and switched on the table lamp. He pulled out the file that the young police officer had handed over to him. The clear plastic cover yielded a letter stained with dried blood. It had been in George's shirt pocket and had been extracted by the autopsy team during their examination of the body at the morgue. Heart beating rapidly, he gasped as he unfolded the letter. He recognized Manjooran's writing. He already knew its contents; after all it was to Hari and Alice that Manjooran had confessed at the first instance. About his growing love for the lady doctor and his desire to enter into a permanent relationship with her. The letter had tried in vain to explain the reasons for this sudden blossoming of love. Manjooran had taken much space and effort to justify the reasons for this growing affection between both of them. And how the memory of Sosha had troubled him all this while, how he was tormented by guilt as he contemplated the steps he was now about to take. It was at Alice's instance that he had been emboldened to write to George and Teresa and inform them of the developments.

The fact that this letter was in George's pocket at the time he threw himself off the top of the apartment building was certainly of some significance. Was there something that he was trying to tell his father? Could the letter have set off some complicated train of thought in a troubled mind and sent him soaring off from the terrace of the skyscraper? And what should he do with this letter, he wondered? Should he show it to Manjooran and Alice, or should he hide it and kept it from them. This was a conundrum he would have to resolve. And he needed Alice's wisdom before doing anything further.

And then he was putting the paper away in the file and under his clothes in the suitcase and hoping he would know the right thing to do. He switched off the table lamp and then moved to the mattress on the floor and closed his eyes. He too, like Manjooran, would not be able to sleep. It was not grief alone that kept his eyes open, but the crushing thought that the letter Manjooran had sent his son may have had something to do with tilting the balance in George's mind and driving him to his desperate act.

THE UNCERTAIN LIFE

Two events connected to you, occurring at the same time; that is the definition of a coincidence. Call it by its synonyms; call it happenstance, fluke, chance, accident or by any other name. But when it does happen, you wonder at the unexplained overlap of incidents that fall one after another into the groove of your life. It resonates within you, leaving you with the hint of some dimly discerned plan, a heavenly plot written without your knowledge, the shadowy intimation of things beyond your ken. Teresa would puzzle over the dictionary meaning of the word coincidence; but more, she would anguish over how, had she appeared here at Mumbai a few hours earlier, she could have, just may have, prevented the awful, shattering, numbing incident that struck like a thunderbolt onto the heads of the members of the Manjooran family.

Teresa landed up at Mumbai airport at two in the early morning of a Monday. It was not clear to her why all transcontinental flights were so absurdly timed, leaving and arriving at unearthly hours. She had had a troubled journey. The economy seat she had booked was not too bad and the food was tolerable. But her mind was jumping from thought to thought like a ping-pong ball, her serenity was disturbed as never before. For a person who had made a cool intellect and a logical outlook the very foundations of her personality, this present frame of mind was something she was not accustomed to. To worry and fret, to think of actions and consequences of action, to be anxious about what impact her behaviour could have on others around her; this change in her was new, never experienced before. It was something she needed to think about.

Her decision to leave the University, and Paul, had been taken during the course of the single night when Papa's letter had reached her. She was still not clear as to why she had decided to do what she had done. That there was some connection between the letter and her decision to return home was clear, but the reasons for her doing so had not yet been analysed. Perhaps she was required to do less of analysis and more of listening to her heart. And the voices of people dear to her. That should be something she would love to learn about in the days ahead. And then there was the matter of her interrupted studies. She had arranged she would send a thesis on the material she had studied till now and that the quality of the thesis would decide whether she needed to pay up any more money to the University for the scholarship she had been accorded or whether the University would absolve her of any financial penalties. She was confident of her own abilities, sure she would pass the test.

Her plan was to stay at Mumbai for a couple of days with George before proceeding down to her home. She thought of ringing him up at that time of the early morning and informing him she had arrived. But then she thought the better of it and decided to wait until daybreak. She had collected her two large suitcases and had propped herself up at the corner of the hall, trying to lie down on the plastic chairs that offered no easy way to sleep. She gave up the effort and sat up on the stiff backed chair, pulling out the half-read paperback she had picked up from Heathrow before she had left. The hours passed by slowly. At times slumber fogged her mind. She found her eyes closing and had to rouse herself with several cups of coffee from the vending machine. At six in the morning she got up to try George's number again but was frustrated in her efforts when there was no response. Half an hour later, she tried again. This time there was an unfamiliar voice at the other end. She enquired who it was and was told that it was the neighbour from the adjoining flat. She then revealed her identity as George's sister and that she had just arrived from London and wished to talk to her brother, or her sister-in-law, if they were around. There was a complete silence at the other end.

"So, you have not heard the news? I am sorry to have to tell you this, and I know how shocking it will be for you." He then informed her, in as bald a fashion as possible, that her brother George was no more and that the funeral was at ten in the morning at the parish church and that she could meet her Papa and Mr. Hari, her sister's husband there, for they had come the previous night.

“What funeral?” She did not have an inkling of what this stranger was talking. Despite his explanations, it had not yet sunk in. And so it was with complete stupefaction at the dawn of an ordinary Mumbai morning, sleepless and exhausted after the long and unquiet flight, that she heard the hesitant narration of the details of George’s flight into insanity and the absolute chaos his action had led to in the lives of those dear to him. She felt her knees weaken. She could hardly utter a word.

“Hallo, hallo are you there?” She could sense the concern in the stranger’s voice as she struggled to maintain her composure and unravel the madness of what she was hearing.

“Yes, I hear you. I am unable to comprehend what you are saying.”

“I am sorry for this, beti, but I think you should talk to Mr. Chacko, Sheeba’s father who is making all the arrangements.” He was eager to end the conversation and pass on the burden to someone else more equipped to convey the news to this young lady, who had returned from abroad in the middle of the night to be confronted by the shattering news of the death of her only brother. He enquired if she had paper and pencil and read out the Mr. Chacko’s telephone number, making doubly sure she had it right. And then he gently cut the line.

Teresa stood in stupefied silence for several minutes. Her father may not even know she was back in the country, though she was pretty sure he would have tried to ring her up at her flat in Brighton. And now she had appeared as if from nowhere, right on the day of her brother’s death. What incomprehensible coincidence was this, she thought to herself. Could she have been compelled to take this decision to leave England and come out here because some cold galactic intelligence had foreseen the need for her to be here, to be with her father at this time of crisis? And had forced her, without her conscious knowledge, to this sudden decision. And how right that decision seems to be now. Papa, Papa, I am here now, I’ll look after you, don’t worry. I am back. I am here for you. And why George, why did you do what you have done. If only I had come a day earlier, maybe you could have talked about it with me, maybe the sudden sight of me at your doorstep would have persuaded you to talk things over, talk about anything at all. Maybe I would have helped you sort out the mess in your mind. Well, that was not to be, that was not to be. If she could have been instrumental in preventing a death, maybe that galactic intelligence would have sent her here a day earlier. No, that is not how things are, she muttered.

She steeled herself again and dialed the given number and heard Chackochayan on the line. She could discern the surprise in his voice: “How did you know of the tragedy, Mol and how have you reached here so fast?”

“I’ll explain everything when I get there. Is Papa there? And Hari Achachan? Please do tell them I am on my way. I’ll be there in an hour’s time. I am taking a taxi straight away. I need to get your address; please give it to me.”

Chacko gave her the details on how to get there. Then, bags and all, she was on her way, spurring the driver of the cab to get her over as fast as possible. The early morning roads were not crowded; it was but six-thirty in the morning. In the taxi, she realized that she had to be composed and calm when she reached her Papa. There are limits to what Hari could do to console him. And knowing the differences they had had in the early days, she was not sure if all the wounds had been healed.

Forty-five minutes from when she had left the airport at Santa Cruz, she was there at Chacko’s door, ringing the doorbell and tapping impatiently on her handbag, heart beating madly, as she waited for someone to open the door. It was, surprisingly, Papa himself who came to the door. Chacko had informed him that Teresa was on her way and he had been waiting for her to ring the doorbell. For Manjooran, it was an act of benevolent magic by a kind god that made Teresa appear out of the skies, at this most difficult time when her presence would be absolutely required. He took her into her arms and held on for dear life. This time there were no tears, just a quiet acceptance of the horror of the situation. A great, wordless gratitude filled his heart that his youngest daughter was once more with him. It did not matter to know that she had terminated her studies and had come back home. That, however, was of the least importance. That she was home, and at this time, was

more significant than anything else. Teresa felt the tears pricking her eyes, but she wiped them away. If Papa had the strength to take his grief into himself, she would not complicate matters by bawling away like a baby. She would show him she too could be brave. There were things they could teach each other. She would certainly help keep him on an even keel. She needed to know the depth of his feelings for this Dr. Rekha before she made up her mind about her; about the future of her and Papa. She would not censure, but she would certainly assess and evaluate before telling him in no uncertain terms what she thought about it. But all that would be later; now she had to help him get through the day.

She hugged him with all her strength and it seemed that the strong, quiet shelter she brought with her from across the seas, now created afresh in the circle of her embrace, would have the strength to weather many a storm. Manjooran, for the first time since he had heard the shocking news, felt he now had the courage to face the day and get through the terrible rituals lying ahead. He exhaled for the first time and smiled back at her. There were no words to be spoken; none were needed.

The luggage was unloaded, the taxi sent on its way and Mrs. Chacko took her in for a cup of tea. Quietly and in her own way, she narrated the events of the preceding day when their world had been turned upside down. Sheeba had not come out from her bedroom so far. She had been administered some drug to make her sleep the previous night and she was still in a deep but troubled slumber. The little boy too was lying by Sheeba's side and waiting for his mother to wake up. Tears flowed freely from her eyes as she bemoaned the death of her son-in-law. She wondered how the future would take care of her suddenly widowed daughter. They themselves were not too young anymore; how would they look after Sheeba and her son in the days that lay ahead. Teresa was not one to normally console and comfort, but this time she held the older woman's hands in her own and spoke gently and talked of God's will, of which she was not sure herself, of the need to be strong in the face of tragedy and of the power of prayer in trying times such as these. Chacko left them both talking to each other and she knew that Teresa could only do good to his grieving wife.

Hari came out too; there were worry lines now on his face as he had lain awake the night and contemplated the contents of the stained letter, its import on the matter at hand. When he saw Teresa, he was taken aback and he gazed in wonder at his sister-in-law, wondering how she had suddenly appeared and from where. He was glad to see her and knew that the burden he had been holding these past few hours could now be shared with Teresa. Sometime soon, he would have to consult with her and Alice on the matter of this letter and take a decision whether he should let Manjooran know about the fact, the fact that his letter had been in George's pocket when he had thrown himself off the top of the apartment block in the early hours of an ordinary morning.

But that could wait for a few hours, maybe a few days. Now he had to see to the arrangements and help Chacko in the dreadful task he had to perform. The funeral was scheduled for ten in the morning. They would have to go to the morgue and collect the body before going on to the parish hall and then to the burial ground adjacent to it. The priest had been informed and he had undertaken to notify the members of the parish, so they could come and attend the last rites. The coffin had been called for as well as the flowers. Indeed there were now agencies that could make all the arrangements and you only had to pay them a hefty amount for the legwork they did. More and more people were willing to do just that; it saved them all the bother and they could keep themselves free for the mourning. There were some who did not agree. Making the arrangements and finalising every detail of the rituals was a necessary part of the healing process that should come with every death.

Mercifully, everything was hastened and speeded up by Chacko himself, who did not want his wife and daughter to go through the tiresome, exhausting funeral arrangements. He wanted to spare Sheeba the pain of the last rites. He preferred she did not come at all. But that was not how it turned out. Sheeba, waking up from the drug-induced sleep would have none of it. Teresa sat with her and made her sip at the tea and the biscuits and gain strength for the long day ahead. And then things moved at such a pace that there was no time for thought or deliberation.

The body was carried from the morgue straight to the parish hall, from where, after brief prayers, it was taken to the quiet and gently landscaped cemetery. The tombstones, some new, some crumbling and blackened with moss, were lying under the trees in strange but splendid beauty. They gave an aura of such calm that it was easy to think that here the soul would find eternal peace.

The old priest, bent and doddering with age, had seen more of death than anyone else in the crowd gathered in the late morning. He was almost peremptory in his prayers and mumbled from the prayer book held up for him by one of the helpers. There was a stupefied silence in the watching people, sometimes a quiet murmuring, as they tried to come to grips with the sudden tragedy in their midst. Sheeba sat a distance away, with her mother while Manjooran, Hari and Teresa stood right at the front, close to the priest.

Sheeba did not sob or weep her heart out. She sat still in the corner, quietly holding a soaked handkerchief to her eyes, silently mourning the inexplicable death of the man she had known these eight years. The prayers over, the men at the funeral lent their shoulders to the corners of the wooden box and carried it over to the freshly dug grave. The mud was moist and dark brown and cool to the touch and they lowered the wooden box into the deep pit. The ropes were pulled away and then the gathered mourners, one by one, came up to the grave and threw in the earth on to the coffin. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The sound the falling earth made was loud and irregular until the lid of the coffin was fully covered with the dark earth. And then they were all slowly filing away to the gates of the cemetery.

There were many who came up to Manjooran and Chacko and offered their condolences and prayers. To them, waiting for the burial to be over, it was a great relief to be now free from the ceremonies of death. There was some advice to be sought from the old priest, some payments to be made to the gravediggers. The priest told them the rest of the formalities could be got through later. Then, it was time to go home and contemplate the deep, solemn meaning of what they had been through. Teresa with Sheeba and her mother in tow, walked slowly back with them to the waiting cars and then they were on their way, back to the Chacko household.

It was time to talk of many things, and especially of Sheeba's future. In the car, with Chacko and a couple of others from the neighbourhood, there was no occasion to raise the subject. But when they reached home, it was Manjooran who spoke first. He said it would be his duty, and a matter of honour for him, to look after Sheeba and the child, as they were his responsibility now. Chacko demurred; he would have no difficulty in caring for his only daughter and grandchild. There was a note of asperity in his voice and it was clear he had not appreciated the suggestion made in so peremptory a manner, so soon after the death of George. And so it was left at that. Indeed, Sheeba would make up her own mind. And it would be in the fitness of things for Sheeba to be with her parents for some time now, until she had the time to absorb the meaning of the sudden tragedy fallen on her head.

And it was now time for Manjooran to talk of going back home. Hari standing by also spoke of the need to get back to Alice and the children who were alone at home. He had, of course, rung her up several times to give her the news as it developed. Just now, he had spoken to her after returning from the funeral and had filled her in on all the details of that simple, dignified ceremony. He had told her that most probably they would be returning the next day. He informed her too of Teresa's sudden arrival and how very much like a miracle it was that she had arrived, just on that day. Alice was glad beyond words that Teresa was back, for she knew that she would take good care of Papa.

And then some agreement was reached on when they should return. Their open tickets and Teresa's had to be confirmed for the next morning and Hari went out to get the work done. The talk in the Chacko household was desultory and full of memories and the unspoken question of why George had taken the final irrevocable step. He had appeared happy and contented and there had been no cause for unhappiness in all that he had done and spoken about in the past. Then why, why, why? Manjooran spoke with brimming eyes and a faltering tongue of the mystery of George's action and cursed himself for not having had even a clue about what had prompted his only son to step across the edge of the terrace wall into thin air.

In the quietness interspersed with the conversation, sitting at the dining table over the rice gruel that had been prepared for all of them, he noticed Sheeba's eyes were on him, full of a fierce questioning accusation. Manjooran could not comprehend the ferocity of her gaze. But there were no words spoken. Then the moment was gone and they were all back at their respective sleeping places, this time Teresa volunteering to sleep with Sheeba and her mother in the small room next to the dining room.

The night was long and filled with the murmur of unasked questions. And then in the morning they were off, Teresa with her heavy luggage and Manjooran and Hari with their single suitcases. Sheeba did not come out to see them go. The plane was on time and they were back home within a couple of hours. Alice had come to the airport to receive them. The journey was over; the funeral was done and still they did not have a clue what had happened. Manjooran was dropped along with Teresa at his house and Hari and Alice went back to theirs, where the twins gave him a welcome that thrilled his heart and made him feel whole again. There was one thing more he had to do before this sorry chapter was closed. Hari had some suspicions and these he would reveal only after he had spoken to the two sisters.

Manjooran and Teresa sat together that evening and spoke to each other. Suddenly, there was much love between them. He could only thank the mysterious ways of God and the glorious miracle of Teresa's return the very same day when one of his children had decided to fly away forever.. One loss and one gain. Questions asked, reasons sought for, possible explanations; all of this gave no relief. The undeniable fact of an unnecessary death sat like a dark, heavy cloud over their heads. There were no answers and the questions would never end. Kamala saw to it that they ate as best as they could, given the circumstances. She hovered around, whispering to Teresa to keep a close watch over her father, to see that he was never left to himself. She had been alone, a horrified witness the last time, when Manjooran had fallen into some private hell, where he had led himself to. Teresa nodded; she would take care of him, don't worry.

With much trepidation, Hari called over Teresa two days after to discuss the curious matter of the bloodstained letter with her and Alice. He needed to be sure that what he was about to do was correct, that he had the support of the two sisters in his delicate task. Manjooran had withdrawn into a quiet little shell ever since he had returned, but Rekha who had come over the next day to visit him was not overly concerned. She put it down to the natural grief that had consumed him these past few days and was sure that with the passage of time, he would feel better. The passing away of a son, the heir of the Manjooran family, was not something to be lightly dismissed. The trauma was great and would take time to heal. He still had his two daughters and he prayed that he could depend on them not to leave him and be near him. There was no certainty now in things he had always assumed for sure. And true, he still hoped that Sheeba would join him here where he could lavish on her, and the little boy, all the love and care that his ageing heart could summon.

So when Teresa had taken out some toys she had brought all the way from Brighton for the twins and had sent them on their way and Alice had prepared the tea and set the cups out on the table, it was time for Hari to say what he had to. With much hesitation and fear, with words that stumbled across his tongue, with several warnings to them to be unalarmed, he took out the plastic folder the police officer had entrusted him with two days ago at Mumbai and pulled out the letter. As he explained what it was, the sight of the stains on the letter shocked Alice into a whimpering and Teresa into a numbed stasis that overpowered her. She cringed and closed her eyes with the palms of her hands, bowing her head in complete defeat. Hari was filled with doubts. Was he doing the right thing, exposing these two daughters of Manjooran to a fresh ordeal once again? So, with much anxiety and a dark sense of foreboding, he revealed the contents of the letter to them. Teresa had received the email with virtually the same message, word for word, about a week ago. It was that very same news that had transformed the way she looked at things and made her take the decision that would change the future course of her life. There was the troubling question that would need some answering; a letter to George and an e-mail to Teresa, sent some days later. Was it the intention that they should both, more or less simultaneously, get the news of the transgression Manjooran was about to commit?

Alice did not have the awful courage to even look at the letter that Hari held briefly in his hands, before he tucked it away into the plastic folder. Teresa reached out to touch the paper, but withdrew her hand away at the last moment. The sight of the bloodstains on the letter would remain in her consciousness for long, of that she was certain. Even if so many other things were dimly seen in the press and throng of the task of living, these stains would haunt her for the rest of her life; of this simple truth she had no doubt.

Why had George placed that letter in his pocket before he jumped from the twenty-fourth floor of his apartment buildings? Was it just a coincidence that the letter had been there in his pocket, forgotten in the more immediate task of ending his life? Or was he sending them some message, some dark plea from across the boundaries of death? And could this letter have led him to take that final, irreversible step, a step into the space beyond the edge of the parapet on the terrace, where reason ended and insanity began, where gravity would strip him of all logic and judgment, where the falling into space and oblivion was more attractive a prospect than living a life that had lost all meaning. The thought of his father considering the prospect of his marriage with Dr. Rekha: had it disturbed George so much that he had lost his hold on the irregular surfaces called everyday life?

The all-important question was to be validated by these two women before Hari would take the decision to reveal the matter to Manjooran. Should he show this letter to Manjooran and explain that it had been found on George's body as he had fallen to his death just four days ago in the early morning of that day in Mumbai? What did it all mean? Was it George's way of saying no, that he did not approve of the alliance his widower father was about to make; that he considered this an act of infidelity to the memory of his mother, now deceased but a little over a year. Of course, this alone could not have been the reason for the extreme step of ending his life, of that Hari was sure and said so to Alice and Teresa. There must have been other reasons, either something that had come up in the past few days or some things boiling and festering in his mind over all these years, something that made him finally realize the pointlessness of continuing to live in a world turned inimical to him. One could think about this forever, Hari warned; but it was necessary to go on with the business of life. What he needed to know was whether the letter, and the fact of its presence in George's pocket, should be revealed to their father or whether it was an unnecessary detail that could be ignored or overlooked; a minor fact that was not reason enough to burden Manjooran with, as he struggled to recover from the shock and horror of it all.

There was a silence as they considered the implications of the question. It was one filled with consequences, the import of which could not be assessed now, but one that could have profound impact on the future of Manjooran with Dr. Rekha living their lives either together or separately. To brush it away casually would be an act of callous indifference to the memory of George, if indeed he had placed the letter deliberately in his pocket before he ended his life. If the intention of that act were to draw attention to the grossness of the proposed alliance of his father with a stranger, then to dismiss it and deliberately ignore it would be wrong. It would be an insult to the memory of their brother. That premise accepted, their father would have to be told. What that would mean to his future, his future with this new woman by his side; that is something that Manjooran alone would have to judge and decide on his own. If, however, the letter had been in his pocket and placed there unknowingly without thought to its significance, then, of course, Manjooran need not be told about the matter.

But with no clue as to whether this was a deliberate act, a message he wanted conveyed to his father in no uncertain terms, or whether the letter had just happened to be in the shirt pocket, the perplexing question was even more confusing.

The three of them were in a dilemma. They talked long and for hours, debating the issue threadbare and considering the choices before them. There were moments when the emotions almost got the better of them and voices tended to be raised. Hari was at pains to let them know that it was not his intention to raise a new storm in the household, already reeling with the shock it had just gone through. Teresa filled with her new found affection for home and family and her overpowering love for her father, determined to protect him in all circumstances, was the most difficult to convince, though she too knew the wishes of the anguished soul

who had taken his own life would have to be respected. When emotion was run through and the matter agonized over in all its details, there was a great silence in the room. It was Alice who finally conceded that there was nothing much they could do but accept what Hari had suggested. Indeed, they finally had to come to the only conclusion they could possibly arrive at. If there was even a faint possibility that, by placing the letter in his pocket before he had plunged to his death, George had intended to convey a message to his father, some hint of his angst, his despair and anger, then they could not, should not, withhold knowledge of that fact from Manjooran. And having done that, they could leave it to him to decide on the course of his action. In the not inconsequential matter of his life ahead with Dr. Rekha.

Thus it was decided. The three of them would broach the matter to Manjooran and Dr. Rekha, together, for it was their joint destiny that would be affected in revealing this bizarre twist to George's sad story. Alice set the stage for the denouement a few days later, for she decided that some time must pass for the grief to settle in her father's heart before throwing this new conundrum at him. She invited him and Dr. Rekha for, what she termed, an important event that would have to be revealed to them in this extraordinary meeting of the family. Manjooran was curious but knew the matter was serious enough in the tone and expression on Alice's face. Teresa who was standing by, watched carefully but did not say a word. Rekha was informed on the telephone and she volunteered to have the meeting at her place, if required. No, Alice decreed, this would be at her home: Hari's and Alice's place, familiar ground, but neither Manjooran's nor Dr. Rekha's. Somewhere where neither of them had any proprietary rights. It was getting curiouser and curiouser.

It was at four in the evening when all of them gathered. It had been decided Alice would broach the subject. Then, Hari narrated the details of the quiet conversation the police officer had had with him on that sad, sad day when he and Manjooran had flown to Mumbai. And finally it was Alice who would tell them of the need for the meeting and what had made it necessary to call them both together, for it was a matter that would affect both of them. It was fitting that they hear this together. As Alice began, sitting in the drawing room, the cups of tea at hand, the twins sent away to the neighbours', both Manjooran and Dr. Rekha for a moment thought that the three of them, Alice, Hari and Teresa, had together built a wall against them, ready to deny them the happiness they sought. That they were now saying, enough of this romantic nonsense, a son had killed himself; this was no time to play at a game of love for senior citizens.

Hari then spoke, holding the folder in his hand and drawing attention to it only at the last moment, when he had finished the story of how it had been passed on to him at Mumbai, at the precise moment when Papa had been distracted by the officials with the formalities involved in handing over the body at the morgue. The fact that George had had his father's letter in his shirt pocket, conveying his intention to enter into holy matrimony with Dr. Rekha, when he had flung himself down to his death, was the last sentence that Hari spoke. Then he was done. And he stood silently, not wishing to add a word more to what was said, not wishing to colour facts with his own opinions. He did not even say that the matter was for them to decide. That was understood, he thought, he did not need to voice the fact that their future together would depend on how they interpreted the final, awful statement George had made. He would leave the judgment to both of them: it was for them now to decide.

Again it was as if Manjooran did not understand what was being said. His expression seemed to say, if George had my letter in his pocket, well, what of it? Rekha, infinitely more sensitive, gasped in horror at the very thought of it. She clasped her face in her hands and bowed low over the table. With an intuitive perceptiveness, she gathered the awesome import of the anger that George had bellowed out on that fateful morning. Why else would he keep that letter with him, on his body, as he flung himself out into the air from the terrace of that damned building? Or was it that inadvertently and absentmindedly, he had put the letter in his pocket and, later, in the awful business of ending his own life, had forgotten all about it. Was George telling his father something, was he whispering something into his ears, something that he should have listened to? Rekha knew he had never been very vocal; this middle child of the family, for Manjooran had at times spoken of him with some asperity, as an average son of whom he would never be proud. There were suppressed histories in him somewhere and it would seem that in the uneventful unfolding of the days of his life, there was much that had not been spoken. Was George more than he had appeared to be, with secret

untold griefs that welled as deep, dark pools in his heart? In the not speaking of those words, had he been drowning in the deep, dark pools inside him?

Slowly, seeing the hopelessness in the face of Rekha, it dawned on Manjooran that the news Hari had conveyed demanded more attention than he had been willing to give it. He reached out for the plastic folder and Hari, with some reluctance, passed it over. Manjooran reeled back in dismay, as the sight of the blood on the pages hit him like a blow on the chin. He dropped his hands even before he had touched the folder and sank into his chair, the sudden shock of the sight of his son's blood making him look old and haggard in a moment. His letter, sent a fortnight ago, and had probably reached George a couple of days later, was now back with him, splattered rust brown, returned to sender with a note of objection, like a colorful highlighter on an office memorandum, bringing out the essence of the message to his eyes. Could it be, he wondered in horrified silence, could it be that George had committed suicide when he received the letter from him? The words on the letter were almost unreadable, the dull brown blotches spread like a stain over them. Was this his way of saying that he did not approve, that he protested with his life for the crime his father was about to commit? How could that be, he wondered in a daze of unspeakable misery, how could one take one's own life when all that he needed to do to make his protest was to lift the telephone and tell him over the phone. But then how many times had his son protested about anything to him. He had remained bland and quiet all his life. Why had he not spoken, why had he not raised his voice, as Alice or Teresa would have?

The stillness in the room was overpowering. Everybody had stopped speaking. It was late in the afternoon and life was going about its normal business beyond the room. In the streets outside, the city and its inhabitants were unaffected by the shattering news. But here within the room, it was as if time had halted in its tracks. It had not, and that was clear too, for the ticking of the wall clock was even louder than before. The evening was turning dark outside. All eyes turned to Manjooran, Hari cool and detached, Teresa full of daughterly concern, Alice worried and hesitant, and Rekha, with the dawning certainty that everything had changed, the plans she had made for a new beginning slowly seeming to melt away in the harsh light of the afternoon sun, the mist and magic of a few moments of dawn bliss giving way to an unforgivingly stern reality that did not think well of the kindling of romance between an elderly, unhappy couple. And though it was now clear to Rekha, she knew too that it would never be clear to Manjooran, at least not as clear as to convince him that it was now too late to pursue idle dreams any longer. That a man in the sixtieth decade of his life should not make foolish plans for holy matrimony. These are things best left to those in the twenties, for truly, life belongs to them and not to doddering, old and foolish people who dared to dream otherwise.

Rekha's face was drawn and suddenly lined with age, with the crushing blow of hope gone awry. She stood up and said she had to leave, that the tragedy should be left to the family. After all, she was an outsider and had no business to be with them at such a moment of misfortune, when the son of a family had taken his own life. She had to go, she had to go. And then, before anyone had the time or opportunity to say a word, despite Manjooran's troubled gesture bidding her to wait, she was gone. They heard the front door close and the sound of the engine starting and the gravel on the driveway scattering as the car, in high gear, engine in a whine, moved out of the gate and into the street and was gone. The end? Was this the end of the story? Alice asked herself the question, gnawing at her fingernails, eyes blurring at the complexity of events that turn ordinary men and women into fools in a world too big for them to understand.

Manjooran sank back into his chair. We do not even know whether George was sending him a message, he thought. We do not even know if the letter was in his pocket inadvertently, or whether George was speaking to him directly, face to face, and speaking to him for the first time in his troubled life, looking him in the eye and saying, Papa, I do not approve. My life, my blood on your letter, this is my way of saying I do not approve. There, now let me see what are you going to do about that. Was George testing him, challenging him, was this his way of stating he had all these days lived a life of subordination to an arrogant father, that he had had enough, and damn the consequences. Here is my life for the anguish you caused me, Papa. I shall see you suffer the same anguish you gave me. I shall see you unhappy and tormented, the prize of your happiness slipping out of your hand, washed away in the blood I shed.

What superb timing, George. What splendid execution. He groaned in pain and his daughters rose from where they were sitting and moved towards him, their hands caressing his forehead, their arms hugging him and seeming to say, quieten down, be calm, we shall think more of this some other time. We want you now to take a deep breath and let things be clearer as we go along. Come, do lie down for a moment and sleep for a while.

Manjooran waved them away. There was some irritation in his gesture. This was not the time for daughters who think they have to come to the aid of their father at moments of stress. This was not the time for lying down and being calm. This was the time when he had to deeply consider what all this meant, what it meant to his and Rekha's happiness, for their joint lives ahead. Rekha had fled, overwhelmed by the turn of events, even when it was not clear what this all meant. He too had been staggered by the new import of the suicide, an unexpected and new significance in the death. Now was the time for reflection.

He got up and moved to the door. Alice dared to ask if he needed help, whether she should come too. No, he shook his head. He would manage; he always had. And Teresa was with him; if he had need of anything, she would be around. At the door, Teresa hovering behind him, he turned to Alice and Hari. There were unspoken volumes in his eyes. There was sadness that this tragedy had come to pass, the loss of a son is a loss beyond words. In his eyes, there was almost the hint of an accusation, why had the letter been revealed to him now, when there was some measure of happiness waiting in the future. There was too, the pain of unanswered questions, of the opening of a door that led to a mystery so dark and profound that it defied understanding. And if he had to make some peace with himself, to find some future for him and Rekha together, then that mystery would have to be fathomed. Manjooran turned and walked to the car, as straight-backed as he could manage. Teresa moved to the driver's seat and they were off. Hari and Alice turned to each other. She was on the verge of tears and he held her tight as the twilight swelled in all its inscrutable secrecy around them.

ENDS AND BEGINNINGS

Another year, another swing of the earth around the sun, another cycle of the seasons. For Manjooran there was reason to believe that time had halted as he contemplated the life it was his privilege to live. He was hanging in balance, afloat on an unquiet sea, arms spread wide, buoyed by the salt of his memories. They lapped all around him, as he swayed and swung in the movement of its waves.

At times he wondered whether it had all been in vain. Whether he had lost his Sosha because he had not seen the pain she had known in the bitter days after Alice had walked out. Whether the little pins he had thrust into George all his life, small barbs of sharp words, oblique comments, critical sneers about his incompetence, had swelled into a mountainous burden the poor boy could no longer hold up against the sky. George had bent his legs under its weight and then lost the battle to the forces of gravity as the morning breeze snatched him from the apartment terrace. But for this awful event that had altered his vision of life, there was much that was consoling too: the thought of the wonderful happiness he had enjoyed with his beloved, now departed Sosha. The return of Alice and the stability she had given his life. If only she had been back with him while Sosha were alive. He wondered for the hundredth time whether that was the bargain God had chalked out for him; Sosha's life for Alice's homecoming. And then, the wonderful awakening of soul and spirit that Rekha in the past year had blessed him with, as he rose from under the grief that had all but consumed him. And the recent astonishing reunion of Teresa with the family, her firm determination to be back once again in her own land. These were good things. How could he not be blessed in the joyful memory of good things?

He spent his days now in thoughtful contemplation, in long walks in the morning, in prolonged sessions of tea and biscuits with Teresa, in unburdening his mind in conversations with himself, sometimes allowing Teresa to overhear. He slept for an hour in the afternoon and, as evening fell, took to reading complicated tomes on philosophy and history and religious interpretation. Teresa, sensing perfectly the mood he was in, advised him on his reading, escorting him on his weekly visits to the libraries. He taught himself to take up an hour of meditation in the early mornings, at first disturbed by the alleys and pathways his mind wandered into, but slowly mastering the way to discipline his mind and focus his mental energies until he reached some measure of clarity of thought. No, he was not depressed, not in danger of falling into the abyss that had been once his lot, a million years ago. This time around, when death had struck the family again, he found himself more composed in the acceptance of all that it meant.

Surprisingly, he did not have much problem falling asleep at night. Not that the thought of his son's suicide did not weigh heavily on his mind. But he realized that what was done was done, that his brooding over things unchangeable could not make them better. He agonized over the way he may have been a thorn under the skin, and remembered Sosha's hesitant words that he should be gentler with George. Of course, in those days, what he said or did was unquestioned. How could he, when at the height of his powers, at the pinnacle of his career in the company, have had the empathy to listen to his middling, incompetent son and be gentle with him? How could he have reckoned the price of the lashes administered on the poor boy? He smiled bitterly. How great is the cost of blindness.

Teresa walked around him, wary and watchful, attendant to his every need, careful of the food he ate, insisting that Kamala be on time, that the food be served exactly on the scheduled hour and that the oil and the fat be strictly controlled. She was an observant friend, ready with a smile at any hour of the day, willing to advise when required, prepared to be silent when that was the necessary thing to do. To Manjooran, it seemed she were on a loose end, spending her days like a mother hen clucking over him, with no definite plans for herself. And he did, in fact, ask her what she intended to do with her life, whether she intended to carry on with what she had left back at her University. She was evasive, but assured him she was going in the right direction and that she would get there soon. Where that 'there' was, he did not know, though she was

confident she would find her bearings soon enough. Teresa herself was contemplative; images of Paul moved hesitantly through her mind and saddened her. But she knew that was all behind her now. The life she had led these many years so far away from home seemed irrelevant and without meaning.

Hari and Alice would drop in often; the conversations were formal when Hari was around, though never hostile. The revelation of the bloodstained letter, when Hari had called for the family conference and the unpredictable change of plans it had set into motion, stood like an unresolved issue between them. To Manjooran it was an evil and deliberate strategy to ruin his best-laid plans, though he conceded to himself that in Hari's place, he would have perhaps done the same thing. It was too important a story to be left untold. In the telling of it though, the bliss of two people searching for meaning in life had been destroyed. Alice was acutely aware of the tension whenever they met, but there was nothing she could do about it. She came, as often as she could, but alone, when the stress, singing like a high-pitched whine between the two most important men in her life, was no longer there. Then it seemed they were almost a family again: Manjooran, Alice and Teresa. They used to talk, quietly and in piquant moods, of Sosha and the love she had given them all in abundant measure. Of the joyful conversations between all of them over the dinner table, in the garden, at the parties they went to. And indeed, they talked too of George and the never-ending mystery of his life, of his death.

Manjooran's regret that hurt him every day was the sudden indifference that Sheeba seemed to display towards him. Immediately on getting back from Mumbai after the funeral, he had rung her up, wanting to talk to her, to invite her over, shower her with love and affection. On the first occasion, she came to the phone after a long wait. She had talked as if she were not well or had just woken up from a deep, drugged sleep. On successive occasions too, she showed no change, just a sullen response in monosyllables to every one of his questions. He wanted to talk to his grandson, but was always told that he was out to school or at his friends' or with the next door neighbours'. In time, in the face of this continued and studied indifference, Manjooran's calls became infrequent and almost died out. Chacko once talked to him and told him, as if in apology for his daughter's conduct, that she was still grappling with the tragedy of her life, learning to come to grips with the awesome loneliness that had been suddenly thrown into her face. In the circumstances, there was little that Manjooran could do to better the situation.

And then, of course, there was the small matter of his own life. Where was he going, he wondered, in which direction and to what purpose. There was an enormous unfilled hole in his heart and he puzzled and pondered over the contours of the emptiness within. Since the day when George's letter had been revealed, everything had changed. A few days after, he had, with much hesitation, rung up Rekha's house and tried to talk to her. An obviously disquieted Daniel told him that Rekha was not in the house and that she had given him strict instructions not to respond to any calls from Manjooran. The message had torn him apart. But he could see the logic of it; he had to concede that. Rekha was merely doing what she had to do. If there were the slightest possibility that George had taken his own life in protest over the proposed union of his father and her, then she would run away; flee rather than continue with the accursed plan. She would not let that horrible truth lie like a brooding cloud over her head, their heads, for the rest of their days together.

So he let her be. He needed to think about that. Teresa and Alice plotted to bring him back to some modicum of equanimity; they made light conversation, they conjured up his favourite dishes, they scolded Kamala on the diet to be followed and they hugged him for no reason at all. He smiled; these obvious subterfuges to divert his mind and make him cheerful were welcome. He wished he could respond in kind and make them less worried than they actually were. Hari kept at a discreet distance. He was not sure if he had been forgiven for having raised the subject of the letter. It had been so timed as to cause distress in the house and put to naught the efforts Manjooran and Rekha had undertaken to find happiness for themselves. Manjooran did wonder why Hari had raised the issue of the letter at all, when it was not even sure if George had deliberately placed the letter in his pocket before he jumped off the building into the golden sunrise.

Manjooran shook his head; he had no right to talk of his son, his dead son, in that fashion. But for the life of him, he could not get over the fact that George had always been an unsatisfactory son while he lived and in

his death he had been intolerably cruel to his father. Manjooran saw himself more sinned against than sinning. The judgment passed on his head by George that dawn in Mumbai had turned him into a brooding, deeply contemplative old man.

He needed to think about the denial of happiness. To live life out day by day till his death, with the sure knowledge that he was not heir to the happiness that could have been his, knowing that in the conduct of his life in the many years before all this, he had sown the seeds of his own misery in the manner he had treated George, in the use of the tone and language employed in the humiliation of his only son. And that, more than anything else, had led the poor, confused idiot to jump off the tallest apartment building in Mumbai city. Manjooran had caused his son's death. And his own misery. That was the final incontrovertible truth. And this he would live with for the rest of his questionable, uncertain life.

For Rekha too, another year had passed. For her too it was another swing of the earth around the sun, another cycle of the seasons. Just a few kilometers away, she too struggled with demons of her own. The traumatic family meeting with Teresa, Alice and Hari had hit her like an ungloved fist on her forehead. When invited, she had nursed the faint hope that there would be some talk of conferring the seal of approval for Manjooran and Rekha getting together. She knew it was too close to the tragedy, that there could be no talk of such a union until sufficient time had elapsed. But as Hari revealed the details of the letter, she had listened with growing horror as the full and final implications of it all became clear to her. George's suicide was but a clear negation of the marriage, a shout of protest that could not be silenced. By the time she had reached home after fleeing from that family conference, it was clear what she had to do. This had changed everything utterly. Nothing more was required to be done or said. The end. She fled to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her, leaving Daniel shocked and worried. He tried to knock on the door and ask her what the matter was. She shouted at him to go away and leave her alone and that he too could leave for good, and never come back. Some hours later, Daniel knocked once more saying that dinner was ready and that she should come out and get something to eat and that he would be damned if he would allow her to starve. That he had been her faithful retainer for years, that he would prefer to go to Hell before abandoning his mistress. That he too would starve if she would not eat.

There had been a long silence that ended when Rekha came out, eyes swollen and face puffed beyond recognition, body cold and trembling, pleading wordlessly for comfort and consolation from the only person now that she could rely on. And it was left to Daniel to make her a hot cup of tea and to throw a shawl around her and seat her on the sofa. To Daniel, she revealed all. The old and loyal confessor listened in silence. He had seen and smiled as the friendship between her and Manjooran had grown into a piquant romance, had watched with growing interest and excitement as they took the decision for matrimony. And now, this, this fall from soaring flight, in the course of a single day. The collapse of a carefully nurtured plan dashed to the ground. The search for happiness in the uncertain days of the future had been foiled, not so much by the death of a son, but by the evidence he carried on his shattered body that screamed against the sin about to be committed, a father's sin so horrific that the son could not bear to live with the shame of it. She spoke to Daniel of the family meeting to which she had been a witness, and how the revelation had, immediately and in a single second, made her an outsider to the circle that had closed around Manjooran. She had been excluded and that itself was enough to break her heart. She who had had prospects of joining that circle, a hope long nurtured, longed for, caressed in her dreams, now suddenly vanishing as smoky vapour from the mouth on an icy day.

It took Daniel all of a week to bring her wounded spirit back to some semblance of normalcy. He counseled her as an old uncle would a fond niece. He told her of the trials she had already been through, more tragic than this, the death of the unborn child and her father-in-law together in an avoidable accident, that she and only she was responsible for, of her traumatic divorce and how each challenge she faced had made her stronger and invincible. How she had yet retained her sensitivity in all the work she did every single day of her life. How she had become a better person, more heart and soul than a dry clinical expert.

Rekha understood as only she could. Was it not she who had gritted her teeth and snarled at the God above. And held Him down to a truce, where both she and God would keep distance from each other and swear not to interfere. And now this sudden tripping up.

In the night, sleepless and wide-eyed, she reassessed the situation. Manjooran was now out of the picture. She could not foresee him leaving hearth and home and the distress of his family and run to her. The death of George lay like a gleaming sword between them. St. George, the dragon-killer, the mythical Christian hero who had valiantly fought the evil, iron-scaled dragon and cut off its head. Just as efficiently as George, the middling child had cut off Manjooran's head. And all talks of a ridiculous marriage between the two gray-haired protagonists.

This was direct hand of a malevolent God. Remember, God, the truce I had so painfully executed with You; the one that had been held in place all these days. You, the Other Party have rescinded from the terms of the contract. I had promised I would fight you like a tigress. And so I will. I had promised I would be a formidable foe. So there! No more deals or bargains. My life is now my work and my home shall now be the hospital. Every man, woman and child who comes to me, it shall be my solemn duty to save their lives. No compromise. I shall live my life one hundred percent for the protection of life. No deaths in my hospital. Not one shall I surrender to You. Every one of them shall be to my account, the account of the fighting and living. Not one for You to take away from here.

In the days that followed, Dr. Rekha Kurien immersed herself in her work, with such dedication and passion that the ones around her were terrified and overwhelmed by her commitment. She did not rest for a moment, not even to have a decent lunch. She was the first to arrive. There was many an occasion when, looking after a young ill child doing poorly, she would decide to stay on in the duty nurse's room and spend the night watching over the feverish patient. And she would invariably be the last to leave. When the paramedics and the attendants would pointedly look at their watches and start shuffling to the door with their things, she would shoo them on their way, while she herself would stay back for some more time, caressing the forehead of this child with septicemia or that elderly woman with the stomach ulcer. She would ring up her specialist doctor colleagues and browbeat them for not attending in time to patients referred by her. She would arrange for medicines for the poorer patients who did not have the wherewithal to buy them. There were some chemists who were willing to oblige her, not because they were philanthropic, but because she had, by then, acquired such a reputation that they did not have the gumption to refuse her.

She lost weight, her face turned gaunt. She smiled less. She was infinitely gentle with the patients who thronged to meet her, for her fame was growing by the day as the doctor who would not allow a patient to die in her wards. But she was also known to be rough spoken, even abusive, when a hospital attendant or a paramedic made an avoidable error that could have endangered the life of a patient. Over the last year, starting from the days when she broke off all relations from Manjooran, she turned herself into an Angel of Life, standing guardian over her precious patients.

It would not be out of place to mention here that in the past one year, there had been but two patients who had died, even as she was leaning over their cots in the hospital. One, a child of seven, severely affected by jaundice, her body a harsh, yellow colour, had looked up at her, smiled and then grown rigid in her arms. Dr. Rekha had thrown her stethoscope to the corner of the room and had stalked out, muttering under her breath, 'Not fair, You have sent me a hopeless case today, one already dead, so that she would stop breathing even as I watched.' Her nurses did not know to whom she was talking, or what her words meant. The other was of a woman, some seventy-five years old, who had been bitten by a snake from the rice-fields where she was working and had been brought in too late for anti-venom treatment. The needle had just been plunged into her frail body, when she suddenly shuddered in agony and fell off the cot on to the floor. Dr. Kurien had picked up the light, lifeless body and had placed her on the cot again and had sat in a corner of the room with downcast eyes. Her face was flaming with a fury that belied the gentleness she normally displayed. Then she had walked off the ward, not to return for the day.

Slowly, she grew an aura around her. She would appear in the middle of the night, when doctors as senior as her were not expected to. And with steely eyes look at the duty nurse snoring at her table. If the patients were all sleeping or restful, she would not bother to wake up the nurse, simply leaving behind a note that she had been in at two in the night. But if even one of the patients was awake and seemed to be in some kind of pain, then she would shake the hapless nurse up and let her have it. None in her staff had a clue as to when she went to sleep or when she would come stalking by at odd hours of the night. To the patients and their families, she was a saint who evoked religious adoration. They even went so far as to say that with a touch of her hand she could cure a fever or set a man destined for the grave back on his feet again.

Daniel watched in consternation. Time as a factor of life did not seem to have any relevance for the good doctor. She could have her breakfast in the late morning or her dinner at three in the early hours before dawn. In time she instructed him to place the food on the table and go sleep and that whenever she came in, she would re-heat it in the microwave. At the workplace, she could do no wrong and the Superintendent of the Hospital wisely left her to her own devices, recognizing that here was a doctor who would not live by the rules of hospital administration, who lived her life on her own terms, charged with a calling that was of an infinitely higher order than anything he had ever witnessed before. He blindly signed for all the extra medicines and equipment she ordered, knowing that if he did not, she would pester him and berate him and shout at him until he had no choice but to concur.

Still, there were moments, when dozing at home in the late evening, just before falling into a dreamless sleep, the drawn and haunted face of Manjooran floated before her, remembered as she had last seen him before rushing out of Alice's home at the family conclave. Manjooran would be invariably staring at her, eyes deeply hurt, face etched with lines of sorrow. He spoke no words but pleaded for intercession, some words from her, some sign that she would be there when all this mess was resolved. Rekha was always jolted out of her slumber, pulse beating at the base of her throat, feeling suddenly short of breath. She took some time to breathe normally again.

Once when Chetan visited her, wanting to find out what was wrong, for there was so much change in the way she spoke on the telephone or wrote to him, she tried to stonewall him and assure him that all was well. He had been uncertain of developments that had been taking place after Rekha had once told him that the marriage was off due to certain differences between the two of them. This came as an unacceptable piece of information, for just a couple of months before this, she had taken the trouble to come over and discuss the complex question of her growing relationship with Manjooran and, in a way, to seek his affirmation on the course of action she was about to take. Then, there had not been the hint of any possible friction between them. What could have possibly led to the sudden turn of events that changed the relationship completely and left his sister adrift and high-strung?

His attempts to talk to Mini and Abha were inconclusive. They too had noticed the drastic change in Rekha and despite their attempts to talk to her about it, even to threaten that they would cut off all relations in the face of her obdurate silence, they had not the slightest clue about the reason for this abrupt change in her. They were worried beyond words but every attempt to talk to her had been gently rebuffed until both of them, the best friends that Rekha had ever had, talked amongst themselves and decided to let her be for a while. She would come around if she wanted to confide in them. Otherwise, she would set her devils at rest in the best manner she could.

Chetan would, of course, have none of Rekha's feeble attempts to put him off and took her out into the garden with a hot cup of fresh coffee and asked her to be truthful, for that was the least he expected of her. Confronted with the artless honesty with which he asked her the questions, she had no option but to bend her head low and speak in whispers about all that had happened, right from the catastrophic day of the Manjooran family discussions that had seen all prospects of joy ending for her to the slave-like single-minded devotion to work she now resorted to as an antidote for the grieving of the heart. Chetan was stung, not only because she had kept these confidences of the heart secret from him, when in all their days together, there had never ever been secrets withheld from each other. Indeed, he was more upset because he felt there

were ways to resolve the present conundrum, provided both parties were willing to look for answers. As a victim himself of love unfulfilled, he vowed he would not let his sister, whom he loved more than the very earth itself, fall to the same fate that had trampled him.

“Leave this to me, stupid woman,” he growled, “and stop fretting about things you have no clue about. I promise I will get back to you in a month’s time. And know that your Chetan is willing to do anything for you and your happiness.” He walked out of the room, leaving Rekha torn between guilt for not having confided in Chetan earlier and the beginning of a spark of hope that she dared not allow to see the light of day. She shook her head as she watched him stalk out, hopelessly tossed between the welter of emotions buffeting her body and soul like a sudden storm.

Chetan now put his contacts to work. Quietly, unobtrusively, he set about the task of finding more about Manjooran, where he lived, with whom he confided, his children, his routine each day. At the back of his mind was a plan, a stratagem that was being fine-tuned. The delicacy of the matter, the sensitivities involved, the awesome tragedy that lay like a dark cloud over the Manjooran household, all of these imponderables complicated this story. But there was no task he was not willing to undertake for Rekha. Chetan, learning from his own desperate experience, now knew that he had to make the effort for her sake. He would not allow silence to again defeat him. He had lost the game in the face of the adamant opposition of his father, when Mini’s love for him, and his for her, had been casually rejected. Now he would not let go of the matter until he had made the best efforts possible to secure the happiness of his sister.

It took him a week to know the lie of the land. His spies, young artful clerks working with him at Thiruvananthapuram, were dispatched to Kochi to scout the territory and glean information of Alice and Teresa and Hari and the people who came and went in the Manjooran household. He learnt quickly enough that the key to the problem lay with Alice and Teresa. If he were able to convince them of the need for reconciliation, for understanding, for giving the two of them, Manjooran and Rekha, a chance at this late stage of their lives to grasp at happiness in a world which had not been kind to them, then there would be a slim chance that the evening of their lives would shine with the golden glow of contentment and companionship. It would be cruel to deny them this, their last chance.

Watching and waiting, he sought the one window of opportunity when Teresa and Alice were alone together so that he could talk to them, as he had never talked before. He came all the way from Thiruvananthapuram to Cochin one sultry evening and checked in at a good hotel on the sea front. He waited for two entire days, until he was told on the cell phone, by a young lawyer apprentice quite eager to please him, that the sisters, both of them, had left Manjooran’s house in the car for the supermarket, apparently for the weekly groceries. Then, this big, burly, bear of a man, dark-skinned and dhoti-clad, slipped out of his hotel room, followed them all the way to the supermarket and kept watch on their movements, as they moved from the vegetable counter to the provisions store and then to the haberdasher and finally to the restaurant for a cup of coffee at the end of their shopping.

It was then that he made his move. He walked up to them just as the waiter had left, placing the jug and the milk and sugar before them.

“Its Alice and Teresa, isn’t it?” He had a careful smile on his face and he was at pains to not make them feel wary or uncomfortable.

Alice looked up; she did not have a clue as to who this dark stranger was. But he had addressed them by their names and that was reassuring enough for her to look at him and ask him a question in return.

“Yes. I am sorry, but I do not recognize you”. Her voice was aloof, but not unfriendly.

“This is going to be difficult for me, as I am sure it will be for you. May I sit down and talk to you. I am Dr. Rekha Kurien’s elder brother. She calls me Chetan. I hope you can call me by the same name.”

There was a moment of utter silence. It appeared to the two sisters that the world had ceased moving. As if Time had stopped ticking. They stared up at him in consternation, not knowing what was coming, not

understanding that the stratagem that this man had devised and so painstakingly carried out these past two weeks, was now falling into place. They did not realize it then, but the neatly laid out plan had been executed with such perfection that they had no choice but to wave him into the chair and ask him what he would like to drink.

He smiled again. "I do think that I shall order a cup of coffee for myself too." And as the two women stared in unresisting surprise, Chetan raised his hand and called for the waiter, ordering another cup and a plate of biscuits for all of them. "Let me explain, it's a long story. And I would like you to listen to me, to hear me out, before you ask your questions, for I am sure that there will be many questions for you to ask."

For the next hour Chetan spoke. This reticent man had hardly spoken more than a sentence or two at a time in the last twenty years and that too when he had no choice but to do so. This soft-spoken, sombre man now spoke like a practiced speaker, marshalling his thoughts, delivering his sentences like a debater holding forth in a manner that no one, even Rekha, would have recognized. He spoke of the white, sprawling building he had known as a child with Rekha, the fears and joys of growing up, the unknown insecurities of youth. He spoke too of a dreamy, philosophical woman who abdicated her responsibilities as a mother for the bliss of books and the elation of a contemplative mind. He spoke also of a hateful father who ruined his life and his single chance to find happiness. He spoke of Rekha and her marriage to Simon and the wonderful year that she had had when an irascible, lovable man, her father-in-law, had been around to give that marriage stability and love. And how Rekha had lost it all in the course of a few minutes when, at her own hands, both he and the child yet to be born had been killed. And how that wonderful marriage had been dissolved thereafter as Love had fled from the heart that had promised to love and cherish forever. He spoke to them with deep searing eyes of how the purpose of living was to search for happiness and how central that it is to the very meaning of life. And that both Rekha and Manjooran, wounded soldiers in the battle of life, had found that happiness in each other and had sought to hold on to that joy for the rest of their lives.

He spoke now of the terrible tragedy that had befallen the Manjooran household and how he had felt, almost as keenly as they did, the sorrow that George's death had brought upon them. He did not know what that death meant, and whether George had singled out his father as target for the wrath that was burning up his soul when he had jumped off the apartment building. And how that leap had brought him down between Rekha and Manjooran and destroyed the slim chance of their life together, a chance that they had fashioned for themselves out of all that adversity. And how it was to all of them, the daughters of Manjooran and this elder sibling of Rekha, to conspire together and give them a chance to grasp that joy. And if they did not, they would have fallen victim to George and whatever twisted thoughts and machinations had moved that troubled mind for so long. He looked at them and held them in the grip of his penetrating eyes. Then he cried out in a voice shaking with passion that he knew of no truth more irreducible than this: to search for joy in life is an elemental right that none could refute and may he be cursed who tries to deny this truth. And who is talking of marriage, he asked. Is marriage the only way in which two people can be together? Do they require the chanting of hymns in a church or the signature of an authority on a piece of paper to validate their claim for joy? Surely, they have come a long way from all that. Surely the road they have traveled required no such corroboration?

"All I know is that to think that by ignoring each other the pain will go away, the conscious denial of even the sight of each other, is a foolishness that even the gods will jeer at. I cannot imagine that two grown adults who love each other would refuse to meet, would refuse to sit down and talk about the situation they jointly confront, however insurmountable the problems may appear. I cannot imagine they do not know that their actions condemn them both to spend the rest of the days of their separated lives in the agony of guilt and uncertainty. Such fools, such pitiable clowns beaten by the circumstances of their lives, such idiots as these I have not seen. And that is why we must give them a chance to find a path out of the horrendous maze into which they have led themselves. And that is why I have followed you here and why I seek this chance for them, for your father and my sister. We owe them this slim chance, this uncertain hint of bliss that surely they deserve so very much."

“And therefore, while I do not know if I make sense to you or not, it is time that we who love them both, help them find the joy that they seek so hard to find. If George’s death denies them that happiness, then it is we who make it so. How can we let misery win? How can we let the fury of a dead man kill the joy of the living? How can the sad memory of yesterday, choke the possibility of joy today? How can we let these two, whom we love with all our hearts, spend the rest of their lives, living in the same city and refusing to even see each other. When the bliss they so desire is within their grasp?”

Alice and Teresa were shaken and nonplussed as the words flew over them like a hurricane. They could not deny the truth that came so powerfully from this big, bluff man who spoke with the strength of love, with the knowledge so painfully learnt, with the force of tears spent in learning the lessons of life. He spoke with an eloquence that challenged refutation. And they bowed their heads in the knowledge of their insufficiency.

Chetan left them with the plea that they think about what he had spoken. However, the women to whom he had addressed his impassioned words were already assured of the truth of his words and were persuaded that they should strive to do the right thing, to urge both their father and Chetan’s sister to move towards each other in the first steps towards resolution of their worries.

Of course it took time. Alice and Teresa were left befuddled after Chetan walked out of the supermarket café, leaving them his card and contact numbers, in case they wished to discuss this further. Then they talked and argued and discussed and deliberated. They listed out arguments for and against. They took several days in the process of analyzing the truth of Chetan’s words and finally conceding the irrefutable logic of his impassioned words. Then Hari had to be brought in. He was unequivocally in favour of the proposal. He had been mulling over the past many months of the grief he may have brought to Manjooran and Rekha in his legalistic need to be just and objective, to not hide any material facts in the context of the proposed alliance. He was sure that the two of them, Manjooran and Rekha, did need to sit down and talk about their respective positions. He applauded Chetan’s initiative and wished he had had the courage to say the same things that Chetan had said. He would not stand in the way of their coming together, in whatever way they desired. Marriage or otherwise. He wholeheartedly affirmed that the first thing that needed to be done was to get them to meet each other, to talk to each other and then allow things to take their course.

And so it was done. Chetan was informed over the phone at his office at Thiruvananthapuram of the consensus arrived at, a week after he had met them at the supermarket. He was filled with a joy that could not be described. He had to meet Alice and Teresa now again as they planned out their next steps. This required another meeting with Rekha too. And so the plot was set and the stage prepared, the script written, the dialogue perfected. On the same fateful day, while Chetan went over to Rekha’s for a long and emotional conversation, the two sisters, took their father for a walk in the nearby park where they sat on the benches in the light of the evening sun and spoke to him in words that took his very breath away. Could it be possible he was really hearing these words? Could he be ever free from the clouds that George had let loose over his head? Could he and Rekha ever wash away the guilt and sorrow they had engendered amongst themselves? Could they be ever free to follow their own path to bliss?

In Rekha’s house, Chetan was talking to her in more or less the same words. The words she so wanted to hear, the words that would let her unfurl her wings and fly up to the heavens. The words that would put her at some distance from the ongoing tussle she had with her Other Party. The words that would make her free to follow her own path to bliss, if it were at all in her destiny to reach for that bliss. She needed the chance, she needed the chance.

And thus it was set. Manjooran would ring her up in a day or two to fix the appointment. Manjooran would meet Rekha again. This time at a place of their own choice, at their own time. And there would be demons and ghosts that would be swirling around them as they talked, but at least they would have a fair chance of confronting them, of slaying them, of chopping off the head of that dragon, of exorcising that ghost, with the courage of their honesty.

A day later, at eight thirty in the morning of a Sunday, Manjooran rang up Rekha. He did not have much to say, that he would when they met face to face. The time was set; the evening of the same day at seven. At the Sheraton on the beachfront, the hotel where once he had met her some centuries ago. There was some measure of contentment in both; they were free now to decide what should be done, what should not; to seek a life together or separately. To decide in their own mutual interest. Teresa and Alice exhaled long breaths of delicious relief and though George muttered in the distance somewhere, they were glad that there was the prospect of resolution in the near future. Chetan smiled in his own quiet way as he placed the telephone down on the receiver, after his conversation with Alice. Now he could lean back and allow these two persons to find a solution for themselves. And it did not matter that they may decide not to go ahead with whatever they wanted to do. At least their decision would be their own, not one where the clutter of other people's thoughts and desires would distort the clarity of their minds and lead them to a cul-de-sac in the road to happiness.

In the evening as both Manjooran and Rekha were getting ready for their dinner appointment, the thoughts running through their minds were similar. Through the half optimism and the half despondency, through the desire and the anxiety, through the possibility of commitment and the risk of final ending, there was time for a larger picture to emerge. When all is said and done, when the breath in the lungs has ceased to rise and fall, in the final computation, for what purpose are we here, they wondered. To live out our small lives, moving from one incident to another in the course of our allotted days, receiving the blessing of grace now and the blight of dashed hopes a little later, of tumbling through ecstatic bliss at one instant and weathering the ravages of unfortunate circumstances the next, and in the in-between, tossed about in the dilemma of uncertainty, when one moment after another in the days of one's life presents only ambiguity, with neither revelation nor despair, when the grace of God is not apparent, and one day flows into another with no meaning in sight, no assured significance of the wonder of life. Then what are we here for, what higher purpose are we serving, Manjooran asked himself.

In another corner of the city, Rekha at the same moment, was asking herself the same question: then why do we go through this endless circle of days and nights, when the few islands of joy are drowned in the seas of sorrow. Who knows what will come out of our meeting today; the result almost seems irrelevant. What is of supreme significance, however, is that we try, we endlessly try.

Surely, in all the uncertain and endless spooling out of the thread of life, the one common human condition suffusing all of us is the constant search for happiness, our need to float upon the tides of hope and seek to find joy. Surely that is what distinguishes us, is it not, the steady, unfailing reaching out for the prospect of bliss. We are who we are, not for the distress we face, the grief we grapple with or the sadness that often permeates our lives, or even the joy that sometimes brightens the dark clouds in our lives. We are what we are because we never cease to hope, we never cease to clutch at the shimmering, flickering, iridescent image of joy that glimmers forever before our straining eyes. We are not just flesh and bones, not even merely the creatures of God. We are more, for surely, in our blind reaching out for bliss, we become the immortal bearers of undying hope, we become the joy we wish to be. We are Hope itself.