

Chataka Birds

A First Generation Indian Woman's Immigrant Experience



Nidadavolu Malathi

(Translated from Telugu original by author)

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e-book created by the author.

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Foreword

I moved to America from Andhra Pradesh, India, in 1973. It took me almost two decades to come to terms with the culture shock I had experienced. That was the starting point for this novel. The story covers one generation, approximately, 1970-1990.

I worked on this novel with three basic premises:

1. Ill-conceived and/or unsubstantiated notions about the other country are prevalent in both countries, America and India.
2. Basic human values, hopes, fears, aspirations, and the primary needs such as food, shelter, and the need for bonding are the same across all cultures. The difference is in the manner in which each culture addresses them.
3. These characteristics originate from the environment, population and available resources.

I also believe people read fiction of another country hoping to learn about their culture. Therefore, the cultural traits of one's culture should be elaborate and precise in fiction intended for the non-native speakers. Fiction is not a lesson in sociology but it provides a few examples that may offer a peek into the other culture and contribute toward the understanding of that culture. I believe a good read transposes the reader into the story's nuance.

I began writing this novel in Telugu in 1984 and finished it in 2004. In this translation, I have made significant changes, keeping in mind the non-Telugu speaking readers as the target audience.

The title, *Chataka bird* refers to a mythological bird in Sanskrit literature, supposed to be flying in the sky, awaiting the fresh raindrops from the sky for its food. According to the legend, the bird would not accept water from any other source except the pure raindrops from the sky and only during a specific season.

I took the metaphor to describe the Indian immigrants who came to America in pursuit of happiness and material comforts. The comparison, however, ends there. The culture shock emanating from the cultural conflicts in their day-to-day lives is much harsher and harder to handle.

I provided footnotes minimally to avoid distraction. Readers may refer to the glossary at the end for the explanations of relational terminology and other common words which appear in the story repetitively.

Read, enjoy, and send comments to malathini@gmail.com, if you please.

Thanks.

Nidadavolu Malathi

March 22, 2023

The Chataka Birds

New bride, Geetha, arrived at New York International Airport. Her fabulous new sari, dazzling gold bracelets, and the fading henna designs on her finger-tips were proof she had been married not too long ago.

She looked around, feeling lost as if she had landed on a different planet. *I am in America* she told herself several times. She could not believe, but she knew that was the truth.

Geetha's marriage with Hari had been performed in such a hurry that even she could not believe it.

This is how it happened:

Hari went to India on a 2-week visit to find a bride and get married. He found a young woman, Geetha, thanks to his friends, near and dear; he knew right away she was the one for him. By then, he had spent ten days of his 2-week vacation, leaving only four days for him to get married. He told the bride's parents the same; the ceremony should be completed within the next 3 days, or else, no wedding. It was not easy, but the bride's parents agreed, and performed the ceremony on the third day. After the wedding, Hari promised Geetha to send the Visa papers as soon as possible, and left. Getting married in such a hurry is not normal in India, but not totally unheard of either.

Eventually, Geetha received the Visa papers, completed the forms as per instructions, and sent them back to Hari. Within two months, Mrs. Geetha landed on the U.S. soil.

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Geetha stood still like a statue and looked around; she was feeling like Alice in Wonderland. Suddenly, she felt a jolt from behind. She realized she should not be standing still in the middle of a fast-moving crowd, and started to move along with the crowd. Everybody was eager to grab their luggage and get into the lines at the Customs counters as fast as they could. Geetha followed the crowd and arrived at the baggage area.

She stood there watching people grab their suitcases, felt lost, and empty in her head. Again, she looked at rolling the conveyor belt; her suitcases were siding away and out of her reach. "Oh, no, no," she jumped trying to get hold of the runaway suitcases, jostling the two Americans in front of her. One of them smiled and told her not to worry, and that the suitcases would be back soon. "Oh," she sighed a sigh of relief.

A little later, the same gentleman grabbed her suitcases from the conveyor belt on their second round and handed them over to her.

"Thanks," she said.

"You're welcome," he said.

She did not know what to say in response. She nodded vaguely and headed toward the Customs counter with her luggage. There were several lines, each seemed to be endless, like the tail of Hanuman¹. She joined the one closest to her. The line was moving at a snail's pace; that was a surprise for her. Back home, her friends told her everything in America was systematic, mechanized, and things got done quickly, since America had advanced technology for everything. "Apparently, not always," she told herself.

Eventually, she reached the Customs counter. The Customs officer objected to all the pickles bottles and powders. She struggled to convince him all those powders were made of lentils and grains; the pickles contained preservatives and were safe to eat. If they were safe to eat, they should be safe to transport, she argued.

After what appeared to be eternal, the Officer let her go. She grabbed the bottles and packages, threw them into her suitcases, and left for the next adventure, which was to find Hari's friend, Peter.

On the day before she left for America, Hari had called her on her neighbor's phone to give her further instructions regarding her travel to the United States.

The neighbor knocked on her door in the wee small hours of that day and told her that her husband was on the phone. She was embarrassed for giving him the trouble, apologized to him profusely, and finished her conversation with Hari quickly. The gist of the conversation was, Hari would not be able to meet her at the airport because of some urgent business at work. Instead, his close friend, Peter, would meet her at the airport and take her to his apartment, he said. He also mentioned that his friend was tall and white, and that she would have no problem recognizing him.

Somebody bumped into her, which brought her back into the present. She again looked around for Peter. Everybody looked tall and white. How on earth she was supposed to identify her husband's friend? That was annoying. She passed through several moods of annoyance, grievance, desperation, and confusion as she waited for that unknown, unimaginable person.

"Namaste, Geetha garu."

The Telugu greeting startled her; she quickly turned around and found, to her surprise, a tall white man in front of her, smiling and with his hands in a namaste posture.

"*nenu* Peter," (I am Peter) he said in Telugu.

"I am Geetha," she replied.

Peter apologized for the delay. He said he had started early, but was in an accident. It took some time for the cops to show up and take the report.

Accident was the only word that registered in her head. Her heart beat twice as fast and her face turned pale.

"Accident?" she repeated.

He laughed. "Ah! it is nothing. Don't worry. These things happen. Come on, let's go," he said reassuringly.

¹ A character in the epic Ramayana, known as Monkey God in America. He possesses extraordinary gifts, one of which is to be able to extend his tail as long as pleases.

As he leaned forward to get the two suitcases, Geetha said hurriedly, "No, no. I will, I will." Back home, she had been told that people in America would carry their own luggage.

"It's okay Geetha garu, I know. It is not appropriate for men to let women carry heavy objects. Isn't it?" he said. "*Oka rupaayi iiyandi madam*," (Give me one Rupee), he added teasingly.

She was confused. Was he joking or refreshing his language skills? She kept quiet.

Peter told her to wait at the curb and went to fetch his car.

As he pulled over, her heart thumped. This car looked like it had weathered a few storms.

Peter parked the car by the curb, put the luggage in the trunk, and opened the passenger side door for Geetha. That settled the one question she had--whether she should sit in the front seat or back seat.

She settled in her seat. Peter went around, sat in the driver's seat, and turned to her. "Please, you need to wear the seat belt," he said, almost apologetically.

"Do I have to?" she asked, sounding equally apologetic.

Peter nodded. "Yes, ma'am. That's the law here. If you don't, I will get the ticket."

Geetha pulled the belt over her shoulder but could not pull far enough to click it.

"Let me," Peter leaned over, pulled it, maintaining the distance between the two to the best of his ability. He was aware of Indian women's sensibilities, their customs and habits fairly well, as a result of his stay in India for a few years.

All the way home, Peter was talking about his stay in India several years back. He had been to Chennai to learn classical music. Previously, during his middle school years, he had listened to South Indian classical music at a friend's house, and immediately fell in love with it. Lucky for him, his friend's mother was a singer. She was more than happy to teach him. Later, in his college days, he went to India under a study abroad program, which gave him an opportunity to revive his interest in music again. Hari had been a great help in getting his dream come true, Peter said.

Peter talked about his experiences in India. He was really taken by India's rich culture and the people. He said the land was so beautiful, people were so kind and generous, and the food was so delicious.

Most of it was lost on Geetha, but she understood one thing. Peter did not talk about India's population, poverty, and did not question women's inferior status. The second thing she realized was that her Master's degree in English Language and Literature was no help in understanding his American accent. She kept nodding and uttering a vague "oh, oh," every few minutes. At times, she looked out the window. The tall buildings, fast-moving cars everywhere, dazzling streetlights overpowering the stars in the sky; it was like the "Maya Sabha"².

"So many cars! What happens if the lights go off suddenly?" she said, thinking aloud.

"Most of the time, nothing happens. We will manage. Come to think of it, it is not any worse than the traffic in Hyderabad," Peter said.

² Maya, a divine architect in Maha Bharata, builds an illusory mansion as a gift to the Pandava king, Dharma Raja. The mansion eventually leads to the Maha Bharata war.

"True," Geetha nodded.

Peter stopped the car in front of his building, went around and opened the car door for her. He took the luggage out of the trunk, put it on the curb next to her, told her to wait, and went to park the car; he returned within a few minutes and led her to his apartment.

Susan, Peter's girlfriend, opened the door. "Namaste," she said, smiling.

Geetha said, "Namaste," walking in, hesitantly.

Peter took the phone and dialed the number, saying, "Let's call Hari and tell him you've arrived safely."

"Is it not too early?" Geetha said hesitantly.

"Normally yes. But from you, no."

Hari picked up the phone at the first ring.

Peter handed the phone to Geetha.

"How're you? Are you okay?" Hari asked. His voice resonated with his concern for her.

Yes, yes, yes, Geetha replied to each of his questions; her heart was beating fast. She was excited to hear his voice; she was in a daze. Hari told her to get some rest, and that he would bring her home the following day, and hung up.

Susan stood in the middle of the room, and said, pointing to the two rooms, "That is the bathroom and this is the guest room. You may freshen up and get some rest in that room."

"It's almost daybreak. I can't sleep," Geetha said.

"Okay. Coffee?"

Geetha was quiet. She had received an earful regarding American manners and customs from her friends and well-wishers before she left for America. She was told everything in America would be different. In India, she would say no and the host would not take no for an answer; the host would continue to insist until she accepted it. But she was not in India now. She was not sure what to say.

Peter smiled, went in, returned with a cup of coffee, put it on the table in front of Geetha, "Here, have some. It would be relaxing," he said.

He turned to Susan and said, "Indians don't say yes the first time, even when they want it."

"Why?"

Peter shrugged and said, "I am not sure; their custom, I suppose. Hard to explain how customs develop in any culture."

Geetha smiled vaguely and nodded. She slowly added, "We think it would be an additional trouble for the hosts."

"How could that be a trouble? They would not offer if it is a trouble; would they?" Susan asked.

Geetha did not reply.

"Get some rest," Peter suggested.

She finished her coffee and went into her room. She lay on the bed and kept thinking about Susan's question. Peter was right, she thought, "Who could explain the customs of one culture, and much less, to the people of another culture?"

She went into her bedroom, but could not sleep; returned to the living room. Peter and Susan were watching TV. She joined them.

"So, how did you meet Hari?" Susan asked.

Geetha thought for a few minutes and told them briefly how it had happened.

"You mean you did not know him before? Married just like that?" Susan expressed surprise.

The question made Geetha uncomfortable. Again, her friends in India had given her extensive lessons about the questions she would be facing in America; she was told "arranged marriage" was one of the big-ticket items. But she did not expect to get it so soon, and that, too, from a total stranger. However, she decided to explain the best she could.

She said, "Traditionally, for us, a marriage is not just a personal commitment between two people. We consider it a family matter and a Dharma. It carries a familial, social and spiritual responsibility for both the bride and the groom. Marriage brings together not just two individuals, but two families. The daughter-in-law shoulders several responsibilities in the in-law's family. Also, in arranging a marriage, both families consider all the aspects such as family background, reputation, their social and financial status, before finalizing the wedding."

Susan looked at Geetha with curiosity. "But still, ..." she said.

Geetha came up with a counter strategy. "I don't think anybody can really know another person fully ever, or else, there would not be so many divorces in America, would they?" she said coyly, without looking into Susan's face directly.

Susan was about to say something, Peter stood up and said, "I am going out. Geetha garu, do you need anything before your next flight?"

"No, I don't need anything," Geetha replied.

Susan excused herself.

Geetha was left alone in the room to reflect on what had just happened. After a few minutes, she went into her room.

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She opened her eyes and saw Hari on the edge of her bed and staring into her face with a charming smile.

She was relieved, for the first time, since she had set foot in New York.

Hari took her hand, stroked gently, and said, "How was the trip? Who put you on the plane in Mumbai? Did you encounter any problem? Did you get through the Customs without hassle?"

Geetha laughed. "You have so many questions. If I answer all your questions, I won't get any sleep for a week, at least."

"Well, did I bring here in such a hurry so you can sleep forever?" he squinted and pouted. Geetha giggled.

She went into the bathroom, freshened up, and returned to the living room. Hari set cereal and coffee on the dining table. He said Peter and Susan had left for work.

"h, I am sorry. I should have gotten up earlier to take leave of them."

"Ah, don't you worry about it. That is the way life is around here. Everybody has to go about their business, or else nothing gets done."

Hari called taxicab; they left for the airport.

At the airport, Hari sat her in the lounge, told her to wait there, and went to check in. She was watching people scramble every which way. Suddenly, a huge wave of loneliness overcame her amid the crowd of strangers around her; she felt exhausted and clueless.

Hari returned with two cups of coffee. She looked at him tenderly. In this whole wide world, Hari was the only friend she had, and that thought was comforting.

Hari settled next to her and handed her the coffee. He put his arm around her shoulder, and smiled. He understood her fully at that moment. "I am here for you," his eyes told her.

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Geetha reached her final destination, her husband's home in America. As she got out of the car, Hari pointed to one door of a 2-storey building and said, "There, that is our heavenly abode."

She could not figure out which door he was pointing to. She nodded and followed him. A cardboard sign of "Welcome" was hanging on the door. She stood behind him nervously.

Hari opened the door to their apartment and let her in. He showed her the rooms--the living room, bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, and dining room--all in one sweep, standing right where he was.

Geetha nodded; she got it.

Everything appeared to be arranged carefully: a flower vase on the dining table, curtains matching the sofa set; kitchen looking like a showroom; everything in its place, a place for everything, as they would say.

"What do you think?" Hari asked.

"Nice," she replied.

But, in her heart, she felt something missing. No feeling of joining her in-law's home, where she was destined to spend the rest of her life. It was more like vacationing in an unknown city for a few days!

That building had been the home of one huge family for two previous generations. The current owner converted it into a 4-unit complex by making a few changes, like installing stoves in the bathrooms, and toilet seats in the bedrooms.

"Like it?" asked Hari.

She nodded quietly. The whole thing was still surreal for her. Her brain was in a silence mode. Nothing was penetrating her head. The tiny cells, which generate cogent thoughts, were filled with vague shadows. How else would anybody, thrown from one end of the globe to the other end in 36 hours, feel? There were two oceans and 10,000 miles of distance between the bed she had slept in two days back and the bed she was going to sleep in today! Faces she had never seen, things she had never seen, and the language she had never heard! Her head was spinning.

The phone rang.

Hari picked up the phone and said hello. An old friend, Bhagyam was at the other end. She and her husband had moved to America 20 years back. She became the best friend and mentor for local Telugu families. She called to ask if the new bride, Geetha, had arrived safely and there was anything she could do for them.

Geetha lay back on the sofa, following the conversation casually. Soon she understood Hari had many friends and they all were calling one after another to find out how her journey had been and if they could do anything for her. Some of them, however, talked about politics. Nixon resigned; What is next? What would Ford do? Geetha dozed off.

Hari got off the phone after two hours and said to her, "You are tired. Come on, have a bite and go to bed."

Geetha got up, walked to the dining table, and asked, "You cooked?"

"Why? You think I can't cook?"

"I don't know. My friend, Satyam, used to say that Indian men, after a year or so in America, would rush back to India and get married to solve the cooking problem only."

Hari burst into a big laugh. "Not bad, not bad at all. You are not as naive as I thought."

Geetha, too, smiled, squinting playfully and sticking out her tongue.

Hari was asking, "how is this?", and "how is that?"

Geetha was saying, "good", "nice", "tasty", "what's this? Spinach? Not Poi."

Hari was excited; it was delightful beyond words. Just in a few hours, Geetha had changed, unbelievable. The future would be pure gold!

"It's okay. Everything will be fine. You'll get used to these things," his eyes assured her.

It was nice. She felt good. In that moment, he did not look like the NRI, who had showed up from nowhere, married her, and left in a hurry, but like a boon companion from a previous life. It was gratifying.

He left for work.

She sat on the sofa, pondering over the day's events. Hari said something about jet lag; the body reached America, but the heart was still in Telugu land.

The next morning, by the time she woke up, Hari had made coffee.

"I didn't think that life in America would be this charming," she said teasingly.

"You've seen nothing yet," he said, smiling. The phone rang.

"Phone calls this early? I thought people in America don't call this early."

"Americans don't, but for our people, there is no such thing as no good time. Phone calls start with the cock crowing," he said, picking up the phone.

That was true. One of his friends, Madhav, called to ask if he and his wife, Radha, could stop by to say hello to Geetha briefly.

Hari told them to come over, hung up, and gave the message to Geetha.

"Guests already? I am feeling like I am still on the plane."

"What guests? Madhav and Radhi are not guests. We were family friends for three generations. Grew up like we were in the same family. Nobody could tell the difference. Don't worry. You don't have to do anything, not even change the sari. They are coming just to say hi to you, that's all. Here, we all feel lost and ache for a Telugu face. Any new face is refreshing to us. You will understand soon enough. Besides, how can I say no when they are so eager to meet you?"

Geetha went into the other room, pulled out a sari and a blouse, and went into the bathroom to take a shower.

By the time she returned, Radha and Madhav were in the living room. She greeted them politely.

"Where are the kids?" Hari asked. The couple had two kids, eight and ten.

"Our neighbors took them to the County Fair along with their kids. They will be back by noon. We thought of making the best of the free time this way," Madhav said, explaining their reason for the early morning visit.

Hari asked if they had breakfast.

Yes, they had breakfast; they just stopped by to see Geetha briefly. "We will come some other time," he added.

Soon Sumati came to visit them, and Tesh tagged along, since he did not have a car. Within the next one hour, a few other friends, Pani, Viswam and Ganapathi came. They all were bachelors.

This get together was unplanned and unexpected, and totally different from what Geetha had learned from her friends in India. She, however, saw that it was just an ordinary event for Hari, nothing unusual.

Hari went into the kitchen and returned with a plate of the sweets and savories Geetha had brought from India. He also brought cookies and crackers on another plate.

Pani took a cookie. That was his favorite, he said.

"How can you eat that cookie while we have these authentic Pullareddy Sweets (A famous store in Hyderabad) from hometown?" Madhav said. His tongue would come alive with food from India.

Tesh had no such preferences. He took a laddu and a cookie and said, "It is no contest. Each has its own flavor. If you don't like it, don't eat it."

While they were eating snacks, Geetha made coffee.

"Coffee is great. I haven't had a cup of coffee this good since I left India. Geetha garu. I bow to you," Ganapathi said.

"Well, you can go to India, get married, and bring her here. Then you too can have great coffee every day," Sumati teased him.

"Well, what if I don't get a wife who can make coffee like Geetha garu? I would be a loser on both counts."

"You can ask her to make coffee when you go to the bride's home to meet her and her parents."

"I don't think that is a plausible option," Ganapathi said.

Geetha was confused. How could they talk so lightly about such a grave subject as the institution of marriage?

"What is he talking about?" she asked Sumati, thinking there might be more to it than his marriage or good coffee.

Sumati replied, "He has made a project of it. Once a month, he sits down and makes a list of things he wants in a girl: Fair skin, correct height, best features, etc. And then qualifications: A physician is good for taking care of kids, an economic major will take care of investments, and a Home Economics major, of course, will

satisfy his taste buds. These priorities change each month, depending on the dominant zodiac sign on a given day."

Tesh said, pouting, "Marriage is a lifetime commitment. Shouldn't I examine all the pros and cons meticulously?"

The clock chimed one. "Let's go to the Chinese restaurant," Viswam suggested.

"Gosh, no! You came to our house for the first time. I mean after my wife has come. You should eat lunch here, at our house," Hari said.

Geetha's heart jumped to her throat.

"She is hardly here. Probably, she does not even know where the kitchen is. Don't worry. We will come some other time," Viswam said.

Others too protested, as was common among Indians.

"Geetha garu needs rest."

"Some other time."

"We came just to say hello to Geetha garu and leave."

"We were not thinking of having lunch here. Just a brief visit."

"Promise, some other time."

Hari dismissed all their protests with a wave of hand. "No. You should stay for lunch, I insist. There is plenty of food. Actually, I've got everything ready for you."

It was amusing to Geetha. She did not expect this, but, some customs die hard, apparently. Indians are Indians anywhere. Unannounced visits and casual hosting!

"I still think it is not right to bother Geetha garu this early," Sumati said.

"No worries, Sumati, I will not put your kid sister to work. I will make it myself," Hari said.

Did he say kid sister? So Indian! Geetha was touched.

Sumati laughed. "Ha, ha. We all have tasted your cooking. I will fix something. You stay out of the kitchen, and that is a big a big help."

"Where is Ganapathi? A party without Ganapathi is like a cart without wheels," somebody said.

"Yes. Hari, call him."

Soon, Ganapathi joined the party with two more friends. It was just like they would say in our wedding invitations, *You are invited with family, friends and the entire household*. No limit to the number of guests! Geetha could not help but wonder.

Tesh followed Sumati into the kitchen. Pani and Ganapathi joined them. Geetha also went into the kitchen.

Radha went into the kitchen, like a family member, and started cooking. She turned on the stove and put rice and water for for *pulihora*³. In another pan on another burner, she added two teaspoons of veggie oil, waited for a couple of minutes for the oil to heat up, threw in some mustard seeds, urad dal, and a few red pepper pods. As the mustard seeds popped, she took out two packets of cut beans and threw them into the pan. The pan made a big hissing noise and subsided. Beans curry would be ready in a few minutes, she said.

³ Cooked rice mixed with tamarind mush, turmeric and spices, also called yellow rice.

Sumati took a potato and started slicing it to make *bajji*⁴.

Geetha felt embarrassed for standing there doing nothing. She said, "I am supposed to be doing the cooking here. Let me cut the vegetables."

"For today, we are in charge. You are a new bride. We respect that. Starting tomorrow, the kitchen is all yours. We will not enter the kitchen unless you beg us to."

She opened the new pressure she brought as a gift, and started making dal. Tesh was cutting onions, tomatoes and carrots for sambar.

"To be frank, I am not much of a cook."

"None of us was, at first. After a couple of months, everybody is a master chef."

Geetha laughed.

"Can you make pepper bajji?" Ganapathi asked.

"What?" she asked, unsure why he brought it up now. She never stepped into the kitchen back at home. She wondered if Hari also had similar expectations.

"Pepper has a great nutritional value. plenty of vitamin C. The heat content sharpens the brain. Also, the best remedy for quit smoking," Ganapathi said with great zeal.

"Yes. You can create atomic energy, too," Madhav said.

Geetha failed to see the humor in their conversation. She sat listening to them. It was past 2 by the time they all finished eating. Radh was removing the dishes.

"Leave them. I can handle it that, at least," Geetha said, taking the dish away from Radha.

"It's alright, Geetha garu. Radha will do it," Madhav said, making himself comfortable in the reclining chair.

"No need for anybody else. I will take care of the dishes. You all go to the living room," Hari said.

It was interesting to Geetha. Strange but not unusual, come to think of it. She felt right at home in their company. She said so, too.

"Back home, they told me Indians in America would behave differently. You all are acting soooo Indian; I don't feel I have left home at all."

"Well."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"It didn't sound like nothing. You think I am being naive?"

"I am not saying you are naive."

"Then what?"

"Do you remember the proverb, 'you don't check each grain to see if the entire pot is done'? But that is not so about people. As far as I can see, humans come in all shapes, sizes and attitudes everywhere. One wave does not make the ocean. One instance is not enough to understand the nature of one person, or a few people, for that matter."

⁴ Potato slices dipped in Besan flour batter, and fried like vegetable fritters.

Geetha did not reply. Suddenly, she thought of Susan and Peter. She had told them the same thing, almost!

"I am just saying humans are very complex creatures. You need to take it in stride."

Geetha nodded.

"Never mind all this nonsense. You are tired. Go, get some rest," suggested Ganapathi.

"Yes, you need to rest," Viswam said.

"I am not tired," Geetha said.

"Come on. No formalities with here. We all know how it feels like after such a long journey. We will not blame you as rude or anything. Go, get some rest," Pani insisted.

Hari also told her to go to bed, take rest. She looked at them, and went in. As soon as she lay down, her eyelids shut closed right away. She had no idea when the guests left. Jet lag wore off. She did not want to open her eyes, but a flood of light filled the room.

"Ah, I am still sleepy. Please, turn off the light," she said, pulling up the sheet over her eyes.

Hari laughed. "I would if I could. I am not the damsel Sumati⁵ to prevent the Sun from rising, unfortunately."

"Okay, give me 5 minutes," she said, rolling over to the other side.

"You go back to sleep. My boss will not be happy if I don't show up on time."

He went to freshen up.

Geetha woke up after a few minutes, went into the kitchen, and saw him eat cereal in cold milk. Feeling sorry, she said, "I will make upma ((cooked, spicy cream of wheat)) tomorrow."

He clucked and said, "You will get used to it in time."

"No way, I can't, not in the next seven lifetimes," she said with a grimace.

She remembered the conversation from the previous night. She asked, "What was that Ganapathi talking about? He said pepper was good for health. Really?"

"He is stupid. That is his research topic. No matter what you talk about, he turns it into a discussion about pepper."

"What research?"

"The nutritional value of various kinds of peppers."

Briefly stated, his story was:

His parents were America at the time of his birth. They went back to India when he was five. Because of his birth status he was eligible for American citizenship. So, the parents decided to send him to America. His father was on a mission to find somebody that would host Ganapathy. After extensive research, he found his second cousin's son' brother-in-law was in the U.S. Thus Ganapathy landed in America soon after he turned 18. Father had prepared him well in advance to be an American citizen. However, despite all that preparation and planning, it took eight years for Ganapathi to reorient himself to American customs, habits, and their

⁵ Sumati, wife of sage Mandavya, prevented the Sun from rising to save her husband's life, according to legend.

lifestyle. Eventually, he found a professor he could work with, and got a job as a student assistant under him.

The professor had spent his childhood in India. His father was an American pastor and mother an Indian. No wonder he was fond of Indians and Indian food.

"Can he really eat our dishes?" Geetha asked. She remembered Peter, yet she could not believe Americans could enjoy Telugu dishes.

"He likes some, but not like the way we do. Anyway, it is getting late. I must go. If I sit around chatting with you, I will lose my job. Close the door. Lock both bolts. Don't answer the door if anybody knocks. Don't worry, this is a safe neighborhood. I am sure nobody comes to our door. Just to be safe, don't open the door for anybody," he went on babbling, as he moved around in the kitchen.

Hari left for work. Her jet lag wore off. Her brain started functioning again. She tried to make sense of Hari's chatter. If it was a safe neighborhood, why bolt the locks? If he was sure nobody would knock on our door, why mention anything about it at all? Before she could form a clear opinion of it, she dozed off.

Hari returned in the evening. Sipping coffee, he told her he had invited four of his friends in his office to dinner on the next Saturday.

She stared at him, looking lost. How could she manage that? She was still feeling out of place. She had not told Hari yet, but she never had set foot in the kitchen while she was in India. For the past few days, she managed cooking by recalling the tastes of the items mother had made, and throwing in whatever spices she thought she had tasted in those dishes. And ate whatever she served without complaints.

"I don't feel like I have arrived in America yet; still feeling like a visitor on a foreign soil. Besides, I asked you to bring a knife to cut vegetables, and you brought a butcher's knife. I am totally lost in this kitchen. Give me a few more days to settle down and get used to these utensils and knives," she said.

"Don't worry. They all know our ways; they will eat whatever we serve. No worries," he said.

"Do they eat our food?"

"They will. Don't throw in too much pepper, though. Keep it simple. Dal, potato curry and sambar should do it."

"Wouldn't it be rude to invite them for dinner and serve only dal and vegetables?"

"Not at all. They are not like us; no need for two curries, two chutneys, rasam, pulusu and all. They would be more than happy with dal and fried rice," he said, recalling the items he had served in his bachelor days.

No point in arguing. "Okay," she said and left it there.

Before the said Saturday, two friends called to ask if they could bring their friends.

"Sure," said Hari.

Geetha was getting nervous by the minute. She called Bhagyam for advice. Bhagyam confirmed Hari's advice and said, "Don't get uptight about the items. They are not like us. At first, I also used to make several items, thinking they would mix each curry or chutney with plain rice and eat separately. Then, I noticed they mixed all the items on the plate into one heap and ate. What I am saying is, it is okay if you

don't make too many items. I would suggest fried rice, raita; idli sambar combo also goes well. Tomatoes instead of tamarind would be closer to their taste. Eggplant or potato curry gets good review. For dessert, carrot halva works best; easy to make. If you are keen on making a special, you can make *bobbatlu*.⁶"

"Bobbatlu?" Geetha said, nearly choking.

Bhagyam laughed. "Just kidding; checking if you are listening."

Geetha also laughed. "You scared me for a second. I don't have idli plates either. So that is out of the question."

"I can lend them to you if you want."

"No, it is okay. Hari also said to keep it simple. I still have the new bride status, might as well use it as long as I can."

There was a big laugh again at the other end. "That is what I'd call smart. Good for you," she said and hung up.

Friday Hari and Geetha went to the store to get vegetables and other items. Hari asked her about the menu. She told him Bhagyam's advice.

"Thomas likes our food very much; he can eat what we usually eat. He said his girl friend also likes our food. She may not handle as much spicy as Thomas. Make one or two items spicy as usual, one item medium; and, of course, plain dal, and fried rice; that should be enough," he said, forgetting the advice he had said the day before.

Geetha had to think hard; how to decide on these variations--spicy, less spicy, medium, medium rare, was tricky.

She woke up early in the morning on Saturday and started cooking the items and washing the dishes in which the items were cooked. It was 4 o'clock by the time she finished cooking. Hari went into the kitchen a few times and asked if he could help. She said not necessary. "Stay out of the way, that is a big help," she said, teasingly.

Guests arrived by six. As each of them walked in with a gift, wrapped in beautiful, colorful paper, Geetha received them, hiding her surprise. She was not aware of this custom of bringing gifts for what she thought was a simple, casual dinner; that was what she thought, at least. In India, we bring gifts only on special occasions like a wedding.

"Why these gifts? I am not feeling comfortable with them," she whispered to Hari.

"That is their custom. Nothing to be uncomfortable about," he told her in Telugu, and translated it into English for his friends. She learned two lessons on that day: gifts for all occasions, and do not speak in a language the visitor/guest does not understand. It took sometime for her to absorb the second rule.

The manners and habits she had acquired while growing up did not come in handy. every thing, big and small, was different.

"You are not talking," Thomas said.

"Ah?" she said, looking confused. She took a minute to understand what he had said.

He repeated, pronouncing each word clearly, "You are not talking."

⁶ A flat bread with sweet filling, usually made during special occasions.

Geetha smiled and said, "Yes."

He also smiled, said, "Nice party," and moved on. Several guests tried to talk with her as a matter of courtesy. She got that. But she could not understand the American accent, and noticed they also had same problem with her accent. She worked on her English mentally and prepared for a good answer. "Usually, I do not talk. Conversation is difficult for me," she said.

That led to another question. "I heard, in your country, women are not supposed to talk to men. Is that why you are hesitant?" Thomas's girlfriend asked.

Geetha found it offensive, but did not show it. She said, "That is not true. My mother used to say don't talk unless there is something worth saying. That is what I am accustomed to. Also, In India, we were taught British English. I am not familiar with American English. Therefore, words don't come easy for me."

The guest took some time to understand what Geetha said. She smiled, nodded, and said, "I understand. Excuse me," and turned to another friend.

They all enjoyed her cooking. They asked her several questions: delicious; what is in it? How did you make this? You must give me the recipe. What are those black seeds? This is spicy, but delicious. I like it.

Their comments and questions were pleasing to Geetha. She thought her cooking was probably not all that bad!

Thomas said the sambar was just like the sambar he had tasted in Chennai and asked for the recipe.

She was not sure if he meant it. Hari, standing next to her, said he would get it for him later. He then whispered to her that asking for the recipe was just a matter of courtesy, and it might not mean anything. Geetha could not believe it; her face turned pale.

The second thing that made her uncomfortable was the praise. Several of them said she was beautiful. Once or twice was okay. More than that made her wonder if that was also normal. She knew she was not a beauty queen. Nobody in India would say to one's face she was beautiful. If at all, they would turn to another person and say she was beautiful. She wore a simple cotton saree and a pair of bangles; there was the thali tied around her neck by her husband at the wedding. No other jewelry. Yet, they all said she was beautiful. Actually, she had asked Hari for his suggestion about what to wear. He said, "This is not a big ceremony; just a casual get together of a few friends. Ordinary saree would do."

Another question she had to answer a few times was why women wore the dot on the forehead.

"That is a sign she is married," Hari said.

Geetha was not sure. "I don't think so. Girls wear the dot before marriage also. And there are also men who wear different kinds of dots," she said in a low voice in Telugu.

"That is different," he said and moved away.

Geetha felt bad. *Did I hurt him? Was he upset because I spoke in Telugu or because I questioned his expertise?* She could not decide one way or the other.

Suddenly, she felt dispirited; felt as if she was playing a role not designed for her, and in a play she did not fully comprehend. It was a small matter, but a good lesson. She decided to be more careful in the future.

It was past midnight by the time all the guests left. She went into the kitchen. The sight of dirty dishes and the leftover foods threw her off balance. She stood there, stunned. Hari came from behind and said, "You must be tired. Go to bed. I will take care of the dishes."

She forgot all her fatigue and smiled. "Have you been always this nice or changed just for the night?" she said jokingly.

Hari laughed. "What do you think? Do you know what my friends have said about you? They said you are lucky to have me as your husband."

"My friends said the same about you," she said, squinting as she transferred the leftover foods to Tupperware, and put them in the fridge.

"Leave them to me, go to bed. I will put them in the dishwasher later," he insisted.

She said okay and left; she was so tired, fell asleep as soon as she hit the bed. It was past 7 by the time she woke and looked out the window. Feeling bad for sleeping so late, she quickly freshened and went into the kitchen. The sight left her nonplussed. All the dishes were in the sink and on the counter, just the way she had left the previous night.

Hari finished his coffee and said, "Did you have a good sleep? I have to go. I was working on my paper, had to go to the library to find some references. Don't worry. I will do the dishes later in the evening," and went into his room.

Geetha sat down quietly with her cup of coffee. Hari came back, told her one more time he would take care of the dishes, warned her again to be careful, not to open the door to strangers, not to go out, and rushed out the door.

Geetha did not say a word; watched him leave and began cleaning up; rinsed the dishes, put them in the dishwasher, made herself one more strong cup of coffee, and went into the living room.

She looked around. The New York Times on the coffee table, the big T.V. against the wall, a shadowy view through the flimsy window curtains, pernicious silence, and crushing loneliness--a huge wave of sorrow overcame, and she did not try to contain it. She broke into bitter sobs until the sorrow wore off; she was composed after ten minutes.

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Time was moving slowly at a snail's pace. Geetha was getting used to the new environment, but it was not getting any easier. Mother, father, brothers, friends, and even neighbors were coming to her mind constantly. In Guntur, Siva Rao mamayya, Kanakam Atthayya, the women's college, especially, Satyam, who became her best friend in the first week. The memories of Satyam were not letting her rest; was constantly on Geetha's mind, no matter what she was doing. Thoughts were storming her head like a swarm of bees. So strange! What a switch; the big leap from one end of the world to the other! As amazing as it was, it threw her into a conundrum.

Cold cereal for breakfast, air-tight rooms making her feel like the walls were closing in on her; and no sight of even a semblance of a human in the area! Hari's constant warnings, "don't go out," "don't open the door," "keep the doors locked," etc. were depressing to her. She was feeling suffocated. Her mother, father, brothers, sisters, neighbors, friends, the maid, and even the vegetable vendors were popping up in her mind constantly. *That* had been her life. The thought of loneliness, like a huge wave, rose and engulfed her.

She recalled the brief conversation she had had with Radha two days back.

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Two days back, Radha called her to inquire how she was doing. Geetha said she was doing well; her voice did not sound like she was fine, though. Radha understood her predicament; she knew it only too well. Almost all Telugu women went through that downtime in the first few months of their arrival in America.

She said, "How is your family at home? Have you called your mother?"

"No, no phone in our house, you know. I didn't want to disturb our neighbors. I wrote to my mother."

"Good. Geetha, take it easy. I know that feeling. We all had been through, you know. It takes time to get used to it."

"I hope so," Geetha sighed.

"Look at it this way," Radha said, trying to cheer her up, "You've said you were not very close to your brothers, and that you were arguing all the time. Now no more arguments."

Geetha laughed, "Well, yes. Still, it is not the same. I still miss them, actually missing them more now."

Radha also laughed and agreed that it was not the same. Also told Geetha it had been like that for her too, at first.

After the chat, Geetha's spirits hit a new low. *How on earth did this happen? I took one big leap in a split second, as if I did not know it was a decision for the rest of my life*, she thought with awe. Her entire life rolled out in her mind, like an old movie; and she watched it as if it was someone else's story.

A decade and a half had passed since.

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The Ramanatha Swami High School published the final exam results. Students were eagerly looking for their names on the list posted on the board. Those who had passed the exam were elated; they were walking around like they had grown two inches taller. The students, whose names were not on the list, were sneaking away. The successful students were trying to stop them and saying some kind words: I am sure there will be a supplementary list; What's the big deal? You can try again; There must be some mistake; and so on.

The successful students were talking about their plans.

"I will sign up for the biology course."

"I wish I could. I like biology."

"I am thinking of taking computer science."

"My father wants me to go to law school."

"My brother suggests I take up Hindi language course."

"I think my mother would advice me to learn typewriting."

So many options! One girl was comforting another girl who was crying her heart out. "Don't feel bad. You know all those who have passed are not necessarily smart. There are ways to pass," she said. That was not a comforting thought for the girl who failed the exam.

"My father will skin me alive," another failed student said, shivering at the thought.

"My tutor took 200 rupees and guaranteed a pass. Scoundrel," Venkanna blamed his tutor.

"The watcher in the exam hall took my answer book and gave it to Butchi Lakshmi. She passed and I failed," Ravi said, exposing the malpractices in school.

Ranga Rao walked to Butchilakshmi, pulled up, and said, "Come, I will ride you at your home in my car."

Butchilakshmi said with a grim face, "Go away. I don't care for your ride."

"Showing off he has a car," another girl commented.

"A junk."

"Well, junk or tinker, he has a car and we don't," the girl standing behind them and listening to their conversation retorted.

The entire atmosphere was boisterous and filled with various emotions: happy, sad, disappointment, desperation; and, high-sounding aspirations, hopes, fears, and tears.

"I will go to America," Ranga Rao said.

Several students quickly gathered around him.

"Yes, yes. I've seen him buying a ticket at the train station yesterday," a short boy said mockingly. Two students laughed. Four students snickered. Three students, stood next to Ranga Rao, and cheered him on. One of them chided the others. He said, "You are jealous. He will go to America, I am telling you. You will be sorry you made fun of him."

"What will you do there?"

"I don't know what I will do. I just know it is a heaven. Beautiful cars, huge mansions, and, unlike here, you don't have to fear teachers. All are equal. Everybody looks like a prince, elegant and smart, houses well-kept. Everyone owns one or two cars."

"Wow! Two cars?"

They all let their imagination fly high.

Geetha stood a few feet away from them, and watched them with a feeling of inexplicable apprehension.

"What do you think you will do?" her friend Satyam asked her.

"Um. I don't know."

"Yes. For girls like us, no plan. Things just happen," Satyam said inanely.

"You think so, too?"

"Well, you know. My two brothers are in college, and two sisters are sitting around, waiting for the wedding day. I know my father can't pay for my education."

"I just don't know what I want to do."

Satyam sighed. "We'll see. I have to go," she said.

"Yes, I had better go, too," Geetha said.

Saroja invited Geetha and a few other friends who had passed the exam to a party at her house.

Those who were not invited to the party went to the movies.

Geetha walked slowly, a few feet behind some and ahead of others, but surely avoiding communication with them all; she was not sure of her own thoughts.

As she reached home, she saw her father on the porch, reading the day's newspaper. "Passed?" he asked.

She nodded and went in.

"Glad it is over," said her mother.

Geetha went into her room and stood in front of her bookshelf. Those books meant a lot until last night, but now nothing. She sighed and turned around.

Her little brother, Chitti, was standing behind her. "You said you'd give me a quarter of a rupee if you passed the exam," he said.

"When did I say that?"

"The other day when I was playing the drums, you said you'd give me a quarter if I stopped playing the drum and let you study."

"Okay. Later."

Mother called her from the kitchen, "Geetha, go to Nagamma Atthayya's⁷ home, get some curry leaves. I am making pulihora."

Geetha went to neighbor Nagamma Atthayya's home. Nagamma Atthayya was making cotton wicks for her daily worship as Geetha walked in.

"Done with high school?" she asked.

"Yes Atthayya, passed. Amma asked me to bring some curry leaves from your tree."

"Sure, take them. What is the rush? Come here, sit down."

"Amma (mother) is waiting for the curry leaves. I had better go."

"Ah, okay, go. You will be in college soon, I guess."

"I don't know."

"Why? Did your mother say no need of college for girls?"

"No, she did not say anything."

"Father said so?"

"No, Atthayya, nobody said anything. I have to go."

"Well, I'm telling you. You tell them you want to go to college. Don't be naive. Times have changed. No boy would tie the thali around your neck unless you have a college degree."

"I have to go," Geetha said.

As she walked down the stairs, she wondered if her mother or father would ask what she wanted to do next. If they ask, what should she say? Instead of asking her, they might tell her what she should do. Then what? What response would be proper under the circumstance? Geetha reached home without arriving at any decision specifically.

She was right. At dinner that night, mother Kamakshi brought it up.

⁷ Atthayya: Aunt.

"Probably, college costs a lot," Kamakshi said softly while serving curry. She would like Geetha to go to college.

"I guess," said father Paramesam, indicating it was on his mind too.

"Aren't there scholarships or something like that?" Kamakshi asked.

"Oh, no, Vadina!⁸ That is only for the rich and the mighty, not for folks like us," Bhanu, Paramesam's younger brother, said sarcastically.

Kamakshi was annoyed, but kept quiet.

"Why would she need a college degree, anyway? No need of a degree to cook, clean and take care of the kids, if you ask me," he added.

"That is right, Bhanu! I think so, too," said Bamma garu. She was lying on the jute-rope cot in the hallway and listening to their conversation.

Kamakshi was seething inside, but could not bring herself up to retort. Bamma garu was one generation senior to her. She sighed and went in to bring the yogurt.

Geetha sat there with her eyes glued to the food on her plate, and mixing the rice with the curry clumsily. They all--Father, Mother, Babayi⁹, and Bamma--were talking about her future. Somehow, it did not feel like they were talking about her.

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On Saturday, Geetha went to the party at Saroja's home. It was late in the evening by the time she returned.

"How was the party?" Kamakshi asked. She had some idea of the questions Geetha might have faced, and how painful it could have been.

"Okay," said Geetha, and went into the adjoining room to change.

After they all ate supper, Paramesam settled in the reclining chair on the porch with the newspaper.

Geetha spread the mats and set the pillows in the room. Usually, that room served as a chat room for the adults to discuss the day's events, and as a study room for the kids to do their homework. On that day also, they all gathered there and started chatting as usual.

"So," said Bhanu. He lay on the mat on his stomach, the pillow folded and tucked under his chin.

"How many times I have told you not to fold the pillow like that. Why don't you use two pillows if you like?" Kamakshi said.

Bhanu ignored her chiding, and continued, "So, what is Saroja going to do?"

"She says she will study medicine," Geetha replied.

"Ha ha. Is she that smart?" Bhanu laughed. He got through high school with bare minimum marks, took the polytechnic course, and took a job as a telephone operator. He did not believe in women's education.

His comment hurt Geetha. She did not like Babayi dismissing her friend's aspirations in one curt sentence. "Saroja got good marks, as always," she said, pouting.

⁹ Father's younger brother. Bhanu under reference.

Kamakshi did not like it either. "Who are we to judge her intelligence?" she said edgily. In her younger days, she had hoped to go to college, but that did not materialize. Now she wanted desperately her daughter to earn a college degree.

"Hindi class is good," Bamma said from the hallway, not that her suggestion mattered. She, however, considered herself a part of the family since she was living under the same roof; and, always offered her advice, asked or not.

Geetha picked up the courage and said, "I want to go to college."

"Think about it, college education does not come easy. It takes four years to obtain the degree. Your father retires by then," Bhanu said.

Geetha pretended not to hear his words, and said, "Degree in Hindi also takes time."

"It may take time, but not that expensive," Bhanu said. He was surprised that Geetha spoke. He wondered if the party at Saroja's home had something to do with it; Who could have said what to her?

Kamakshi's face fell, but nobody noticed it. "It would be nice if she got a bachelor's degree," she said.

Paramesam walked in, heard Kamakshi's words. He too liked it, but his responsibilities were in the way. He knew it was beyond his means.

Bhanu would not let go of it. "What do you mean by 'nice', Vadina, tell me; enlighten me," he said.

Paramesam yawned, and said as he went into the bedroom, "That's enough. It is getting late. We need to wake up early. Go to bed."

The discussion ended, leaving her future hanging in the balance.

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All colleges in town opened for the academic year. Some of Geetha's classmates joined the courses as they planned. A few had to find other venues. Saroja signed up for the biology course, but Sambu could not, although he had received higher marks than Saroja. Lakshmi, Sundari, John Gopal, Ansari Ali, and others went their separate ways.

Geetha joined the Hindi class. She could not help but think of her classmates. Some of them would graduate from college and go for further studies. They were in a better position socially, and so, had better opportunities. Some of them "managed" to pass the tests; but her high marks did not help her to get an admission into a college. Her heart ached as she remembered she would be "a girl without a college degree" for the rest of her life.

Kamakshi's younger brother, Ramana, was in America. He wrote to Kamakshi that he was happy Geetha had finished high school, and he would be happy to help her pursue higher studies in America. Kamakshi read the letter twice and left it on the coffee table.

Geetha returned from her Hindi class.

"Did you write to him?" mother asked.

Geetha was confused. "Writing what? To whom?" she asked.

"To Ramana mamayya¹⁰, about passing the exam."

"I did. So?" Geetha asked.

¹⁰ Mamayya: Maternal uncle.

Kamakshi threw a scathing look at her and went into the kitchen.

"Yes, go, pack and leave right now. He married a white girl. He will find a white boy for you, too," Bamma said, expressing her displeasure.

Ramana had left for America when he was 22, completed his studies, got a job, became American citizen, and settled in the U.S. He married his colleague, a white woman. That was a sore point for Bamma ever since.

Kamakshi was in the kitchen stirring the curry on the stove. Bamma's comment ticked her off. She came into the hallway and said, "He married a white girl. So what? Our girl passed the exam. She was happy. So, she dropped a line to her uncle. He was happy about it. What has one got to do with the other? It is not like we are taking him upon his offer, and sending her to America."

Bamma did not reply.

Kamakshi continued. "Let's not forget how we treated him when he came to visit us. He was away from home for 12 years, and what did we do? He is my only brother. You did not take into consideration even that. You insisted he should not be allowed into the kitchen because he married a white girl. We should be grateful he offered to help us, after all that humiliation." She struggled to stay calm while replying to Bamma.

"What did I say? Did I say anything that is not true or appropriate?" Bamma fired back.

Geetha stood there watching the farce. She wondered what would have happened if Babayi was there. Well, he would be home soon, and this bickering would continue, she told herself.

She was right. Babayi returned from work and revived the squabble. He raised several questions: "Where did she get the money to buy the aerogram?", "Who put the idea of going to America in her head?" And, "Why her mother did not tell her it was not appropriate?"

In reality, Geetha had heard about it at Saroja's house. Ranga Rao mentioned it; it would be easier if one had a relative or friends in America. Ramana mamayya came to her mind.

Not that it became an obsession with her, but the thought surfaced when her mother gave her the aerogram and told her to write Ramana's address and mail it. She scribbled a line about her passing the exam and mailed it. It was all casual, no expectation of opportunities or possibilities.

Bhanu would not let go of it so easily, though. "Ha, I see now, Vadina? Good training," he said.

"Um. My training? What can I do? After all, you all are here watching her like hawks," she replied edgily.

"Okay, Geethamma, please, don't forget this poor, no good Babayi. Find a small job for me, too, in America. I will be ever grateful to you," Bhanu continued his brassy remarks.

Geetha felt terrible. She regretted writing to Mamayya; *Oh, God, what have I done?* she grieved, silently.

"Who knows what is in store for anybody, Bhanu? As they say, *the barren land you ridiculed today may bear fruit in time*, Kamakshi said, and left the room.

Paramesam's father was not rich but made enough money to give the family a good life. He gave his children good education and even helped a few others. In the course of time, the property was gone for children's education, weddings, and other family-related obligations.

Paramesam inherited a small house and got a job as a teacher at a local middle school. That was about it. He had three sons and one daughter. The first son finished college, got married, and moved to the big city. The second son was in the second year of college. Now Geetha finished high school; her higher education was hanging in balance. The last child, Chitti, was in the 5th grade.

Paramesam's younger brother, Bhanu, completed high school, and joined a telephone company as a telephone operator in the same town and moved in with them 5 years back. His stay with them was financially helpful; his thoughtless comments and murky ideas were annoying to both Kamakshi and Geetha. He had no college education, and so, in his opinion, Geetha did not need a college degree.

Bamma was one more living soul in that household. She was Paramesam's mother's younger sister. She had a son, but he refused to take care of her. Since she had no other place to go, Paramesam's mother took her into her home. Ever since she became a part of the family and she presumed to have a right to express her opinions on all family matters.

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One fine morning, Paramesam's childhood friend, Siva Rao came to visit Paramesam and his family. They both had tea in the same tea stall, attended the same school, learned to smoke cigarettes and play cards from the same classmates, got a taste of the same canes from the same teachers. They received medications and reprimands from the same doctor. They were not born to the same parents, but grew up practically like brothers. After they were done with schooling, each settled in life in their own ways. Siva Rao married his maternal uncle's¹¹ daughter and settled in Guntur, taking care of his father-in-law's business. Paramesam married Kamakshi, picked by his parents, and settled as a schoolteacher in Vijayawada. Both got busy with their own lives. There was not much communication between the two families for a while.

Kamakshi welcomed him heartily, gave him a glass of water, and inquired about his family in Guntur.

"Haven't seen you in a long time. I thought you've forgotten us," Bamma garu said, expressing her displeasure.

Siva Rao sat in the reclining chair on the porch, sipping water.

"No, no, Bamma garu, my business is like that; hardly any time to attend to anything else. We can't trust anybody nowadays, you know. I don't have time for anything, not even to die. If the Lord Yama¹² comes and says, 'it is time for me to go,' I would have to tell him, 'not now, come later'," he said to Bamma garu, turned to Kamakshi and said, "They all are doing well, Chellemma!¹³ Your vadina has some minor complaints like backache, but nothing serious."

"Don't your sons help?" Bamma garu asked.

¹¹ Traditionally, the marriage between cross-cousins is permissible among Telugu families.

¹² God of Death.

¹³ Chellamma: Younger sister. Common among Telugu families to use relational terminology, even when not related.

"No, Bamma garu, too young to go into business."

"So, what is new, Anna¹⁴ garu?" Kamakshi asked.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he smiled and said, "I came to invite you all to my son's wedding, set to June 25th."

Geetha returned from her Hindi class and stopped at the top of the stairs, listening to their conversation. She was trying to imagine a young man who was not old enough to get into business, but old enough to get married.

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"So, what is new, Anna garu?" Kamakshi asked.

"Like I said, my son's wedding. I like you all attend the ceremony."

"Ah, that's nice. Who is the girl?"

"She is from Tadiparti family, a highly regarded family. She is the youngest; just finished the first year of college; a nice girl, well-mannered and cordial. We heard a lot of good things about the family and the girl. We believe she fits nicely into our family."

"I am glad, Anna garu. That is what we look for in a girl," Kamakshi said.

Siva Rao turned to Geetha and asked, "How're you? Coming from college?"

"Not college, Mamayya¹⁵ garu. Coming from Hindi class."

"Not in college? Why?" he said to her and turned to Kamakshi. "Why is she not in college? Don't you think education is important for girls nowadays? Your husband is not making millions to pass on to your kids. Why not give them a good education, at least?" he said, expressing his genuine concern for Geetha and displaying his business acumen.

"What can I say? Ask your friend, Anna garu," Kamakshi said. She wanted to make it clear she was not happy about it either, and it was not her fault. Her brother's offer to help and the family's reaction to it were bothering her.

"I will, for sure, ask him after he comes home. I do not mince words," Siva Rao said.

Geetha snuck behind her mother and whispered, "Haven't we had enough bickering about it? Why start again?"

"What did I say? He asked me why we didn't send you to college, and I said he should ask your father. What is wrong with that?" she said, sounding innocent.

"What is Bhanu doing?" Siva Rao asked.

"He is working in a telephone company."

"Making good money?"

"He gets 300 rupees per month, and some OT (overtime) too."

"What?" Siva Rao said. He was lost in his own thoughts for a moment.

"OT or something, I am not sure; he gets more money for working more hours."

"Oh, okay. That's good," Siva Rao said and stood, saying he needed to take care of some business in town, and that he would be back in a couple of hours.

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¹⁴ Anna: Older brother.

It was dark by the time Paramesam got home, and Siva Rao returned a little later.

Paramesam was delighted to see his friend. "I was waiting for you. What is the rush? Could you not take it easy for one afternoon? Can't your business wait until tomorrow?" he expressed his mild displeasure, like any good friend would.

"Ha ha. If I were a schoolteacher like you, I would go to work on the stroke of ten, return home at 4:00 sharp, and spend the rest of my time leisurely, like a jolly good fellow. For us business folks, there is no work time, free time, supper time, sleep time, and so on. It is just one long stretch of the business time, day and night. We must be alert round the clock; it is easy to fall prey to crooks," Siva Rao replied, laughing.

"Cute, Siva! As Robert Frost said, you do not know what lies on the road you have not taken. If you are a teacher, you would not use words like 'leisurely' and 'jolly good fellow'," Paramesam said edgily.

"Alright, I admit I misspoke. Don't you start lecturing me now."

"Enough talk. It's getting late. Food is getting cold. Come on," Kamakshi said, walking into the kitchen.

At supper, Siva Rao brought it up again. Paramesam was not ready for it, though. His second son was in college, and there was the youngest Chitti still to worry about. Paramesam mentioned the same in defense of his position.

"This is the problem with our families. They bring more children more than they can feed into this world, saying God will take care of them. Then, they complain they can't afford to give them the things they need most."

"Are you lecturing me about family planning? Cute. How many kids do you have, sir? Two or three?" Paramesam said teasingly.

"Alright, yes, I have six. But I am also making enough to provide for all of them."

Kamakshi was serving the rice into his plate. Siva Rao leaned forward, put his hand across the plate, and said, "No, no, Chellamma, I am full, I can't eat anymore. Please, no more."

She went in and brought the yogurt.

Bhanu came home, washed hands and feet, and sat down next to his brother.

Siva Rao greeted him with a smile and asked him how he was doing.

Bhanu said fine.

"You can argue all you want, Paramesam. I strongly believe girls should be educated just like boys. I see no reason to deny them the opportunity to become better persons," he said as his final thought.

"I understand, but I have to be realistic, Siva. It is beyond my means. The first boy just finished college and moved to Hyderabad. The second one is in his second year. That means paying the tuition fees for two more years. Then there is the youngest. I have to think of saving for his education too, you know."

"Okay, as you please," Siva Rao said.

Paramesam felt bad; he did not want Siva take him the wrong way. "Hopefully, we will find a suitable match for her soon," he said, changing the subject.

Siva Rao expressed surprise. "Seriously? She is barely sixteen. Talking about marriage already?"

Paramesam offered as many explanations as possible: Geetha is not a baby; the higher the girl's education, the higher the groom's education we expect to be; the higher the groom's education, the higher the demand for the dowry would be."

"I understand what you mean. Let's see if we can find another way. You keep looking for a groom. In the meantime, let her continue her studies," Siva Rao said.

"Why does she need a college education? Is it necessary to serve food to her man?" Bhanu repeated his objection again.

"Are you saying that her education comes in the way to serve food?"

"That's not what I am saying. I am saying a degree makes no difference and therefore no need to spend money on it. Look at vadina for instance. What degrees did she have? None. Yet, she cooks great and manages the family wonderfully."

"Aha, you want to talk about me?" Kamakshi said; it was a diversion; she was not happy about it.

"Oh, no, Vadina! You can't say that. I could come this far only because of you. Without your help and support, God only knows where I would've been today," Bhanu said. He genuinely appreciated her kindness and support.

Kamakshi's face lit up for a second; his words were soothing. In the next minute, however, she felt let down as the topic took a turn she did not like. Both Paramesam and Siva Rao noticed it. Both understood what was on her mind. One of them was content and the other disappointed. For the same reason, one of them decided to end the discussion, and the other to continue it.

"Listen to me, Paramesam. Let's set aside all this gibberish about girl's education, for a second. You too know boys nowadays prefer educated girls. You look for a boy with a bachelor's degree, at least; and a boy with a bachelor's degree does not make a lot of money. So, his family looks for a girl who could bring additional income, which means an educated girl. Whether the in-laws send her to work or not depends on their financial needs. Besides, education makes her a better person and gives her a better understanding and appreciation of the world around her. There is nothing wrong with the girl having education, if you ask me," said Siva Rao.

"I know where you are coming from, Siva. You have six children, all boys. You may say whatever you like. I just can't put three children through college with my income. That is the stark reality," Paramesam replied.

"Ah, come on, you are talking as if you're dirt poor."

"You seem to feel very strongly about her higher studies. Maybe, you would like to take her to Guntur and put her through college there?" Bhanu said.

The suggestion startled the other adults in the room. It was totally unexpected and inappropriate.

"Well-said," Bamma garu said. Nobody paid attention to her comment.

"You shut up, stupid," Paramesam yelled at Bhanu.

"What a stupid suggestion! I've said it so many times, 'Say nothing, if you have nothing worth saying,'" Kamakshi said.

Siva Rao swallowed the wad of food in his mouth, took a sip of water, and said, "That is a good idea. I don't know why I did not think of it myself. Yes, Paramesam, send her with me. She can stay at our place and attend the college."

"You think it is funny?" Paramesam said knotting eyebrows.

"Anna garu, you are kind, but she is not your responsibility. It is not appropriate for us either, to let you take her in," Kamakshi echoed her husband's opinion.

Siva Rao would not hear of it. "Bhanu may be immature, but spoke the right thing. In fact, it should have occurred to me. Please, send her with me. My wife and I have been praying for a girl. Maybe this is God's will. Geetha fulfills our wish; she is like the Goddess *Balathripura Sundari*¹⁶."

"Enough of this chitchat. I have to get up early tomorrow," Paramesam said, getting up to wash hands.

Kamakshi was in a dilemma. She was not excited about sending her daughter to someone else's home, but the thought of her daughter's education was tempting.

Paramesam was feeling down by the minute for the situation he was in.

Bhanu was aghast that his casual comment took an unexpected turn.

"Ridiculous, if you ask me," Bamma garu said.

Geetha was trying to imagine how her life would be like in a house with six boys in it.

Kamakshi told them to go to bed. The conversation ended rather abruptly.

The next morning, Geetha left for Hindi class by the time Paramesam woke up. Bhanu left for work.

Paramesam freshened, ate breakfast, and was on his way out. Siva Rao said, "Time for school, already?"

"Um, what can I say? I have to go. You will wait until I come back, right?" Paramesam replied in a lighter vein.

"Of course, I will. I can't just take her away without your blessings," Siva Rao replied.

Paramesam was going down the staircase. He pulled his foot back, turned around, and said, "I did not think you meant it seriously."

"Of course, I meant it. I said it yesterday and I will say it again, in all earnestness. Your vadina (Siva's wife) would be thrilled to have a girl in our home."

"Well, I have to ask Kamakshi."

"Of course, please, ask her. Send the girl with me only if it is acceptable to both of you. The women's college in Guntur is a well-established institution. As I have said yesterday, you keep looking for a suitable match. I'll also keep an eye on it. In the meantime, let her study."

Paramesam nodded and left.

Siva Rao turned around to go to his room. Kamakshi was standing in the doorway, leaning on the door-frame.

"Anna garu, you don't have to do this. It is a big responsibility and an imposition especially on vadina garu. I would rather we find a way to send her to college here. There is a college here, you know," said Kamakshi. She, like any cautious mother, was thinking of the six boys at their home.

"Oh, no, Chellemma, don't you ever think like that. As I said, we two have always been wanting a girl. And, Geetha is not a baby; we don't have to worry about

¹⁶ A young goddess known for her extraordinary beauty.

fixing her hair, dressing her up, or tucking her in bed. She is old enough to take care of herself. I am sure it will be a great experience for her, too," he said fondly.

"She is very naive, believes *everything white is milk*, as the saying goes. Vadina garu cannot be everywhere, and watch her all the time. These times, you know," she said, expressing her hesitation.

"I understand your concern. I promise, we will take very good care of your daughter. Anyway, you think about it and let me know. Send her with me only if you are comfortable," Siva Rao said genuinely.

"Oh, don't say that. Of course, we have full faith in you two," said Kamakshi quickly.

After Geetha returned from Hindi class, Kamashi asked her, "What do you think of living in Siva Mamayya's home and studying in Guntur?"

Geetha was grappling with this question ever since the subject had come up. Several issues beset her and rendered her restless. With her mother's question, her heart pounded twice as fast. She even wished for a second that this had not happened.

"Why Guntur? Don't we have a women's college here?" she said.

"What kind of question is that? You are talking as if they are strangers. You know that our two families have been close friends for three generations. Your father and Anna garu are like brothers. Besides, they are very excited about having you in their home. You know she prayed for a girl during every pregnancy. Maybe God planned to fulfill their wish in this manner. Anyway, it is only for four years; it will pass in no time," Kamakshi offered as many reasons as she could.

Regardless of all her attempts to convince Geetha, both of them knew that was not the whole truth; but neither of them was prepared to accept the bitter truth.

Siva Rao got ready to leave the following morning.

As Geetha was packing her suitcase, Chitti began crying; he wanted to go with her. She gave him a half-rupee and comforted him. She assured him she would be back soon.

Paramesam pulled Siva to a side, and said, with tearful eyes, "I can never repay your debt, Siva."

"Sh, sh, don't say that. Geetha means as much to me as to you," Siva Rao said, patting on his shoulder gently.

Paramesam approached Geetha, told her to study well, to be careful, and not to hesitate to ask Mamayya or Atthayya¹⁷ whatever she wanted or needed. He also assured her that Siva was like a father and his wife, Kanakam, a mother to her; and either himself or Bhanu would visit her frequently.

Geetha kept nodding, for she could not speak; she was overwhelmed. As the car started, she could not control herself anymore; she broke into sobs.

Bhanu stroked her head gently and said, "Don't be sad. Everything will be alright. Call me anytime you want to talk. It is only an hour and a half trip, right? You can come on weekends. Be a good girl, study well, okay?" He shoved a five rupee note into Geetha's palm lovingly.

"What for?" Geetha said, clutching the note tightly in her fist. Her voice was hoarse.

¹⁷ , Atthayya: Aunt.

"Just keep it."

"You all, rest assured; don't worry about her. We will take good care of her," Siva Rao assured them one more time from the moving car.

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Geetha got out of the car and followed Siva Rao timidly. As she appeared at the doorway, Kanakam, Siva Rao's wife, went to her with a sweet smile, put her arm around Geetha's shoulders lovingly, and walked her into the house. That calmed Geetha's nerves a little. Siva Rao watched them walk into the house, arm in arm. He was pleased he had made the right decision.

Kanakam led her to the sofa and said, "Sit down. I will get you coffee," and went into the kitchen.

Siva Rao sat next to Geetha, stroking her hair gently he said, "Don't you worry. Athayya is just like your mother. Don't hesitate to ask for anything you want or need. Nothing to worry. You can go home for holidays. I will take you there myself."

Geetha nodded coyly.

Kanakam gave them the coffee and made some casual inquiries about her family. Geetha said they all were doing well. And then Kanakam asked if Geetha would take a bath.

No, Geetha shook her head. Something was holding her back from leaving the seat.

"Take a bath. You will feel relaxed," Siva Rao said.

Geetha got up, went in and returned with a fresh saree and blouse. Kanakam said, "come on," walking toward the bathroom.

As she returned to the living room, Siva Rao got a chance to tell her the reason for bringing Geetha to their home.

Kanakam shook her head vehemently. "You did not think it through clearly, as always," she said, edgily.

"How so? I did think it through very well. She is a smart girl. Paramesam is in no position to send her to college. We always wanted to have a girl. Why do you say I did not think it through? I thought you would be happy to have a girl in our home," Siva Rao laid it for her; he was sure he had made a great decision.

But Kanakam was not so sure. In her opinion, men were short-sighted, and not good at thinking clearly or realistically. They might lecture at meetings and write long articles, but no clear understanding of how to raise a girl. Only women were circumspect in such situations.

"She is still young; should be under her mother's care. We do wish her well, no doubt. You know the saying, *think about the bad first, and then the good*. It mentions the 'bad' first," Kanakam said, with the shrewdness of a worldly wise woman.

Siva Rao stared into his wife's face. "How could anything bad happen while you are there for her?"

"That's what I am saying, too. You act on a whim, make promises, and then, turn them over to me to deal with the consequences. You don't think of what happens next. We have grown up boys in our home. We wish and hope things would go smoothly. Did you ever think that one of our boys could act up in a crazy moment?"

Siva Rao took a second to respond. "Alright, let's say our boy shows interest in her. We can arrange their marriage; can't we? You know Paramesam cannot get any better match for his daughter."

Kanakam lost it, almost, as she said, "That is what worries me most. You are only thinking from your side. I know I am his mother and I should not be saying this. But think about it. Can you honestly say our boy deserves her?"

Siva Rao was stunned. For the first time, he got it; she was talking about their son's behavior. Their son, Syam, was not exactly a model boy. He got into trouble at school and in the neighborhood, frequently. Kanakam and Siva Rao tried their best to teach him good behavior, but to no avail. Kanakam was aware of that. Siva Rao understood it, only after she had spelled it out for him.

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Siva Rao took Geetha to the college on the first day in his car. He paid the late fee, filled the admission forms and completed the process. The following day, Geetha was ready to leave for the college. Siva Rao noticed the fear on her face, got into the car, and sat next to her. He told the driver to stop at a friend's house.

He called out, "Ammayi¹⁸ Satyam!"

A young woman pushed aside the old saree, hung on the door as a makeshift curtain, and stepped outside. Geetha looked at her. The girl was of average height, fair complexion, and not stunningly beautiful, but a passerby might stop and take a second look at her because of her sharp features.

"Mamayya garu!" she said, greeting him with a namaste.

"Aren't you going to college?" he asked.

"Yes Mamayya garu! I will. I am about to leave," Satyam replied.

"I am taking her to the college. Come on, get into the car. I will drop you both there. This is Geetha. Like a daughter to us. She is new here. I was hoping you will show her around."

"I will, Mamayya garu. Wait for a second. I will get my books," she said, and went in.

Papamma, Satyam's mother, came in, wiping her hands on her saree end and greeted Siva Rao, "How are you Babu¹⁹ garu?"

He said he and his family were doing well and asked how she was doing. He also told her to ask him if they needed anything.

Satyam returned with books and got into the car. The car headed toward her college.

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Geetha was adjusting to her new home, Siva Rao Mamayya, Kanakam Athayya, their sons and the college environment. Most of the time, Geetha did not see the boys around; probably they were avoiding her on purpose. The only exception was Syam, their second son. Lately, he was talking to Geetha on some pretext. At college, Satyam became her best friend.

One day, Syam came into the room while Geetha was studying. "What are you doing?" he asked.

¹⁸ Ammayi: Girl.

¹⁹ Babu: Sir, a polite form of addressing male adults.

"Nothing. I have to write an essay for my Telugu class, due tomorrow. Studying for the essay," she said. She stuck a piece of paper in the book as a bookmark and closed it.

"I heard nominations were called for student president in your college."

"I don't know."

"Yes, they did. I know. Probably, Rani Rao will contest again. She is no good. You must support Govindamma."

"Why?"

"Because Govindamma belongs to our caste. Besides, Rani Rao is an idiot; knows nothing. Muslims and Christians support her, and they comprise not even 30% of the students. Mary is running as Govindamma's Secretary. Mary is amazing, you know. You must support Govindamma."

Geetha's jaw fell. She stared at him, puzzled.

He was tiptoeing around her like a shadow, barely visible; and yet, he was so knowledgeable in her college politics? And how was it possible that he knew so much about the elections in *her* college?

"But Mary is a Christian, is it not?"

"In fact, she belongs to our caste. Three generations back, her ancestors converted to Christianity, but they are really one of us. She worships our gods; she believes in our religion. Do you know she goes to the Hanuman temple every Saturday."

Syam also went to the Hanuman temple on Saturdays, regularly. Now she understood his devotion to Lord Hanuman. She was amused.

"What are you two talking about?" Kanakam came into the room.

"Nothing," Syam said, and left in a hurry.

"He is talkative; ignore him. Let me know if he bothers you. I will talk to him. You need to study," Kanakam said and left.

Syam reappeared as soon as Kanakam had left.

Geetha cringed; Kanakam's words were ringing in her head.

"Look, I don't know why my mother does not like me talking to you. I like it only because I have no sisters. You are like a sister I never had. That is all I am saying," he said, sounding brotherly.

That made sense, Geetha thought. "It's okay, I understand. I have to study, though," she said.

Kanakam called Syam from the other room.

Syam quickly shoved a piece of paper in Geetha's hand, saying, "this... this," and left in a hurry.

Geetha shivered. The paper in her fist soaked wet with sweat.

"Still studying?" Kanakam came into the room. She made a point of going into Geetha's room and made sure she went to bed. Sometimes, Geetha would fall asleep on the book she was reading, and Kanakam would wake her up, walk her to the bed, put away the books, and turn off the light.

"I could not sleep," Geetha said.

"Just lie down and close your eyes. Soon you will fall asleep," Kanakam said, taking away the book from her hand.

Geetha lay down, pulling the sheet over her face. Unaware, she was crunching the piece of paper in her fist. The stories she had read and the movies she had seen were hovering in her head clumsily. She waited until everybody was asleep and then went into the bathroom, straightened the crunched note in her fist, with her heart beating twice as fast. It read, "Tell Mary to come to Hanuman Temple tomorrow. Urgent."

It was not signed, but she could guess easily who had written it and what it meant. For a second, she was disappointed. It took a couple of minutes for her to realize what she had expected and what had happened. It took her all night to figure out what she should do under the circumstances.

The next morning, she prayed to all the thousand gods and hoped she would not see Syam again. The gods must have heard her prayers; she did not cross paths with Syam again. He told his mother he had an early session and left very early in the morning.

At college, Geetha racked her brains all morning, and finally asked Satyam who Mary was.

"Why?" Satyam asked.

"Nothing. Just thought it would be nice to know. She is running for secretary, so I am curious."

"Did Syam tell you that?"

"How do you know?"

"Ha ha. You are living in the times of Lord Rama. You think people can keep such things secret. The entire city knows about Syamasundarudu and virgin Mariamma,²⁰ and their circumambulations around Hanuman temple."

Geetha was aghast. She thought she had an inscrutable secret in her fist; and Satyam shattered it with a snarl.

"There," Satyam pointed toward a skinny girl at a distance. As Geetha stepped toward that girl, Satyam held her arm and said, "Look Geetha, you are smart enough to get great marks. Don't get me wrong, but you need to have a different kind of brains to deliver this kind of messages. Don't get into this muck. Be careful, at least."

Geetha stood there thinking about it for a couple of minutes. She approached Mary and gave her the note. "Syam asked me to give this to you," she said.

Mary said "um", snatched it from Geetha without looking at her and left quickly.

Geetha recalled Satyam's advice and thought, probably, she knew a lot about Mary.

At home, she did not see Satyam all day. His younger brother, Jagadeesh, said Syam went to a movie. Suddenly she felt like she was all alone, wanted to talk to somebody.

"Can I go to Satyam?" she asked Kanakam.

"It is getting dark. It is not safe at this time of the day."

"Can I go to Hanuman temple? It is too far."

²⁰ A sarcastic remark by Satyam. She compared Syam and Mary to Syamasundarudu (Lord Krishna) and Mariamma (Virgin Mary).

"Alright, let's go. I will go with you."

They both went to the temple. At the temple, Geetha kept looking around as if she was looking somebody. Kanakam noticed it and wondered if she was homesick.

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The election fever filled the atmosphere at the college, spread to the streets, and to the students' homes. Geetha learned quite a few things, not only from Syam's lectures, but also from other students on campus. Especially, things about castes and the wealth were quite an education for her. If a Kamma girl competed with a Reddy girl, the Kamma girls would support her. Naidu students would join the Reddy girls. Brahmins would support the Naidu girl but not the Reddy girl. All this mix and match of castes made no sense to Geetha. She also found out that the poor would support the rich; nobody would support the poor; the girl, who dressed up like a movie star, would get plenty of followers; nobody would care about the girl, who looked ordinary and wore plain clothes.

Geetha tried to find a rationale underlying this mania, but found none. The entire ruckus about the election appeared to be more perplexing than the nature of Lord Brahma. Stupid, if you ask me, she told herself.

At home, Syam's craze for Mary heated up, much to the discomfort of Geetha. His mother too noticed it, too. She stepped up her efforts to shield Geetha without making a fuss about it. Geetha felt cornered; she could not tell Syam to stop it, nor could she explain the real problem to Kanakam.

"Why are you fixated on Mary?" Geetha asked Syam one day.

"What do you mean why? How could you be so calm about the things that are happening at your college? As citizens, we must be aware of what is happening around us and in the country. That is our civic duty," he said, echoing the hollow speeches he had heard.

"But all your concern is about Mary only."

"That is the talk of the narrow-minded. If Mary is not a girl, you would not raise this question, would you?"

"If Mary were not a girl, would you be so excited about this election?"

The question sent him reeling. He pulled up, took a deep breath, and went on rambling, "Look, little sister, you need to expand your horizons. You should stop thinking about people as girls and boys. You should get involved in local affairs. Unfortunately, the times are like that; people are shouting 'rape' if a boy looking at a girl. We have to change. Do you know, in other countries, men and women walk around holding hands and kiss in public? Nobody thinks of it as immoral, much less a transgression."

His rambling made no sense to Geetha; totally irrelevant. She asked again, "Tell me this. Are you focused on the elections or Mary?"

Her question annoyed him. "You are coming to the same point over and again. You are asking only because Mary is a girl and I am a boy."

"Well, is it not the case?"

"That is not the point. Your question should be about the main issue. I am focused on one ideology, not on one person."

"Oh!" Geetha said. She thought he was probably a great scholar, and that his mode of thinking was too complicated for a simpleton like herself.

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Election fever peaked in town. Not only in women's college but also in men's college, fired up. One day, one party's cronies grabbed their opponent, took him to a deserted place, slashed him with blades, and left him under the bridge to bleed. Somebody told his parents about the incident. They, heartbroken and sobbing, ran to his rescue and took him to a nearby hospital.

The District Collector learned about the incident, canceled the elections, and told the principals of both colleges to find an alternative method of electing the college president.

Students in both colleges lost interest in the elections. They all were looking for peace on their campuses. That incident threw Geetha off her mindset; it crushed her spirits. Satyam, who was usually calm and collected, also was worried sick. The wounded boy and she were childhood friends, she said. She wanted to visit him at the hospital and asked Geetha to go with her. Geetha did not like it, but agreed to go with her. She could not let her best friend face it alone.

At the hospital, the boy's parents sat on a bench on the porch, crying their hearts out. They said he was their only son, and were hoping he would finish college and help them out in their old age. Inside the room, the boy lay on the bed, wrapped in bandages; barely identifiable. Geetha could not stand the sight; she turned back and left quickly. After a few minutes, Satyam came out. Both expressed their sympathies to the parents. They went into the front-yard, sat down under the Neem tree. Satyam broke into heartrending sobs. Geetha could not weep; her heart and brain froze.

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Geetha walked in and saw Kanakam in the hallway. She sat by the window, reading Bhagavatam. Kanakam saw Geetha's livid face and was alarmed. "What happened? Are you alright?" she asked with concern as she put down the book and went up to her.

Geetha said, "Nothing," and threw herself on the sofa. She could not control herself anymore. She told Kanakam about the tragic incident, her trip to the hospital with Satyam, and broke into big sobs.

Kanakam took her into her arms and consoled her the best she could. She said gently, "Come, come, you need to be brave. Why did you go to the hospital, anyway? Don't go there ever again." She also decided to warn Satyam not to take Geetha to such places again.

That night, Geetha could not eat food. Kanakam sat by her side, and made her swallow a few bites, almost by force.

It took considerable time for Geetha to recover from the shock. She had not seen hatred and violence at that level, ever. Kanakam was also getting more and more worried about her. "I told you," she said to her husband, and blamed him for the situation Geetha was in. The couple took her to the movies for a diversion. They even arranged a party, to keep her mind off the topic.

Geetha noticed how worried they were about her and tried to pull herself together. She got busy with studies, hoping they would feel better.

The following week, Bhanu called and asked them to send Geetha home on the next Saturday.

Kanakam said, with a chuckle, "Why? Is vadina garu missing her so badly? Tell her Geetha is fine, no worries."

"Oh, no, no. We know she is safe at your home; like a princess in a palace. We want her to be here for *pellichupulu*²¹, set for the next Saturday."

"What? *pellichupulu* now? She just started college!" Kanakam said. She felt obliged to protect Geetha and her education from other distractions.

"Well, nothing is settled yet. This is only a start, not the end, you know. It does not mean the wedding is set to go."

"If you think it will not go forward, why arrange it at all? Don't you think it would be an unnecessary distraction?"

"Maybe, we too would say the same, if my brother had all boys only." He took a sly jab at her because she had only boys, and that hurt her.

"Fine. I will tell Mamayya garu after he comes home," Kanakam replied, sounding sore, and hung up.

Later in the evening, she gave the message to Siva Rao.

"Now? She just started college," he said, expressing surprise, like he did not expect it.

"Um. Their daughter, their decision. Whatever they think best for her," Kanakam said, struggling to hide her irritation. She was still rancid about Bhanu's crack at her kids being all boys.

"Okay. Is that all? Did he say anything else?"

"Not much. Naturally, parents would like to see their girl married as soon as possible, and feel good about completing their duty. We can't blame them," Kanakam said.

"She is barely seventeen. If they keep drumming up 'marriage', how can she focus on her studies?"

"That is not how a girl's parents think. They are eager to do what is right for them as parents. We can't blame them."

Siva Rao shook his head, called Geetha and asked if she would like to go home for the weekend.

Her face lit up like on a Diwali day. She nodded.

Kanakam felt a nudge at heart; no matter how much she cared and showered love, it was not the same as a mother's love; the girl's heart was anchored in her mother! She understood it for the first time.

"I will put you on the bus here and give Bhanu the bus arrival time in Vijayawada. He will meet you at the bus station and take you home."

Geetha agreed, but it did not sound right to Kanakam. "They might think we were irresponsible if we send her alone. You go with her," she said.

"I can't. I have business to take care of. How about sending Syam with her?"

"Why Syam?" Kanakam quickly expressed her objection. She had noticed that he had been around Geetha a little too much, and that was uncomfortable for her.

Finally, the couple decided to send their fourth son, Jagadeesh, with her, just to be on the safe side. For Geetha, it did not make sense. How a boy ten years younger than she could be her protector? She, however, did not want to make a fuss about it; she let it be.

²¹ A formal meeting of the groom and his family with the bride and her family.

Siva Rao called Bhanu and gave him the time of Geetha's arrival in Vijayawada. Bhanu assured him he would go to the bus station and receive Geetha and Jagadeesh.

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Bhanu went to the bus stand with Chitti to receive Geetha. Geetha was glad to see Babayi and Chitti. Chitti hugged her and said, "Akka!" She patted him lovingly and introduced Jagadeesh to them. At that moment, he looked like, not as a protector, but as another brother like Chitti. She felt one notch grown up as a young woman!

Bhanu went and returned with a rickshaw. Geetha and Chitti sat in the rickshaw. Jagadeesh sat on the backseat of Bhanu's bicycle. The two vehicles headed home.

At home, Kamakshi told Geetha about the prospective groom and his family. Geetha said, with her eyes glued to the floor, almost inaudibly, "I want to complete B.A."

"Yes, you can do that, too. Is there a rule you must not continue your studies if married?"

"We don't know whether they would let me continue."

"Don't you remember? Aunt Ramani's daughter finished high school and college degree after her marriage."

"Yes, but aunt Sitamma's daughter's education ended with her marriage."

"Let's see what they would say. He comes from a respectable family and is studying medicine. They are not asking for a dowry. 'If the boy and the girl like each other, we are happy,' they said."

Geetha spent all night thinking about the young man who was studying medicine, was well-behaved, had a prospect of making good money, and did not want dowry.

On the next day, the entire house was bubbling with excitement and teasing.

"Don't forget this poor Babayi. I can't pay high fees," Bhanu teased Geetha.

"Akka, if you get married and go away, will you be back to see me?" Chitti asked, looking sad at the prospect of her going away.

"Wife of a doctor, wow! You may forget little people like me," Doramma, their neighbor, poked fun at her.

All those jokes threw Geetha into an inexplicable mix of emotions, fear, anxiety, and maybe even slight bitterness.

She got up, went into the backyard, and stood under the Parijatha(Night Jasmine) tree.

The branches from above showered the Parijatha flowers; it sent her reeling into a pleasant shiver. A little bird cooed at a distance. She was enthralled for a moment; she rested her hand gently on the tree trunk. Caterpillars wiggled. She cringed, pulled back her hand, and tiptoed back into the house.

Kamakshi chided her mildly. "You are still in the same saree? Go, change. It is almost time; they will be here any minute. Wash your face and wear the violet Georgette saree. I made Jasmine garlands - one for the Goddess in the kitchen and the other for you. Pray to the Goddess Gowri and wear the garland in your hair."

"what is the hurry? It is not even 3:00 yet. They would not be coming until after 5:00," Geetha said, walking toward the bathroom.

She washed her face with soap, changed into the Georgette saree, and looked at herself in the mirror. The red dot on her forehead, a dab of Collyrium²² on the lower eyeline, glimmering lips, and the saree slipping off of her shoulder - all made her blush.

Nagamma came in from behind. "You silly, that is not how you wear a sari," she pulled it off, and wrapped it around her again. "See, this is how a college girl wears; not like a grandma," she said teasingly.

Geetha blushed. "Go away, Atthayya," she said.

"Aha, would you say 'go away' had I had a son of the right age," Nagamma said playfully, pinched her cheek, and went into the kitchen.

Paramesam returned from the store, handed the bag containing paan leaves, betel nuts, fruits, and flowers to Kamakshi.

Bhanu came in and announced that the grooms' family had arrived. Paramesam went to the front door and welcomed them courteously.

The groom and his parents got out of the car. The group consisted of not just the groom, mother, and father, but a few others. They thought 3 was not a good number, and so, included the groom's brother, another woman for moral support, the mediator, and two children who refused to be left behind. In all, six adults and two children.

"Great. The entire party is here. You might as well perform the wedding," Nagamma commented.

"Sh, be quiet. You may offend them," Kamakshi said nervously. She returned to the living room with snacks and coffee.

While the guests were sipping coffee, Kamakshi went in and returned with Geetha.

Geetha sat on the edge of a chair, with her eyes glued to the floor.

"Don't be shy, Ammayi. Don't worry. No strangers here. Look up," the mediator said.

"What did she study?" the groom's mother asked.

"She has completed high school. Also, she learned to type, and attended a few Hindi classes," Paramesam described her qualifications.

"We've heard she is studying B.A. in Guntur. Why Guntur?" groom's brother asked.

"Because there is a women's college."

"There is one here, too."

"Never mind that. Will she quit college after marriage?"

"Whatever you say, Sir. Let's say for the sake of argument, you prefer to postpone taking her in until after the young man completed his studies. Then she will stay here with us and complete the B.A.," Paramesam said, suggesting a compromise.

Kamakshi did not like the suggestion, but kept quiet.

"Can't we talk about it later?" the groom said coyly.

²² Collyrium, a paste made of lampblack and castor oil, applied to the lower eyeline. Supposed to have medicinal value.

"True. No need to talk about it now," said the woman who came with them for moral support.

"Alright. Just one more thought. Can you perform the wedding next month? The following month is not auspicious to perform weddings," the groom's mother asked.

"We also like to perform the wedding as soon as possible. Bamma is getting old; we would like her to watch the wedding and bless the newly weds," Paramesam said.

The guests stayed for another half-hour, chatting about this and that, not necessarily relevant to the occasion.

Paramesam walked them to their car and came back into the house.

"What did they say?"

"Said they will let us know in a day or two."

"I am going to Saroja, Amma," Geetha said.

"Why now? You can go tomorrow," Kamakshi did not want her to go out; it was getting late, she thought.

Geetha, disappointed, went into her room, changed into an ordinary cotton saree and sat down with an old magazine.

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Geetha and Jagadeesh returned to Guntur the following day. Siva Rao received them at the bus station, and drove them home.

It was too late to go to college. Geetha skipped classes for the day and went the next day.

"Why didn't you come yesterday?" Satyam asked.

"Just. Didn't feel like."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Went home."

"You could have returned Sunday evening."

"Well, I didn't."

"pellichupulu?"

Geetha was startled by the question. "How did you know?"

"What else girls like us would have? No earth-shattering problems to resolve. Actually, it is all over your face. I also think this is the first time for you," she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Her apathy toward marriage was puzzling to Geetha.

"What is he doing?" Satyam asked.

"Studying medicine."

Satyam was quiet for a few minutes. She said, "I don't even remember for how long this farce has been going on in our home. My oldest sister was sick of this stupid custom and ran away with a good-for-nothing fellow. She said that was a better option than this stupid tradition. My parents learned nothing from the step she had taken. They never learn, I suppose. It started all over again with my second sister."

Horrible, Geetha thought; she felt sick in the stomach. "Time for class, let's go," she said, heading toward the classroom.

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For the next ten days, Geetha shuddered each time the phone rang. Various emotions beset her as the mail carrier stopped at their door or passed by. She was too shy to ask, but hoped Mamayya or Atthayya would call her parents and find out if there was any news from the groom's parents. In her mind, the two families were acting like she was not a part of it.

The following week, she received a letter from her friend, Saroja.

Dear Geetha,

We are doing well. Hope you are doing well. Life is moving along. Students don't care about what the lecturers teach; and, the lecturers don't care that the students don't care. Days just pass by. I wish you were here. A few days back, I ran into your brother at a store. He said you came for the weekend. Why didn't come to see me? Anyway, this is to let you know I am getting married, happened unexpectedly, set to 15th of this month. The groom is a distant relative. My mother says we used to play in our childhood. I don't remember. He came from America to get married. So, there is not much time. You must come.

Yours affectionately,

Saroja.

Geetha read the letter several times; felt like Saroja was talking to her in person. Feelings of pleasure, depression and inscrutable emptiness took over in quick succession. She told Atthayya about it and asked if she could go to the wedding. Atthayya said, of course, and suggested taking Jagadeesh with her like before. But Jagadeesh refused, saying he had schoolwork. Geetha said she could go alone. Siva Rao put her on the bus and told her Bhanu would pick her up at Vijayawada bus station.

Geetha nodded.

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Saroja's parents performed the wedding beautifully, although they did not have much time for preparations. The groom's parents and the guests were impressed; they all blessed the newly weds heartily.

"Your turn next," one of the guests teased Geetha.

"I can find a groom for you in the States, if you like," Saroja's husband joked. Saroja smiled. Geetha laughed.

"Probably I will die without watching your wedding. My karma," Bamma said, dabbing tears.

Saroja accompanied her husband to Chennai to see him off to the States.

Geetha could not stay at home for another day. She told her mother she would leave the following morning for Guntur. Kamakshi tried to persuade her to stay for one more day. Geetha insisted she had to study for the upcoming exam and left.

Kanakam was happy to see Geetha return home earlier than expected. She thought Geetha felt at home in their home.

Geetha got busy with her studies. She also kept her distance from Syam. It took sometime but Kanakam got it right, understandably; Geetha grew up at heart. Kanakam was even discussing family matters with her.

Geetha felt a decade older with the experience. Now, she was viewing Kanakam's sons, like Chitti, young and immature.

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After summer break, Geetha returned to Guntur to study B.A. During her absence, several things had happened. Mary married a Christian boy she had met in her church and moved to Calcutta. Geetha learned Siva Rao had initiated the talks of Satyam's marriage with Syam; Papamma, had not accepted it, not yet.

Geetha was perplexed. She went to see Satyam. She ran into Syam on the street corner. He smiled vaguely and passed quickly.

Satyam was on the porch, embroidering flowers on pillow covers. Geetha approached her from behind and blew on her neck. Satyam, startled, screamed ouch as the needle pricked her finger. She was delighted to see Geetha.

"After a long time," she said, taking Geetha's hand into hers. Geetha was equally happy. Her face lit up like the moon on a full moon day.

Both sat next to each other without a word, for a few minutes, enjoying the pure joy of meeting after a long time. It was sheer poetry. As a famous Telugu poet had said, friendship is the sweetest thing in the universe. (A line from a popular song, *srushtilo teeyanidi snehamenoyi*)

"So, tell me, what is new?" Satyam asked.

"You tell me," Geetha said, squinting playfully.

"You know what is happening. And I know you know that. So, only you should tell what is new in your life. What did you do during the holidays?"

Both were quiet for a while. Both sat there staring down; heavy thoughts filled their hearts. Each felt the solitude in the company of the other. It was a unique experience.

After a few minutes, Geetha opened up. "It seems your mother was hesitating to accept Mamayya's proposal. Why?"

Satyam shrugged. "Well, you know, dealing with the rich."

"But you are okay with it. Why?" Geetha asked again. She could appreciate her mother's concern, but she wanted to hear it from Satyam.

Satyam laughed, smacked her lightly, and said, "That is cute. You asked why my mother would not accept it, and again, asking me why I would accept it."

Geetha, too, laughed. "What can I say? I am perplexed by the whole thing."

Satyam took some time to reply. She spoke slowly, said, "Geetha, you are smart but not worldly wise. You are like a little child; eat when you are hungry and sleep when tired. You don't think beyond that. It never occurs to you to think how the food got on your plate or how things get done if you slept."

Geetha thought Satyam was probably right. She had always kept her distance from everything. Ever so often, she stood aloof, thinking things would happen on their own, and watching things happening on their own, as if she was an audience and she had no role in it.

Satyam had two older sisters and two younger brothers. Her father had died when Satyam was eleven and the last boy was two. Her mother, Papamma, lived with dignity; never asked others for any help. After her husband had died, she managed the household by doing odd jobs at others' houses in the neighborhood.

Her grandmother also was living with them. She spent her time reading the epics like Ramayana and Maha Bharata for other women in the neighborhood. Eventually, a small group of devotees gathered around her. They were bringing fruits, vegetables, occasionally, a saree and blouse pieces, and sometimes, small cash. Together, they got by.

Some people in town blamed Papamma's brother for not taking care of her. Tired of the accusations, her brother went to Papamma. He said, "Look, instead of doing odd jobs in others' houses, why not stay with me and do the same?"

Papamma did not agree. She said, "Think about it. When I work at others' place, I can walk away anytime I feel like, without thinking twice. At your home, that won't be easy because of our relationship. We would grudge, complain behind each other's back, and may even scream, but walking away would not be that easy; and the same with you. It will be just as hard for you to ask me to leave. I don't care what the others say, but I like the way I am living now."

Satyam recounted this story and said, "I have no expectations of my mother finding a great groom like Lord Rama for me. That is the stark reality. Siva Rao mamayya garu and Kanakam Atthayya garu are well respected people. Syam is all talk but nothing to worry about; he is immature. Plus, he respects you. And you care about me. That is good enough, I thought. Don't you think so?"

Geetha felt like a great burden was off her chest. "Alright, I agree I am a dimwit."

"Oh, shut up," Satyam smacked her gently.

Satyam and Syam were married within a month, and moved to a new home. Siva Rao put him in his business and started to train him in business matters.

Geetha completed B.A. and Bachelor's degree in Education. She joined as a teacher in the same school her father was working. Both her parents were worried if they could ever perform her wedding.

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Time was moving at a snail's pace. For Geetha, life became dull. That was so until a phone call came from Siva Rao and gave her a jolt.

Siva Rao called Bhanu and told him that a young man came from America to get married and Geetha could be the right girl for him. He added there was not much time, and that Geetha needed to be in Guntur on the following Saturday with her parents.

Geetha did not like the idea but, out of respect for Mamayya and Atthayya, agreed to go to Guntur with her parents.

Siva Rao and Kanakam were elated to see Geetha. "How are you? How is your job? Is everything going well?" Siva Rao asked affectionately.

Kanakam's face lit up like the full moon. She held Geetha's chin in her palm, and asked, "How're you doing? How is the job? Hope no troubles."

Geetha was touched by the warmth in their voices. She told them everything was fine, no worries of any kind.

Siva Rao told them about the groom. "Hari came from America to find a bride and get married. If both the girl and the boy like each other, the marriage should take place right away."

Siva Rao and Kanakam kept the meeting very simple, no fuss, like on previous occasions. Geetha wore an ordinary cotton saree and tucked a bunch of jasmine flowers in her hair. After a few minutes, Siva Rao asked Paramesam to follow him into the library. Kanakam stood and said to Kamakshi, "Come, Vadina garu. I will show you our house."

Hari and Geetha were left alone in the living room.

Hari started the conversation. "The whole thing is so sudden. Do you have any questions? Ask me."

"Questions about what?" Geetha said in a low voice.

Hari laughed. "I don't know either. When I left America, I thought I would just get married and return to the States. Once arrived here, everybody has a girl to introduce me to, and I am as much dazed as you are. Never mind. Just tell me what you are thinking now about this arrangement."

Geetha felt relieved to see he was candid.

"I feel the same way. They dragged me here saying, 'come, come', and I came. I don't know what to think."

"Okay, I will start. You stopped your studies with B.A. Is it because you are not interested in higher studies?" Geetha hesitated to reply. She was not sure how he would take it if she told him she discontinued because of their financial situation.

Hari said, "That's okay. I was only trying to find out what your interests are. There can be any number of reasons for someone to do or not to do something. Let's forget that. Tell me this. What do you think of moving to America?"

Geetha took a few seconds and asked, "They told me you are working on your doctoral degree in America. Will you return to India after you are done?"

"I can't say one way or the other, yet. You know, our lives are where our jobs take us to. Probably, I would have to say, for now, yes, I will stay in the States. You will have to resign your job and go with me."

"So many people are struggling to get a job. You want me leave a job I have on hand?"

"That's also true. How about taking a leave of absence without pay for one year? We will see how things turn out," Hari said as a compromise.

They talked about other things for another half hour. "My mother forgets the time when she is in company. Do you mind asking her to come back?" Hari said.

Geetha smiled, went in, and returned with the two women.

Hari's mother said, "I know it is rushing, but his schedule, you know. If we pass this date, we don't know when he can be back for the ceremony. The marriage has to be performed tomorrow."

Paramesam and Kamakshi were aghast. "In two days?"

Siva Rao assured them he would take care of the arrangements.

Kamakshi took Geetha to the other room and asked her what she thought of the young man. Geetha was silent for a few minutes and then said, "Looks like he is a decent person."

"Tell me if you are not sure. I don't want to rush into things," mother said again.

Geetha said she was sure; that settled it. The wedding was on.

Siva Rao called a few friends, used his clout in town and made all the arrangements as if it had been in the works for months. The wedding was performed at a local temple.

Paramesam and Kamakshi were grateful to him beyond words. "I am her father in name only. You took care of her education and marriage, too," Paramesam said to Siva Rao with moist eyes.

"Oh, no. Never say that; you should not even think like that. You two are her birth parents and always will be. Kanakam and I are always Mamayya and Atthayya to her; and, we are happy to be so. Geetha means as much to us as to you," Siva Rao said fondly.

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While Geetha was reminiscing her past, the phone rang. It was a telemarketer. She told him she was not interested, that he should not call again, and hung up. She was vexed with such calls. Phone rang again. She picked it up and yelled, "I told you not to call."

Hari said, "What?" from the other end.

Geetha bit her tongue, "Oh, no. Hari, sorry. I thought it was..."

Hari cut in, laughed and said, "Who's getting your blessings?"

"You know, the telemarketers, as always."

"Well, no point in telling them not to call. They are trained to take it as 'call me again'."

"Coming home?" she asked. She was waiting for him, eagerly.

"No, Geetha, not yet. In fact, I called you to tell that. I am stuck here with a complicated file. I need to finish it tonight. Don't wait up for me. You eat and go to bed. I will be late."

"Okay," she said, disappointed.

"I'm sorry. I know you are bored. I am disappointed, too. What can I say? That is the way things are here. Lot of work and very little time for anything else. I will try to come home as soon as I can," Hari tried to comfort her.

"Yes, I know. I understand," she said and hung up.

She looked around the room. Suffocating loneliness, not a single human around. Devastating boredom. Thoughts of friends back home came to her mind, again. She sat down to write to Satyam. She filled four pages describing her life in America, about Hari and his job, her cooking, about the expansive space, and the small population. She waited a few weeks eagerly for a reply, and then, it became a pastime. No letter. Um, Indians, she mumbled and let it go.

Everything in America appeared to be diametrically opposite to what was in India. She reminisced again: We say 'keep left,' they say 'keep right'. We turn the light switch down; here up. We take a bath the first thing in the morning; here they do so in the evening. At home, mother always said, 'get home before dark'. Life starts in the evening here. She would not feel she had eaten, unless she ate with hand. The other day at the party, she watched the trouble some Americans had trying to eat with hand. Fork was not flexible like fingers. Yet, fork was the thing for them. She tried to imagine eating *rasam*²³ and rice with fork; totally impossible. Probably, habit

²³ Spiced tamarind water.

becomes custom, she thought. Everything, big and small, is different. It is almost like what is wrong in India is right here. The thought made her smile.

She even thought *Oh, God, what have you done to me*, and regretted leaving her hometown for a couple of minutes. Hari noticed her agony. He sat next to her and tried to explain a few things; made a few changes so she could feel better. Nonetheless, the situation was irksome to both of them. The thing that bothered her most was the necessity to sit behind closed doors in that one bedroom apartment; it was suffocating her. She wanted to go outside; then she remembered Hari's constant alerts not to leave home. She could not understand why he was so afraid.

Radha's words of wisdom came to her mind. She should learn to adjust to the new environment. *I jumped into the ocean knowingly. I'd better start flapping my arms and legs*, she decided.

She could not take it anymore; decided to take a walk, opened the door timidly, peeked both ways, and convinced herself there were no demons that might snatch her away, and stepped outside. Then it occurred to her; she forgot to take the keys. The door closed shut behind her. Oh, my God! She screamed inwardly. Hari had told her several times the door would close automatically; she forgot. That settled it.

She proceeded on her walk. There was not much traffic; a few cars and bikes; barely anyone on foot. Farther down the street, there was a lake. Some ducks on the water and a few boats at a distance rendered the entire atmosphere a pleasurable sight, like it was designed for her pleasure. It reminded her of the times she had spent with Saroja on the banks of River Krishna; and then Satyam... No reply from her; what could have kept her so busy? She had no time to scribble just a few words? It was getting hot. She did not want to leave the place, but hunger forced her to leave.

When she left home, her plan was, if she walked straight on the same street, turned around, and walked back, no way she could miss home. Somewhere, the plan got botched. She walked a few blocks and turned around. The street did not look familiar. Again, turned left, turned right, went back, and turned right. Finally, it hit her; she was lost!

She called on God for a second time; Oh God, what have you done? She looked around, hoping to find someone who could point to her the right direction, but found none. She started walking again, hoping she might stumble upon her home by chance. That did not happen either.

After a half-hour or so, she saw a gentleman walking toward his car. She quickly went to him and asked if he could tell her where the Rennebohm store was.

"There are half a dozen stores in this area. Can you tell me which one you were referring to?"

"The one closest to Randall."

"Randall court? Randall street? Randall blvd? Which one?"

"I don't know."

He asked her to be specific, but she could not be any more specific; she just could not think of any. It was clear she was new to the place. He wanted to help her and asked her a few more questions, but got nowhere. Finally, he asked if she was staying with a family? Friends? Or any other person she could name?

"I am married to Harinarayana Murthy Pullabhatla. He works here."

Ah! His name that long?! Without showing his surprise, he asked, "Is it in the telephone directory?"

"I think so. He has been here for a few years."

"Does he have any other name he goes by?"

"No, um, I don't think so."

The gentleman played with different parts of the name, and finally found one, Bhatla, HNMP. He noted down the address, and said, "That is quite far away. Come on, I will drop you at your place."

Geetha hesitated for a few seconds. She remembered all the warnings Hari had given her dutifully. He would go bonkers when he knows she accepted a ride from a total stranger. But then, that was not the time for dithering. Her anxiety about getting home was greater than the fear that her husband might get mad. He was her only hope at the moment. She got into the car and put on the seat belt.

The gentleman dropped her at her doorstep. She thanked him profusely. He said, "You're welcome," and drove away.

Geetha took a deep breath, walked up the stairs, and stood by the door. No keys to go in. While she was standing there wondering what to do, the building manager came by. That was a relief. She quickly went to him, introduced herself as Hari's wife, and asked him if he would kindly open the door for her.

The Manager felt bad for her, but he was not permitted to open the door for anybody except the lessee and in emergencies. "The rules are very strict," he said.

"This is an emergency," Geetha argued.

"No, ma'am, this is not an 'emergency'." Fire, broken pipes are emergencies. This is an unfortunate situation."

"I am his wife. I swear I am married to him. I am sure I have a right to your service," she tried to persuade him.

"I am glad you are married, ma'am. Congratulations. But I cannot open the door except for the person who has signed the lease. If I do, I will lose my job."

"Thank you. I understand. No, I don't want you to lose your job."

Thus, they both spent some time feeling sorry for each other, and hoping and praying to find out a feasible solution under the circumstances.

Their prayers were answered. Hari showed up. He said he called home a few times to see how Geetha was doing. There was no answer, and that worried him. So, there he was to find out what was wrong.

He was relieved to see Geetha at the door. Manager conveyed his best wishes to the couple and left.

"What happened? Why manager is here?" Hari asked as he opened the door.

Geetha too was glad to see Hari. No more fears; it was even amusing. She recounted the entire story and said, laughing, "I must give it to you. Your name is a great story. The gentleman who gave me the ride said even the FBI would not be able to catch you."

Hari also laughed. "True. My colleagues at work call me A to Z Harry. Anything to eat? I am hungry," he said.

"I can make rava dosa."

"Never mind. I don't have much time. I'll have rice with pickles and go."

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Geetha was getting used to a routine. No plan, no logic; things were just happening, and she did not resist the change.

She was going alone to the store to get milk and vegetables. On one such occasion, she saw a Telugu face in the store. She looked at the woman curiously. The woman was fairly tall, of captivating complexion, striking facial features, impressive stature and demeanor. That lady looked at Geetha at the same time. For a few minutes, both were hesitant to start a conversation. Finally, the lady made the first move.

"New, I suppose," she said.

"Yes. Four months," Geetha said.

"I thought so. It takes sometime to get the NRI face," she smiled.

Geetha could not understand what she meant, but let it go. She wanted to continue the conversation, though. "I am Geetha," she said.

"Oh, okay. My name is Tapathi," the other woman said, as she handed her credit card to the checker. On her way out, she said, "Nice meeting you."

Geetha kept thinking about her all the way home. She told Hari about her.

"Tapathi garu? Strange, she never talks to anybody," he said.

"I don't know. She was fine with me."

"Must be your charming looks."

"Ha, ha," Geetha said, squinting playfully.

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Bhagyam garu called Geetha to invite the couple to a puja at their home on a Sunday, two weeks from now. The occasion was their wedding anniversary.

Geetha congratulated her, told her she would ask Hari and let her know.

"Yes, ask him. I hope you two will come. I look forward to seeing you two. Gives you a chance to meet other Telugu people in town."

Later that evening, Geetha told Hari about the invitation. She did not believe in pujas, she added.

Hari smiled. "I don't, either. But her Pulihora and Chana vada are the talk of the town. We never miss her cooking. Frankly, take it as a casual get together, if not puja. You will find out soon enough that this is the only way we get to see each other. I mean, our Telugu folks. Tell her we are coming. You can see for yourself how it goes," he said.

Geetha called Bhagyam and told her they would attend the event.

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Hari and Geetha went to Bhagyam's home on the said Sunday. As she stepped in, it felt like a totally different world. As the saying goes, the house was big, like an island. Bhagyam said they had gotten it built recently. She added, "In the old house, there was no room to set up our deities. I used the broom closet as our puja room; I didn't like the idea though. It was always a sore point for me. We are making so much money, enjoying so many amenities, by the grace of God only. How can we not have a separate room for our deities? It kept nudging me, like a thorn at heart. I pestered my husband until he agreed to have this house built with a room to set up our family deities."

In India, a room for deities was a priority, but in America, a room for broomsticks seemed to be a priority. Apparently, each culture had its own priorities! That was amusing to her.

The entire house was filled with the items transported from India. Pictures of several deities adorned the walls. It was hard to say whether they were displaying the owners' devotion to the gods or their taste in art. Stereo system was playing Baba devotional songs at a high pitch.

Geetha scanned the room with curiosity. She could see most of them were professionals like doctors, engineers and professors. A group of students gathered in one corner. In a country, where "all men are created equal" was the commanding canon, the subtle overtones of discrimination was strikingly obvious.

The younger group was talking about movies, music, and their not-so-pleasant encounters with local culture. The professionals were in their 50s and 60s and well-settled in their jobs. Topics of their conversations included kids' education, cultural conflicts in raising the kids as "Indian kids," while grooming them to be successful adults in America; also about children's marriages and their own retirement plans.

"Market may not recover anytime soon. Wonder if Greenspan waves his magic wand and gets the market going."

"20% loss."

"Only paper loss."

"Your son graduates this year, I suppose. Where is applying for?"

"He applied to Brown University. 60k. Kids' education is a killer."

"My son has got a full scholarship."

"Really! In Yale?"

"No. He will go to Georgetown; he found about it himself. Can you imagine? I have no idea how these things work, but the children could figure it out so easily."

Women gathered in the kitchen and the dining room. They were chatting about their travels to India, the things they were planning to take with them, and the things like sarees and jewelry they would bring from India. Some were exchanging recipes; also, a few were talking gossip about the women who were absent at the party.

"I haven't seen Gowri in a long time. Is she out of town?" a woman wearing a flashy blue silk saree asked.

"No, she has not gone anywhere. I saw her yesterday in the grocery store," another woman in a yellow silk saree said.

"Me too. I tried to talk to her, but she left in a hurry. I saw her daughter in the Mall with an American boy. I think they were dating. Probably, that might be the reason she was avoiding us. Afraid we will ask her about her daughter."

"What is the big deal. Nowadays. so many of our children are marrying white boys or girls."

"My boys do not even think about white girls. Both told me they would marry whom we pick for them," the first woman, who asked about Gowri, said.

She was proud she had raised her sons the right way.

A lady sitting by the wall said, "Come winter, I will go to India. I want to bring a grinding stone. We don't get the taste of authentic lentil chutney when we make it in the blender."

Geetha saw a woman sitting in a corner, away from all the other women; tried to recall where she had seen her.

That woman looked at Geetha and smiled vaguely. Geetha got it. That was the same woman she had met at the grocery store the other day. Geetha smiled back.

Bhagyam told the guests the puja was set to go in the family room. All the guests, but for a few, followed her into the family room.

The puja and the bhajan songs took almost an hour and a half. All the guests received *prasadam* (consecrated food) and blessings. The food was served in the basement. Geetha was stunned to see the dishes spread on the ping pong table. She could not believe one woman could cook so many dishes for so many people.

Tapathi sat in a corner and eating. The woman, who had inquired about Gowri earlier, went to her and asked, "I haven't seen your husband. How come he never comes to any party?"

Tapathi shrugged and turned away as if she was looking for somebody.

The woman continued her questions. "Is it true your son joined the army?"

Tapathi nodded.

"You are tough. If my son joined the army, I would be dead out of fear," another woman commented.

"Well, your son is doing medicine. No worries," Tapathi said.

"What is your daughter doing?" another woman asked.

"We don't know yet," Tapathi said, stood, and walked away.

As she walked away, somebody from behind said, "Remember I told you about a second marriage? That is her." The words came out loud and clear.

Geetha felt a jab at heart. It was clear why Tapathi would not go to the parties. She sighed, went to the patio door, watching the flowers and trees in the backyard.

The garden was bursting with beautiful flowers and fruits hanging from branches. Geetha pushed the screen door to a side, stepped outside, and closed it again to prevent bugs from entering the room.

Bhagyam's interest in gardening was amazing. Besides the usual Hibiscus and Jasmine, there were several rare plants. At the far end of the yard, there was a huge Magnolia tree in full bloom. The palm-size, glistening white petals with rosy tinge on the edges were quite an eye-catcher. Geetha stood there staring at those gorgeous beauties. Her heart fluttered like a child's at the sight of a favorite toy. On one side, a hibiscus plant displayed two fully blossomed flowers. The plant brought back memories of the plants in her backyard in Vijayawada. Without thinking, she extended her arm to touch them. A line from a popular song by Karunasri came to her mind. As she was humming *chivaluna komma vanchi goraanedunantalo*, [As I reached the bough and was about to clip] she heard footsteps behind, and stopped humming and turned around to see who was there.

Tapathi was standing there with a little smile and twinkles in her eyes.

Neither of them could think of a word to say. Geetha looked at the people on the other side of the patio door. The distance between her and those inside was only 10 feet, but what a huge difference in the atmosphere!

Tapathi looked at the Magnolia tree and said, "What a gorgeous flower! It, is short-lived literally, yet displays such a regal beauty."

Geetha looked at the tree again. A magnificent splash of pure white adorned the tree cozily.

"The blooming period does not last long. However, its elegance and fragrance make it unique. You remember the Sun chariot rangoli we draw in the front yard during the Sankranti festival? That is what comes to mind every time I see this tree."

"True," Geetha said.

Tapathi was quiet for a few seconds and then said, "I heard you hum. Did you learn to sing classical music?"

Geetha said, "Oh, no, only humming; they call it wedding music. You know there is no girl in our families who has not tried to learn music."

"How far you have learned?"

"Not much, really. The first few lessons like *Sarali swaraalu*, *janta swaraalu*, and *swarajathulu* [First 3 steps], That's all. My music lessons ended there. After that, I picked a little more from listening to All India Radio."

"You have a good voice. You should continue."

"Where?"

"Here."

"What do you mean here? You mean 'here under this tree? Or, here in America?"

"I can, if you like."

Geetha hesitated for a second. It would be nice to learn to sing, a good pastime. But then, did Tapathi mean it, or just it was a casual conversation? She was not sure.

Bhagyam went into the yard to ask if they wanted coffee or tea.

Tapathi and Geetha followed her back into the kitchen.

"I'll help you," Tapathi said.

"No, what's there to help? It is only boiling water and milk," Bhagyam said.

After a few minutes, Geetha looked for Tapathi.

"Where is Tapathi garu?" the woman, who had asked Tapathi about her husband earlier, asked, rolling her eyes disapprovingly.

"She left."

"Um. I don't understand. What is wrong with her? She never comes to parties; and when she does, disappears just like that. Why can't she stay and chat with us, enjoy the party? Weird, if you ask me."

Ugh, Geetha wanted to scream. She understood why Tapathi was avoiding those parties.

On the way back home, Hari asked Geetha, "So?"

"So what?"

"What do you think of the party?"

Geetha thought about it for a few seconds. "Reminded me of some people back home. They talked like that in India! I thought it would be different here," she said evasively.

Hari noticed the disappointment in her tone. "What do you mean? I thought you would like meeting the Telugu people, eating Telugu food and talking in Telugu. Wasn't it fun?"

Geetha asked him the question she had been grappling for some time. She said, "They've been here for a long time. I would think they have acquired the local manners and customs. What is all that cheap talk and annoying questions?"

He was confused. "What happened? Who said what? Did somebody say something to you?" he asked.

"No, not to me. I am talking about Tapathi garu. Some women were so cruel, I could scream. I don't know what to think of them."

Ah! He was relieved; took a few minutes to respond. "Maybe that is the reason she avoids these parties. How would I know what happens in women's quarters? She is a relative of Bhagyam garu or something like that. She goes to only their house, that too, only on special occasions. Probably, she showed up today because it was their anniversary, I guess."

"I don't understand. She was fine with me. She even offered to teach music to me."

"Well, as I've said before, it is your charming face."

Geetha kept thinking about Tapathi for a long time.

In the next three months, Geetha and Hari went to a few more parties - 4 at the homes of Indians and two at the homes of Americans. She did not see Tapathi at any of the parties.

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As she got used to the new lifestyle, she also noticed the subtle differences in the American culture and the ways in which Indians were imbibing them into their lifestyles. That was quite an education for her.

One evening, Radha called to invite them to a potluck at her house.

"Sure, we can be there. Any suggestions? What should we bring?" Hari asked.

"Geetha is still new to this kind of parties. We will let her skip it for this once. She does not need to bring anything," Radha said.

"No, no. She may be new, but I am not. I will make something," Hari said.

Radha laughed, "Okay, it is up to you. We will not hold it against you if you don't."

Hari, too, laughed and hung up. He told Geetha about the potluck at Radha's house.

Geetha lost interest in mingling with Telugu people after she had seen how some women had treated Tapathi.

"All these parties are reminding me of *vaaralu*,²⁴" she said.

"I have said it before; we feel lost here. Most of the time, we are boggled with work; no time to see other Telugu faces. This is the only way out for us to see each other. Never mind that. This crowd is different. It is not like the one you have seen at Bhagyam's home."

"Yes? How?"

²⁴ A tradition. A family offers to feed a poor Brahmin boy once a week, on a regular basis, while he is in school.

"The guests there are from the 50s and 60s era; they are well-settled in this country. Their concerns and worries are different. The friends at Radha's party are all young and bubbly. They don't care about the things those previous generation folks care about. Let's go. You can see it for yourself."

"Okay. When?"

"Next Saturday. In fact, you've met some of them. Remember? The day after you've arrived, they came to see you. Tesh, Viswam, Sumati, Ganapathi and others. You may also meet a few others you've not seen yet."

"Oh."

"Tapathi garu may join us."

"Yeah? Will she, really?" she asked, sounding skeptical.

"She is a distant relative of Radha. I think she is her aunt twice removed or something like that. Since Radha has no other relatives here, Tapathi plays the big aunt for her. Our friends at Radha's home don't care about Tapathi's personal matters. She doesn't have to deal with the dimwits like those at Bhagyam's home."

What a relief! "Alright, let's go," she said, "What should I make?"

"Radha garu said you are excused for this once since you are still a new bride."

"What new bride? I feel like I have aged two decades. How about bajji? Easy to make."

"Pepper bajji?" Hari said.

Geetha shook her head, an emphatic 'no'.

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Geetha and Hari arrived at Radha's place by 5:30; they were the first to arrive there.

It was a 3-bedroom ranch on the far east side of the town. Usually, houses in that area were cheaper than other neighborhoods. It defined one's social status, Geetha heard. She liked it. It was small but tastefully decorated. A 24x36 picture of Lord Venkateswara and a couple of kids' photos adorned the walls. Furniture was speaking of their modest lifestyle. In all, the look and feel of the rooms were pleasant.

By 6:30, all guests arrived. Geetha made potato bajji. Sumati brought drinks. Tesh brought a cake, and his professor brought mung beans dal. Radha made fried rice, white rice, sambar, raita, and eggplant curry. Pulihara was Bhagyam's speciality. Nobody else would even think of it, if she joined the party. Other items like chips, crackers, cheese, and drinks were also set on the table.

Soon, the guests grabbed a plate, helped themselves with the items, and continued chatting. Hari was right. They all were in their early 20s and 30s, except Bhagyam and her husband Hanumayya. They all were talking noisily about movies, local politics, and joking about their professors and/or bosses, as the case might be. The cost of education, life after retirement, and children's marriages were not on their minds. They were there just to enjoy the day; not a care in the world.

Bhagyam garu struggled to mingle with them. Hanumayya settled down in a corner with professor.

"Dal is super. I want your recipe," Tesh said to his professor, holding the beer bottle in one hand and the dinner plate in the other.

Professor, staring into his plate, said, "Let's see. I took one cup of shelled mung beans, soaked for 2 hours, and cooked in the pressure cooker for 3 whistles." The narration took 10 minutes. Tesh listened to him enthusiastically, which looked affected to Geetha.

Measurements and the timings never figured into her preparation. She would have said, "Cook a handful of mung beans with a pinch of salt and throw in some cumin seeds; add the tempering." The professor skipped the tempering part. He had learned it from a book by a North Indian. Tempering was specific to South Indian dishes. To her, it was amusing. That probably was part of the game, she told herself.

Bhagyam asked Geetha, "What did you bring?"

"Bajji."

"I had one. My husband hates potluck dinners. He says we should make the dishes ourselves when we invite people to our home. We are old-timers, you know."

In their village, they were like royalty. The entire village was at their beck and call. Her father settled disputes. That status was obvious in her words, behavior, and actions. She could cook for 30 people and the number of items would fill one ping-pong table. She always cooked the dishes the same day. She said it would not be appropriate to offer a day-old food to God.

They all finished eating by the time Tapathi arrived. Radha took her hand lovingly and said, "Come in. Glad you came," and led her to the dining table.

Geetha was delighted to see her. Tapathi went to her and said, "Radha told me you were coming," turned to Radha and said, "I am not hungry; late lunch."

"Have a bite, please. I was hoping you'd test my expertise in culinary art."

"I am sure they are delicious."

Radha took her into the dining room. Tapathi served herself a little just to taste and returned to Geetha.

"You told me you would learn music. You didn't call me. Why?"

"I did not say I'll learn. You said you'll teach."

"You didn't say you will not learn."

Both had a hearty laugh.

Geetha noticed Tapathi was using second person informal singular form of you, *nuvvu*, to address her. She felt closer to Tapathi. Chatting with her thus, freely and openly, made her very happy; it was like old times, back home in Vijayawada or Guntur.

"I don't have your phone number," Geetha said.

"I thought Hari had it. Okay, here it is, note down."

After a few minutes, Bhagyam and Hanumayya left, saying they had something to take care of early next morning. Tapathi followed suit. Before leaving, she held Geetha's hand, squeezed it gently, and said, "Call me, I'll be waiting." It was inviting. Geetha was pleased.

Hari, Pani, Ganapathi, Sumati and Viswam sat down to play cards. Radha and Geetha moved to a corner.

It was past midnight by the time Hari and Geetha got home. That was the first time in her life to be awake or away from home past midnight!

Hari had to go to a conference in Philadelphia. He was worried about his wife being alone. Could she manage by herself for a week while he was gone? Or, should he ask Tesh or Ganapathi to stay at his place while he was gone? He asked her.

Geetha could not answer one way or the other. Hari was right; she had the same question. She had never been alone, ever. Sounded unbelievable, but it would be impossible to be alone in India. There were always people all around wherever she went, at home and outside. Hari might try and not get anybody to help her out; they all had their jobs and other activities. No different from living in the woods, she thought.

Hari took her silence as an assent and said, "I will ask Tesh or Ganapathi. They are busy with their jobs in the daytime. But one of them may come in the evening and be here at night. That is the most scary time, right?"

"I guess," she said.

After he left, Geetha was depressed. Was she not alone even when he was in town? He was never home during the daytime. How is this different from all the other days? No, it is not the same. She kept pacing up and down in the apartment all day. In the evening, Tesh called and said he would be home late and she should not wait for him.

Hari called her as soon as he landed in Philadelphia again during the lunch break and told her he would call later in the evening again. She said okay, okay during the entire conversation.

Tesh came home at 10:00 pm. Geetha was glad to see him; she greeted him with a smile and set the table for two.

Tesh felt bad. "Oh, no. I have told you not to wait for me. You should not have waited for me," he said.

Geetha was equally insistent that it was no big deal and that she was not hungry, anyway.

Next morning, she went into the kitchen; it was still dark. Geetha was preparing batter for rava dosa [Cream of wheat pancake]. Tesh went into the kitchen, said 'hello' to Geetha, and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Did you sleep well?" Geetha asked. Yes, he had a great sleep, he said, and apologized. He had to rush to work.

"I am making rava dosa," she said.

"Ah, rava dosa! I love it, but I have to go. I am already late for work. Please, don't treat me as a special guest. Hari is like a brother to me; we are family," he apologized again and left.

Geetha was alone again. It did not feel like he was home at all. She could not understand the point of 'his being' at home, if he was hardly home. Not that she held it against him; but, just that feeling of somebody was there for her, was not there. Getting through each day was a struggle. She did not feel like eating lunch.

Hari called. He asked her if she had lunch. She said yes. She wanted to pour her heart out, but did not. What's the point, lately the phrase kept coming to her mind over and over again.

She called Tapathi.

"Hello."

"Me, Geetha."

"Hi. I was thinking of calling you."

"Really?"

"Really. What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"What do you do usually at this hour?"

"Good question. I don't know what I do. Just sit around, I suppose. I do nothing, yet the day goes by," Geetha said, laughing a dull laugh.

"Come over. I haven't had lunch yet. We can chat, eating lunch."

"Sure, on my way," Geetha answered quickly, as if she was waiting for that invitation. She hung up, took her handbag, and left.

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Tapathi's house was on the outskirts of the town. It was a small house, but gave a homey feeling with flower, fruit, and vegetable plants.

Tapathi was waiting at the door. She went to Geetha as she parked the car and got out, and extended her warm hand. It was a feeling of reuniting with a childhood friend for both of them;2 totally different from the feeling of seeing a person she had met just a few weeks back.

"What would you like to have for lunch? upma or rava dosa?"

"I don't mind rava dosa if you throw in some cashew."

"Cashew in rava dosa? Never heard of it but, if that is what you want, that is what you will get. Don't blame me if it does not turn out right."

Tapathi prepared dosa, while Geetha sat there and watched her. She served rava dosa and red chilli chutney on two plates, handed one plate to Geetha, and said, "Let's go."

"Whereto?" asked Geetha, looking confused.

"To my Brindavan(A famous botanical garden in Mysore). We are having a party."

She brought a blanket and spread it under a maple tree at the far end of the yard. It reminded Geetha of the lunches she and Satyam used to have during her college days. A thin film of moisture filled her eyes.

Geetha asked, "You are so friendly with me. How come you've got the bad name 'unfriendly and demure like a lone bird'?"

Tapathi laughed. "Are those words yours, or borrowed from an Internet pundit?"

"Well, the words are in the dictionary; I stole the idea. Tell me if it is good; I will make it mine," Geetha said jokingly.

Tapathi laughed and said, "Good one."

Geetha looked away as she said, "It is just like old times," without being specific.

Tapathi did not understand what she meant, but let it pass. Looking around, she said, "True, especially these two months, July and August. Mild, warm sunshine makes you drowsy and you won't know where you are; it could be India or America."

Both were silent for a while, enjoying each other's company.

Tapathi said, "You never told me how you ended up here. What brought you two together? Is he a cousin or something?"

"No relationship. Airlines brought us together," Geetha laughed.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know. My friend Satyam has a theory. She says, usually, our young men refuse to get married while in India, but after spending a year or two in America, rush back to India to get married. I am one of those discoveries. Even more amusing to me is, our people are so stuck on auspicious days for marriage; but, for the NRI grooms, they can always find a pundit who could find an auspicious day to fit this NRI schedule," Geetha said with a crafty smile.

"You sound like you did not like it. Did that bother you?"

"No, it is not that. I am just being frivolous. In fact, my mother said I did not have to agree to the wedding, if I had doubts."

Tapathi decided not to harp on the subject anymore. She knew only too well how many other factors could play a role in such situations. She started slowly, "Earlier you've asked me why I don't mix with the people here. At first, like all others, I too ached for our people, the sound of our language, and the taste of our dishes. In fact, it sounds silly now. When Emanuel asked me to go to the States with him, he said, 'unlike in India, people in America respect each other's privacy, and that nobody pricks me like crows.'"

"Who is Emanuel?"

"Oh, haven't I told you about him? He was the superhero who saved me from our gossip-mongering social nitwits and transported me to this heaven."

Geetha noticed a vague streak of pain and kept quiet. Her heart cringed. One of those times when no words are necessary for one heart to reach out to the other.

Tapathi resumed, "That is a long story; actually two. How I ended up here is one, and why I would not mix with the local community is another."

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Tapathi recounted her story.

She was born in a town called Annavaram. The family had a small house and a strip of land on the outskirts of the town. Her parents married her to her maternal uncle Chengalrayudu at 15. She was a mother of 2 by 18. Chengalrayudu was excited about marriage but would not accept the responsibilities that came with it. He eloped with Tapathi's younger sister, 14. Her mother was heartbroken. It hit her hard; she could not understand how to deal with the situation: on one hand her own brother, and, on the other, her two daughters set against each other. The entire situation was very painful and humiliating. After a few months, Chengalrayudu wrote to Tapathi asking her and the kids to join him in Chennai; he said he would take care of them. He also said the two sisters could live happily under one roof.

Tapathi was enraged and rejected his humiliating offer. Her eldest uncle Raghupathi, Chengalrayudu's older brother, heard about the situation, and was angry about his brother's outrageous act. He went to Annavaram and promised to take care of Tapathi and the kids. He took them to Visakhapatnam, With his help, she got her high school diploma. She also finished her teacher training course and became a teacher in a local school. She had learned to sing from her mother and grandmother. That also came in handy. She gave music lessons to kids in the neighborhood in the evenings, which helped her to earn extra cash. In a few years, she was able to support

herself and her children, with the help of her kind uncle. She moved into the outhouse of Gurunatham, a local businessman.

Visakhapatnam was a big city, but some people still appeared to live in the stone age. There was no dearth for gossip-mongers. They often confronted her in temples or stores and would tell her, "I saw your husband with another woman," "He was at a party", and so on, as if she was dying to know about his activities. That was annoying to her; so, she stayed away from them, and chose to keep her life private, as much as she could.

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Gurunatham was a reputable businessman. Because of his business dealings, foreigners visited him. Emanuel was a businessman, who had dealings with Gurunatham. On one such occasion, he was in Visakhapatnam for 3 weeks, but most of the time, he traveled to other places like Chennai, Bombay, and Delhi. He hardly stayed ten days in town.

Nevertheless, he spent some time with Tapathi. In that short period, he had developed an interest in her and her activities. Gurunatham told Emanuel that Tapathi was smart and good-natured; and that reinforced Emanuel's interest in her.

While Tapathi gave music lessons to young women, Emanuel sat a few feet away from her and listened. After a few days, he asked her to sing her favorite song and listened with great interest.

"You have such a beautiful voice. Do you do concerts?"

"No, I am not that talented."

That was about it as far as their friendship went.

One day, she was sitting on the front porch, helping her son, Vasu, with his math homework.

Emanuel came and sat by the staircase. Tapathi saw him curiously, smiled, and asked if he needed something.

"No, nothing. Just I have some free time, and so, thought I would visit with you. I will not disturb you. You go ahead with your work," he said.

He was a perfect gentleman, always; never said an inappropriate word or behaved in an unseemly manner. Vasu finished his homework, closed the books, and asked her, "May I go to Gopi's home to play, Mom?"

Tapathi nodded yes.

Silence for a few minutes. Seemed like Emanuel had something on his mind. She did not know how to approach. She said, "How are you?"

"I am fine. Thank you. How are you doing?" he said.

It was awkward for both of them; both were silent for a few minutes.

"How did your work go well in Chennai? Got it done successfully?" Tapathi said, again breaking the silence.

"Yes, it went well," Emanuel said. Then, added slowly, "I am leaving on Sunday."

"Back to the States?"

"Yes."

Tapathi said, "Oh!" It was obvious; he wanted to say something, but she could not figure out what it was.

"I need to talk to you," Emanuel said.

"Okay."

She was quite used to this phrase, "Can I talk to you?" At first, she was puzzled, wondered, but never actually asked about what it was, or why, specifically to her. Now, she concluded he was one of them; they all would want just to talk, and her presence was nominal. They picked her since she sat there and listened to them with mouth shut and eyes open. It did not matter to them whether she listened or not.

Emanuel said, looking straight into her face, "It is not about me."

Tapathi shook her head.

"Gurunatham garu told me about your situation," he said, again watching keenly how she would take it.

She did not ask what Gurunatham garu had said. She had a general idea of what he might have said. She was not surprised; that was no news to her.

Emanuel took a few minutes to rearrange the words in his mind. "Come to America with me."

What? Tapathi shook up, as if a lightning rod struck her. She stared at him to see if he was joking. No, he was dead serious. He meant it wholeheartedly.

Emanuel continued, "Gurunatham told me your story."

"What story?"

"Sorry. He said you were married to your maternal uncle and that he eloped with your younger sister."

Tapathi shirked, was annoyed; she could not speak one word.

"He said people around here are talking gossip and pestering you, bringing up stories about your husband and the little sister who eloped with him. I am sorry. I mean, I am not saying this because I am sorry for you. I am sorry it happened. All I am saying is it might be in your best interest to get out of here. Also, you need to think about the kids. I am sure they also are facing harassment. As they grow older, it gets harder. Gurunatham cares about you and wants you to be happy. I told him about my thought and he agreed it is a good idea. For some inexplicable reason, I just want to help you, nothing else. I assure you I have no ulterior motive. I will give you in writing if you will, that I will make no demands on you, none whatsoever."

Tapathi took sometime to recover from the shock and said in a soft voice, "I have to think."

"Of course. Think, but there is not much time. I have to leave in two days."

"I want to talk to my uncle, Raghupathi. He is the oldest in our family and we always consult him. He has been there for us after my father died."

"Sure. Talk to your uncle and Gurunatham. As I said, I have no other motive. I will take you America, help you with finding a job, and settling down there. That is all. I will not interfere in anyway; not in any decisions you make or the manner in which you choose to live."

"Let me think."

"Hope you will make the right decision," Emanuel said and left.

Tapathi thought hard about the consequences of her moving to America with an American. What did she know about him? Nothing. She had seen him a few times during his business dealings with Gurunatham garu, but nothing more. Gurunatham

had said Emanuel was an honest man and doing business with him was always a pleasure. Was that enough for her to go with him halfway around the world?

And what would her family and friends say? That was not hard to imagine. Their advice, suggestions, and admonitions would go like this: Are you crazy? How can you trust a man, that too, from another country? What do you know about him?

And then, there were other comments, "What a great opportunity to go to America! And you are sitting here, counting stars? If you don't go, tell me. I will go with him."

"It is not like you are moving to the next township or next state. If things do not work out, you cannot say 'I don't like it here',' and jump on a train to go home."

"My cousin married her brother's friend. He took her to America, and dumped her for a white woman within a year. Can you imagine her own brother's friend doing that?"

She went over all those and a few other scenarios and decided there was no point in asking others. In the final analysis, there was only one thought, and nobody else would know better than herself. It must be *her* decision. Obviously, there would be some issues, even hardships, but she had been facing hardships in her town too, she told herself.

Tapathi took him up on his offer, disregarding the warnings, chiding and threats by her family and friends. The one line that stuck predominantly in her mind was his. He said, "Things could not be any worse than what you are facing here now." He was right. A few days back, her son Vasu had refused to go to school. He did not tell why, but Tapathi could guess. It had been quite a struggle for her to convince him to go to school again. Her daughter was still young but soon she would grow up and then, she would face even harsher treatment from heartless neighbors and schoolmates, no doubt.

Her uncle Raghupathi gave his blessings wholeheartedly. Her mother was apprehensive but agreed. "I am happy as long as you are happy wherever you are. Just be careful," she said.

The following day, Tapathi and Emanuel were married.

Emanuel kept his word. After arriving in America, he helped her to get training in data processing on computer and get a job in a bank. Her son, Vasu, joined the army, got an Engineering degree, and settled in Minneapolis, married his colleague, Lisa; she was also an engineer. Daughter, Sudha, got her B.Com degree and joined a bank in Houston. Her husband was the manager of the same bank.

Tapathi stayed in Emanuel's house and took care of it while he traveled on business. Whenever he was home, he inquired about her and her children's well-being, and if she needed anything. He was always kind and true to his word.

One day, he sat her down and told her he had received a great opportunity in a major company in Germany, and he decided to settle there for good. He told her she could stay in his house, take care of the repairs and mortgage; and it was hers, he said. He had the necessary papers drawn by a good lawyer, he added.

The news shook her from the roots up. She felt like the branch she was sitting on comfortably was cut off, without a warning. She was also surprised that he would leave a house to her. People could give a ride, a saree, and maybe a car, but the entire house? She could not believe it, and said the same to Emanuel. He said he had made sure that she was well-provided as promised; now she and her children settled, and it

was time for him to move on. He also added that it would benefit him better to give it away than sell. A savvy businessman with a big heart, she thought.

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Geetha sat, listening to her story, with steadfast eyes. She could not believe Tapathi, who always looked calm and collected, hid such a gruesome story at heart. Her respect for Tapathi doubled.

Tapathi ignored her friend's reaction, and continued, "Remember I told you Emanuel's comment about people in this country? He said here people would not bother me with uncomfortable questions. At the time, I thought so, too. But, now I understand he missed a chunk of the population that contradicted his argument. The social conditions, he thought did not exist in America, is not true. I think it is everywhere. The lucky ones escape it, knowingly or unknowingly. We just have to accept it as human nature."

Geetha thought for a few seconds and said, "Maybe he was talking about Americans. He may not have Indians in America."

"I don't think so. I have such people among Americans. He did not see in the circles he moved, I would assume."

Tapathi said, "Let's go in," and got up, with her plate and one dish. Geetha followed her with her plate and the other dish. They put the dishes in the sink. Tapathi poured water into the coffee-maker, added coffee grounds, and sat at the dining table. Geetha sat across from her and asked, "So, did you ever regret your decision?"

"No. I can't deny I have a good life here and he was the reason that happened. I am just saying there are always some people whom we cannot tolerate."

"You mean our people?"

"I am not saying all of them, but most of them, yes. Actually, there are some Americans, too, who ask uncomfortable questions. Questions like 'Why did you come here?', 'When will you go back?' and 'Is your marriage arranged?' I don't like them, but they think it is okay. When I told them I did not want to talk about those things, they would say, 'How would I get to know you if I don't ask?' Finally, I decided it was in human nature; not just one trait in one culture. Just curiosity."

Geetha took a few minutes to absorb the truth in her comments and said, "Is it possible to get to know a person fully by asking a few questions ever?"

"No, I don't think so, either. I believe they ask because they are curious about our culture; they try to make sense of our uncanny customs and traditions. The other reason could be they just do not know what to talk. But, our people should know better. That is what bothers me. Our people develop a unique mentality after arriving here. Time alone is not enough to understand this reinvented culture. It is hard to understand them without a particular type of experiences."

"I have had some experiences, too."

"No, not that. I am talking about a different kind of experience. One has to be clever to avoid such experiences. You know, at first, I was very friendly with all people, and was helping whoever needed help. Maybe it is because of the help I had received from Emanuel. Maybe I thought I was repaying his debt. In time, however, I've got to understand that there are several layers within our community. They are not as obvious as in our country. Nobody admits them, either. They keep chirping the same old song, 'we are all Telugu people', 'we should cherish our culture', 'we love

our language', 'we love our land', on and on. However, the economic status plays a big role in all these relationships. Hard to see their real colors. They all form into groups based on their jobs, status, caste, the towns or cities they had come from, and the schools they had graduated from. One must have a special knack for merging into one of those groups and settle comfortably. Consider it a gift, bestowed only on a few people," Tapathi said with a sardonic smile.

Geetha took a deep breath and stood, "it is getting late. I had better go. Hari will call soon and he freaks out if I am not home."

Tapathi nodded and followed her to the door.

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After Emanuel moved to Germany leaving the home to her, Tapathi developed an interest in art. Her colleague, James was a part-time art teacher. He offered to teach her on weekends.

In general, Tapathi had never been a party girl. However, she invited occasionally a few good friends, meaning those who did not criticize her lifestyle and who took her for who she was.

One such occasion occurred on one Sunday. While she was making a list of the invitees, she remembered Gayatri; met her at one of the parties at Bhagyam's house. She also had learned that Gayatri, like herself, avoided parties, and for a good reason.

Gayatri and her husband, Somanlingam had three children, two boys and a girl. He had come to the U.S. 10 years back pursuing a doctoral degree in chemistry. Unfortunately, that did not go well. His professor was not supportive, and he lost his scholarship. He drove a cab for a while and, eventually, opened his own garage. Gayatri learned to type and got a job as a teller in a bank. Together, they managed to have a decent life.

Their two sons were doing well in school, but it was a different story with their daughter, Chitra. She was mentally challenged. Her parents did not realize that until they had sent her to school. On the second day, they received a phone call from school. They were told that Chitra was not mixing with other students; she should be evaluated by a specialist. They also suggested that she should probably be sent to a special ed school.

That was beyond their means. They kept her at home and changed their schedules so that one of them was always at home and attended to her needs. They were tired of umpteen stupid questions and suggestions for their daughter at parties. So they avoided them. Under unavoidable circumstances, they left Chitra in their sons' care.

Tapathi invited Gayatri and told her to bring Chitra also. Tapathi knew their predicament. In a peculiar way, she identified herself with them, since she also was unable to deal with similar stupid questions and suggestions.

Gayatri was apprehensive at first, but agreed to go to the party. She had some idea of the rough times Tapathi had been through and, for that reason, thought she was kindly disposed toward their daughter.

"We will be there. Please, don't be upset if Chitra says something or does something wrong," Gayatri said.

"Not at all. I give you my word. I am sure nobody else would, either. I am inviting only nice, friendly people," she assured Gayatri.

Gayatri and Somalingam went to the party along with Chitra. Tapathi welcomed them with a smile.

It was a small party. She invited her art teacher, James, a couple of her colleagues, and Geetha.

They all sat down in the living room and chatting. Chitra was walking around. Gayatri called her to come back, but Chitra did not listen; she kept walking around. Tapathi said it was okay, let her walk around; she did not mind.

Then Chitra was out of sight and Gayatri was nervous, got up quickly and went looking for her. She went into the kitchen and asked Tapathi if she had seen Chitra.

It was not a big house. They found Chitra soon enough. She was in the den by the canvas on which Tapathi was painting.

Chitra was dabbling with the brush on the canvas.

Gayatri panicked. She went to Chitra, yanked the brush from her hand, and slapped her. She kept saying sorry, so sorry, to Tapathi again and again.

Tapathi said it was no big deal, went closer to the canvas and looked at Chitra's work with curiosity. She thought Chitra's work was interesting.

She called James and showed him what Chitra had done.

Gayatri was confused. She thought Tapathi was asking James to evaluate the damage Chitra might have done.

"I am so sorry, really really sorry. I will pay for the canvas, Tapathi garu," she said again, with a sinking heart.

"Oh, no, Gayatri garu, don't worry. It's okay. No, I am not upset, really. I think your daughter is talented. James also thinks so."

"She is talented, no doubt," James said.

Somalingam came into the room, suspecting something bad might have happened there.

Chitra was sitting in a corner, curled up and sobbing.

Tapathi went to her and consoled her, "It is okay. Don't worry. You did nothing wrong. Actually, you have a good job on that art piece."

"Yes, she is good. You should consider sending her to art school," James suggested to Somalingam.

Both Gayatri and Somalingam were relieved there was no problem, and were happy to know their daughter was gifted. Nevertheless, they were dispirited as well.

"Thank you, James. Sending her to an art school is out of the question, beyond our means," Somalingam said politely.

Thus, Chitra's gift had come to light on that day.

Tapathi thought about Chitra, and her talent. She discussed it with James and asked him if he could help her.

James said he would be happy to teach Chitra himself. "No, I will not charge her," he said. Tapathi was surprised. She mentioned it casually, but no expectation of help from him.

She thanked him wholeheartedly. "You don't know how much it means to me," she said.

"No big deal," James said with a smile.

Tapathi conveyed the wonderful news to Gayatri. Gayatri was happy to hear that; she thanked both of them and said it still might not be feasible. James was too far from their home. Chitra would not be able to go by herself, and neither she nor her father had the time to drive Chitra to James' place. Their work schedule would not permit it.

Tapathi was disappointed and conveyed the message to James. "Oh, no. That's not a problem. I have another student in that area. I can stop by their place prior to my other job, and teach her for 45 minutes," he said.

Tapathi jumped with joy. The schedule was set for Tuesdays.

"I can never repay your debt, not in the next seven lives," Gayatri said, with tearful eyes and holding Tapathi's hands.

"No, Gayatri garu, don't say that. I am glad it worked out. Glad her talent is recognized," Tapathi said.

Following Tuesday, James went to Gayatri's home and started the lessons. At first, Gayatri stayed home during the classes. After a few weeks, she felt good about James's demeanor and dismissed her own fears.

Chitra showed signs of improvement in six months.

Her mother, father and Tapathi were elated beyond words. James also was happy about his new student's improvement.

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Time does not go by smoothly forever. If it does, there is no story.

One day, Gayatri left for work after James had arrived, and she returned home, as usual. She did not find Chitra at home and became nervous. She called her neighbors, friends and everybody she could think of, and asked if they had seen Chitra. Nobody had seen her, nor they could think of any place she might have gone to.

Gayatri called Tapathi. Tapathi was terrified. What could have happened? She told Gayatri she also would try to find out what might have happened. She went to James' section and learned that James took a leave of absence for two weeks; he was gone, nobody knew where to. Her head started spinning. The thought of James taking Chitra away to some unknown place was unthinkable. But, that was the only thought that was coming back to her again and again. She should share her thought with Gayatri, but how? How could she say it? But then, how could she be quiet, as if nothing happened?

She picked up the phone, held it for a couple of minutes, and then hung up; better to say it in person. She got into the car and headed toward Gayatri's home. All the way, she struggled to find the words to convey the message. Not a single word came to her mind; one of those occasions when language fails hopelessly. Possibly, Gayatri would blame her for it, and Tapathi could not blame her in all good conscience. She brought him into their lives. She must share the responsibility. Tapathi arrived at Gayatri's home without a clear idea of what she would say to Gayatri.

Gayatri was in the living room sobbing. Somalingam was making phone calls to relatives and friends. They were hoping against hope that James had taken her to the mall or park, and would bring her back soon.

Gayatri hit the roof as soon as she saw Tapathi. "This is all because of you. If you had not introduced him to us, we would not be in this plight now," she yelled.

Tapathi had no answer. There was some truth in what Gayatri had said. All the good that had happened so far was wiped out in one second. Ironic! Tapathi tried to calm her down as she said, "I've made some inquiries at the office. James took a leave of absence for 2 weeks, I heard. I am thinking maybe he took her to an art gallery or something."

"Shouldn't he ask us first?" Gayatri grumbled.

"Yes, he should have," Tapathi mumbled.

Their neighbor, Henry, came, expressed his sympathies, and suggested they should file a complaint with the police.

Somalingam said, "We live quietly, minding our own business. I don't even know where the police station is. I don't know what questions they would ask, and what I should to say."

Henry offered to go with him to the police station and help him. Somalingam nodded and followed him to his car.

At the police station. The police officer said they should wait 24 hours before filing a report. He also suggested the girl might have gone to a friend's place or run away.

Somalingam said his daughter was not like that; she had no friends and she would never run away.

Henry intervened, did some tough talk, and convinced the officer to take the report. He took the report alright but did nothing. It was not a high-profile case. Chitra was one of the hundreds of no-name kids that disappeared every day. There was no big reward. The case went cold.

Tapathi received an earful of accusations: We should never have trusted you; You should have known better; maybe, you do know what kind of person he is; what is in it for you?

The accusations and name calling continued by other Indians in town as well.

Tapathi had no choice but to be quiet. She stayed away from them. She did not, however, remain passive. She promised Gayatri she would do everything in her power to find Chitra and bring her home.

Four months went by. One day, Tapathi received a postcard from James. The gist of it was, Chitra's brothers were jealous of her getting so much attention and were bothering her. He was not sure whether the parents were aware of it, but Chitra was unhappy and getting restless. He ended the letter saying, "In hindsight, maybe I should have talked to her parents or you, but at the time, the only solution I could think of was to remove her from that horrible situation. Chitra is fine. I am fine. No worries."

He had taken her to New York, sold Chitra's artwork on sidewalks and to small stores. James did not give his phone number or address in his letter.

Tapathi stopped for a minute. The narrative pulled her spirits down. Geetha listened to the story and said, "That's good. She has a good life now."

"But nobody thought so. They attacked me every which way. In their opinion, I had no morals since I had married a second time; I set a bad example for the young

girls in town. They all went on questioning my judgment; would I do so, if she was my daughter? What was in it for me? Did James offer a reward to me? They even blamed it on his entire race; and predicted he would use her as long as he could, and then throw her to the dogs."

Geetha was flabbergasted. Unbelievable. "Did they really talk like that?"

A lifeless smile spread on Tapathi's lips. "You don't know how cruel people could be. Yes, they all act and talk like they are civilized. Some of them spoke politely, but the message could not be any more clear. That is why I stayed away from them. Lucky me, this house is far away from town; I could enjoy my peace of mind."

"Shouldn't the parents be happy? The girl is happy wherever she is, isn't it?"

"That's what makes me sick. Instead of feeling good about her present situation, they continued to imagine the things that may never happen, and weep; it was almost like they enjoyed in wallowing. Then they turn on me and curse me for introducing James to them."

"Okay, let's set it aside for a moment. Tell me what do you think? Do you think she is happy?"

"Why? You want to blame me, too?"

Geetha laughed heartily, clearing the air.

"I don't know. Only Chitra can answer that," Tapathi said.

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Hari got busier at work, which meant spending less time at home. His travels increased considerably. At the same rate, Geetha's meetings with Tapathi increased. They got closer. Geetha started learning computer skills, in addition to music lessons.

Between his busy work and her avocations, neither of them realized the growing distance between them; a vague shadow was spreading between them.

One day Hari came home early; his face was pale. He looked wiped out.

"What happened?" Geetha asked with concern.

"Lost my job," Hari said weakly as he threw himself on the sofa.

He said, "It was not a total surprise. There have been discussions for some time about revitalizing the office. At first, they told us that they were planning to expand the company; it was in progress for a while. Then, they said they were merging with another company. In the process, some employees were handed pink slips. Today, I got mine."

Geetha sat by his side and took his hand into hers. No words. So what? Who knows? You may land a better job; this is not the end of the world. You have been a great asset to the company; they may call you back; she wanted to say, but not one word came out of her mouth.

Plenty of inspiring words were hovering in her mind, none would come out of her mouth. In her heart of hearts, she knew the words would sound empty.

Hari never talked about his job with her. He asked her what she wanted, but never talked about what was happening in his life. Now, she was at a loss for words.

Hari was on the phone for over an hour and stood. "Don't you worry about it. I can find another job. I am going out, will be back soon," he said and ran out the door.

Geetha was perplexed, could not think straight. Sat for a while, trying to make sense of what had happened, and then she called Tapathi. Tapathi listened and assured her Hari, with his qualifications and experience, could find another job in no time; don't worry, she said. Vapid words; they meant nothing to either of them. To both of them, it became clear how empty the words would sound in real life; there are really no words that could comfort, when one is stuck in a terrifying situation.

She hung up the phone, and sat there for a long time imagining various scenarios. Hari returned around 9:00 p.m. He did not mention where he went and she did not ask. She thought he might have gone to a friend to vent his frustration, just like she talked to Tapathi.

Hari was trying hard to find another job. He contacted everyone he knew as well as those whom he had barely known. Also, called those recommended by others.

Geetha cut down her conversations with Tapathi. She wanted to talk, but could not think of what to say. She did not feel like going out either. She knew there was nothing she could do by staying home, but there was nothing she could do by going out either. Life came to a screeching halt for her.

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Geetha was going over financial papers. She found a canceled check written to Sumati. There was no sign of getting it back.

She asked Hari. He said he had loaned the money to Sumati sometime back, but did not remember the details.

"Did she pay it back?"

"I don't remember."

"There was no record it was paid back."

"Maybe she forgot. Ask her," he said and left the room.

Geetha was not comfortable with herself asking Sumati, but decided to go ahead and ask. They were going through hard times; nothing wrong with asking her for the money she owed them. Two thousand dollars could certainly come in handy.

Geetha called Sumati. Sumati was cheerful and chatty until the matter of money came up.

As soon as Geetha mentioned it, Sumati became uptight; she was annoyed. "Did Hari tell you to ask for the money?" she growled.

Geetha was stunned. She could not even imagine it was possible to differentiate between a husband and a wife, much less by a friend.

"No, that is not it, Sumathi garu! I came across this loan while balancing the checkbook. We have only one account," she said apologetically.

Sumathi did not hold back. "Give the phone to Hari. I will ask him what games he is playing," she gnarled.

Geetha was taken aback. "Sorry if I offended you. He is not home. I will tell him to call you after he came home. You two can settle it yourselves," she said and hung up.

Later in the evening, Geetha related the story to Hari. He too was surprised; could not understand why Sumathi spoke so harshly. After that, Sumathi kept her distance from Geetha at parties and other places.

A few months went by. One day, Radha saw Geetha at a grocery store. She asked why Geetha did not attend Sumati's wedding. Sumati and Tesh got married at a temple in Chicago the previous week.

"Oh! I did not know about it. We were not invited," Geetha said with a grim smile.

Geetha felt bad about it for quite a while. She had no problem with herself being left out. But why leave out Hari? They had been friends for years; did it not count? It made no sense. Befuddled, she called Tapatih for a few comforting words.

"That is the way friends are here," Tapatih said in a matter-of-fact tone. She added, "I cannot explain why they did not invite you to their wedding. But the one thing I can say is, people change after arriving here. On one hand, their faces light up like fireworks when they see a Telugu face; they feel a strong pull toward our folks; they want to bond together. On the other, they want to assimilate with local people, which means keeping distance from our folks and watching for their interests only. On one hand, their privacy is precious. They protect it like a hawk; on the other hand, do not hesitate to tell all kinds of gossip about others. All I am saying is, most of us become an odd mix of incongruent parts after arriving here. Want to have it both ways."

"What do you mean by an odd mix of incongruent parts?"

"You know, back home, there is no such thing as privacy. We all speak whatever is on our mind whenever and wherever. Everything is in the open. That in itself is a therapy for us. Of course, I don't understand the concept of privacy here either. They are so particular about privacy, but there is so much out in the open. Internet gives away so much of your private matters, journalists pursue celebrities, and dig into their private lives, in the name of 'people have a right to know'. Weird."

Geetha spent a lot of time trying to figure out Sumathi's psyche and her behavior. She found no comfort in Tapatih's words. She was perpetually confused and dismayed by Sumathi's attitude. She could not shake the feeling of being lost. Finally, she grabbed a paper and started jotting down her thoughts. She did not stop, not even for lunch.

She finished the story by 2:00. It was 6 pages long. She read it a few times over and again. Looked alright. Yes, she was satisfied with it. But would somebody else think the same? She called Tapatih, confirmed she was home, and went there.

"I wrote a story. Tell me what you think," Geetha gave the sheaf of papers to Tapatih.

"I didn't know you write stories."

"I did not, either. Don't use plural. This is the only story I've written. Just to clear my head, I suppose. I couldn't take it anymore, I mean, the heartache. Read it and tell me what you think. I will make coffee," she said, walking toward the kitchen.

She finished reading it in five minutes. She went into the kitchen and said, "This is good. Hard to believe this is your first story."

"Really? You think so?"

"Really, yes. I mean it. Actually, that is how it happens. When something pierces through the heart, the pain seeps into the pen, and readers respond at the same level. Unlike the usual run-of-the-mill stories, the stories written with honesty reach the readers."

The two sat down with coffee cups and fine-tuned it. Around 8:00 pm, Hari called Tapathi and asked playfully, "Any sign of Geetha coming home today?"

Tapathi looked at Geetha. They broke into a big laugh.

"Come on over. We are celebrating the birth of Geetha as a writer."

He said okay and came within a few minutes.

"I did not know you write stories?" he said to Geetha.

"I did not, either. This is the first. Just felt like scribbling something," Geetha dismissed it as no big deal.

Hari read the story and understood how much Sumati's behavior hurt Geetha. Geetha did not use the real names and places in the story. She skillfully crafted the story of a person who was struggling with the cultural conflict in a new environment after leaving behind hometown and close relatives. He could not help but appreciate Geetha's keen sense of commitment.

All the three finished eating and chatting. Geetha felt good about it. She saw Hari feel relaxed, for the first time after losing his job; and, credited it to her story; felt like her story had accomplished something. She looked at Tapathi. Tapathi nodded; she understood.

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It was over a month since Hari had lost his job. For Geetha, it was more like a few centuries. It was getting harder for both of them.

One day, Tapathi called Geetha and asked, "There is an opening in my bank, a small job. Would you like to try for it?"

Ho ho ho, a job! Job for me? "Job for me, really?" she screamed, almost.

"Yes, a job, yes, for you. It is a small job, but I thought it might give you some respite from your present situation. And it is also an opportunity to put your computer skills to use."

Geetha wanted to jump for joy. Her enthusiasm fizzled away in a few seconds. "I don't know what Hari would say," she said. He was looking for a job, but a job fell into her lap! Strange!?

"Yes, ask him and let me know."

She asked Hari. He said good. That was all; confusing for her.

She felt cornered. *Is it proper for her to take a job while he is unemployed? Would he feel embarrassed?* But then again, she remembered all those days when she went nuts for sitting at home doing nothing. Sometimes she wished she had a job, just as an excuse to get out of the house, if nothing else. At the end, the advantages outweighed the disadvantages.

"I would like to take the job if you don't mind," she said.

"Why would I mind? Take it, if that is what you want," He said.

Geetha decided to go for it. Whatever was on Hari's mind, he did not let her know. For all the appearances, he was calm and quiet. After she started at the bank, both felt relieved. It was a lot better than sitting at home, facing each other 24 hours a day.

Hari was busy with his job search and Geetha with her job at the bank. Geetha's income was not much, but it gave her great satisfaction. She recalled the proverb her mother used to say; man finds strength in possessions, and animals in consumption.

The little cash she received on the first of each month lifted her spirits and made her feel like as a person.

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Ramana phoned Geetha. He just returned to New York after a year's stay in Germany on business.

His voice made Geetha jump with joy. She was ecstatic. "Oh, Mamayya, I am so glad you called. So nice to hear from you."

"Sorry I could not call you earlier. You know I was away from home. Anyway, how are you?" he said. He was just as happy to hear her voice.

"I am fine," she said.

"And Hari? How is he doing?"

"He is okay," she said hesitantly. Ramana noticed the hesitation in her voice and asked straight if there was a problem. She told him, hesitantly, about Hari losing his job.

Ramana said sorry and told her to tell Hari to call him; he would try to help him find a job. Ramana also apologized he could not be there to receive her when she had arrived in New York. "You should visit us sometime," he said.

Geetha said yes, yes to everything he said and promised she and Hari would him soon.

Ramana repeated his offer to help Hari and hung up.

Hari, however, did not take it very well. He said, "Um," and left it there.

At supper she brought up Ramana's offer again. Hari was annoyed. "Why did you tell him I lost my job?" he said. Geetha knew it; she was afraid he would be upset. Nevertheless, it hit her hard. Until now, he never raised his voice like that. She left the room in tears. She went into the kitchen, put the left overs in the fridge, dirty dishes in the sink, and went into the bedroom.

Hari took a few minutes to calm down; he felt bad for yelling at her. Why did he yell at her? She did nothing wrong. He was frustrated and he took it out on her. Hari went into the bedroom, sat next to her and said, "I didn't mean that. You know. You go first. I will join you a little later."

Both were equally frustrated for being helpless. "I don't want to go alone. We will go together whenever we can," she said.

"Okay," he said and went back to the living room. He knew how painful the situation was to her. He sincerely wished she would go and spend a few days with her uncle; that would be a relief, however temporary it might be.

She wished, sincerely, he would go with her; Ramana could help him in his job search. That would be a big relief for both of them.

Hari called several friends and talked with them all night. They all advised him to go to New York; said it was not a bad idea. Also, he could show Geetha the city, a change of pace for both of them, they said.

Before he could decide, Ramana called again. Hari took the phone halfheartedly.

"We could not attend your wedding. Please, visit us. We like to meet you," Ramana said amicably.

"Yes, I like it, too. Let me think about it," Hari said.

"No, no. There is nothing to think about. Actually, it is a good time for me, too. I can show you around. I really like to see you two," Ramana insisted.

"Okay, Mamayya garu. Let me look into the reservations. Here, talk to Geetha," he said and handed the phone to Geetha. She talked for a few more minutes and ended it.

She thought Hari would be mad, but he was not; he said he would book the tickets.

"We can visit Peter and Susan also," she said. They were the first two people she had met after landing in New York. She developed a special bond with them.

"They broke up. Peter moved to Berkeley, California. I don't know where Susan is," Hari said.

Geetha was sad. She had spent barely a day with them, yet felt like a family.

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Ramana received Hari and Geetha at the airport. He told them over and again how bad he felt for not being there for Geetha on the day she had arrived at New York International airport. Geetha and Hari had to assure him as many times that it was not a big deal.

Emily, Ramana's wife, welcomed them zealously. Geetha was touched. Hari was glad he had accepted their invitation.

Geetha could not help but recall the crowds as they went to see places of attraction in India. It was so different here. As they went around to see places like Statue of Liberty, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and other tourist attractions, Geetha felt like Alice in Wonderland; it was magical!

"We can go to Broadway next week. They are playing Pippin, a great musical," Ramana said.

"I am having a problem understanding American English; can't follow even in a coffee shop. Broadway show? I don't think so," Geetha said, smiling.

"No, it is not like that, Geetha! You may not follow each and every word, but you will enjoy get a general idea of it. I am sure you'll enjoy the show. It will be a great experience," Ramana said. He explained briefly the history of the Broadway musicals and the story of Pippin. Geetha agreed.

Emily also narrated a few highlights of the show.

After the show, Geetha was happy she had seen it. Sure, she missed a lot, but it felt good she had that experience. Just like prominent artists in India, the commitment of the actors in the show was captivating.

She was particularly impressed by the core theme. It would appear that, in any country the core values are the same. She did not expect this angle of human values in America: Wealth and materials goods do not provide the supreme bliss to a human. That is the message both in literature and music. However, the same riches and material goods were the reason she and Hari had arrived in America. Probably, that is the inconsistency or irreconcilable difference in our lives, she thought and sighed.

"you are right, Mamayya, it is nice. Glad I've seen it," she said to Ramana.

The next day, Ramana invited his boss Williams for lunch, and at lunch, he introduced Hari. Williams asked some casual questions about Hari's interests and experience. Then he said, "We are thinking of opening a branch in Chicago. Are you interested?"

Hari asked for more details.

Williams said, "It is still in the planning stage. I can give you more details soon. There is a small art show tomorrow. Would you like to join us?"

Ramana explained that Williams' son, Robert, was learning from a Telugu art teacher. The teacher planned the exhibition of her students' artworks and, at that time, would distribute certificates to the students.

Hari said, "It would be my pleasure to attend the exhibition and ceremony."

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They set up the art exhibition in the main hall and decorated it beautifully. Williams saw Ramana and the party, welcomed them heartily and introduced his wife and son to them. Williams made a big deal of Robert's accomplishments: he played soccer, was good at track and field, played piano, ranked first in all subjects, was a member of a literature club, and great at painting. Hari said, "Amazing." Ramana congratulated him profusely. Geetha watched them with curiosity.

Williams led them to the refreshments table. Geetha said to Hari in a soft voice, "So many activities. The boy has no life as a boy."

"Every parent wants the best for his or her child. Probably, they think they are introducing him to all the opportunities available to him; he can pick up the one he likes best in course of time," Hari said.

They walked around looking at each artwork. Geetha felt like she noticed a vague pair of eyes hiding underneath either artwork - a discolored leaf or a jarring chunk of cloud. The more she looked at it the stronger the feeling became. It was heart-wrenching. Suddenly, she felt weak and leaned on Hari's shoulder.

Hari was alarmed and asked her if she was okay.

Ramana was also concerned. He took her hand, walked her to a chair and said, "Come, sit here. I will get water."

Geetha was uncomfortable as they all were so anxious, and tried to dismiss it quickly. "I am fine. Just felt a little dizzy, just for a second. You two go ahead, finish your tour," she said.

The secretary came and announced that the meeting was about to start and all the guests should gather in the conference room.

The first two rows were reserved for the successful students receiving certificates and their parents. Williams, his wife, and Robert sat in the first row.

Ramana, Emily, Geetha and Hari settled in the third row.

Jamie Bhai²⁵ walked to the podium, welcomed the guests, and stated Sheethro Behanji²⁶ could not speak at the ceremony for health reasons, but later she would come in and would give the certificates herself to the students who had completed the course successfully. He requested the guests to join him and his staff in the reception following the ceremony and make the event a grand success. In appreciation of their support, the artworks were sold at a 10% discount and carried Sheethro Behanji's personalized autographs.

²⁵ Bhai: Brother. A common North Indian form of addressing males.

²⁶ Behenji: Sister. A common North Indian form of addressing females.

He went in and returned with Sheethro Behanji. She leaned on him heavily, looked somewhat unconscious of her surroundings, and walked as if she was walking on air.

Distribution of certificates was over in five minutes. Jamie walked her back into her room, came back, and asked the guests to follow him to the dining hall for the reception.

He stopped at the cash box by the door and signaled the guests to proceed to the exhibition room. A couple of volunteers were busy explaining the highlights of each artwork and the artist. Williams and Ramana bought a piece each. Hari was in a dilemma. If he bought one, it might look like he was trying to impress Williams; if he did not, it might look like he was stingy. Also, what about Geetha? Would she like to have it in their home? He was not sure, but dropped the idea.

Many guests admired Sheethro's extraordinary talent and her teaching method. They all expressed pleasure at having such a great teacher to teach their kids. Sales on that day went well.

Soon, the guests formed into small groups and talked about the art and the teacher: Great show; Amazing; Brilliant; She is a blessing to my child; Jamie Bhai is lucky to have found her; Sheethro Behanji is lucky to have found him.

Then there were other comments: What luck? He locked her up in a room on the third floor; never let her step outside; three doctors and ten types of medications. He says it is some kind of neurological disorder; nobody knows what it is. I don't trust him; that's why I did not send my son to his school.

"Actually, the school is run by Jamie Bhai only. He makes the videos, sends them to the students, and answers their questions either in person or on the phone. Nobody has seen Sheethro teach or hear her talk," a guest commented.

"He makes a lot of humdrum, though. He has a studio in the city, but lives in some god-forsaken corner, far away from town. He runs a newsletter, and handles all the correspondence himself."

Geetha and Hari looked at each other. Both had some suspicions, but neither said it aloud.

Geetha congratulated Robert once again and asked for a copy of his photo at the time of receiving the certificate.

"Give me your address. I will mail it to you," Robert said gleefully.

Geetha scribbled her address on a piece of paper and told him not to forget it.

"I won't," he said with a big smile.

Williams said to Hari, "See you soon," and took leave of them. Hari thanked Ramana. Ramana dismissed it, saying, "I did nothing. Apparently, he was impressed by your qualifications and experience."

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That night, Hari could not sleep; he was worried about the job. Geetha could not sleep, either. She could not stop thinking about Sheethro. She had not spent much time with Chitra, but she remembered the contour of her face fairly well. Sheethro looked so much like Chitra but for her red hair and lifeless eyes. She was much thinner, too.

It was past midnight. "What are you thinking?" Hari asked her.

"I am not sure. The more I think about her, the more I am convinced she is Chitra."

"I don't know. I can't tell," he said.

"I am thinking of the comments Tapatih had made about Chitra, her age, neurological condition, that Jamie is 15 years older, and all those details. I am almost certain it is her. If it is her, I want to know if she is happy here, and whether she is getting the satisfaction from her creativity the way it is laid out for her."

"Are you thinking of writing another story?" Hari asked.

"I don't know. Maybe."

She recalled the two attempts after her first story. She had sent her first story to a small website, and it was published. She received two positive comments. But, two other stories she had written were rejected.

She showed the stories to Tapatih and asked for her opinion.

Tapathi read them and said okay.

"What do you mean by okay? What is the difference between the first and these two?" Geetha insisted she wanted an honest evaluation.

"Well, the first one was in response to a person's behavior and the hurt it caused you. It cut through deep into your heart. You could portray your genuine feelings. In these two stories, all I see is your desire to write a story; there is no experience or a strong feeling in response to a certain event."

That conversation was still fresh on her mind. She said, "I don't know if I can write another story."

Hari, engrossed in his problem, said nothing.

Next morning, while eating breakfast, Ramana called and asked, "Did you think about Williams's offer? If you are interested, I can talk to him again."

"Can you find out what his thoughts are? I prefer a project-oriented job rather than a managerial position," Hari said, expressing his dilemma.

"I understand. You may, however, want to consider your options also. Don't you think something is better than nothing? I would take this and use it as a stop-gap. You still can keep looking for a better opportunity."

"That's also true. Talk to him and let me know."

"I will. In the meantime, I will also keep looking for other jobs. Give me a few copies of your resume."

Geetha asked Ramana to remind Williams about the photo his son had promised.

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Geetha returned to work as usual, but she did not give up on Chitra. She was making phone calls and searching various websites. She was aware Hari was getting nervous by the minute; hoping and praying for the positive call from Williams.

Hari, while waiting for Williams' phone call, had to deal with the unpalatable position Geetha's job put him in also. One of his friends commented, "Good thing Geetha has a job. Helps financially, you know." That was not a comforting thought for him. It sounded more like a comment about his unemployment status. He tried to take it in stride, but it was hard.

Then came another blow. As the saying goes, *a sore whitlow gets beat up over and over again*. Hari received a telegram from India. The Post Office tried to call, but there was no answer. So, they mailed a copy of the telegram. Hari looked at the telegram in his hand and looked at the watch; time for Geetha to come home.

Geetha walked in, stared into Hari's face, and stopped.

Hari waited until she came closer, and said gently, "Telegram from home."

"Telegram?" Geetha's heart beat fast.

"Your mother," he handed the telegram to her.

Geetha looked at the paper. She was dumbstruck; felt like a boulder fell on her head. She slumped onto the sofa. Something happened. Something happened somewhere. The line "mother passed away" did not register in her head. Something happened to somebody? Where? To whom?

Geetha was in a shock, totally lost. She could not think straight.

Hari put his hand on her shoulder and asked, "Want to go?"

Geetha threw a blank look. Yes, she should go, she needs to see her mother, and tell her she came to see her.

Phone rang; it was Bhagyam. Hari picked up the phone and gave her the bad news. She was shocked, expressed condolences genuinely, and said she was coming to see Geetha right away. Before leaving, she called a few other friends and gave them the sad news.

By 7:00 pm, several friends gathered at Hari's place and expressed their sympathies. Geetha sat like a sculpture; no sign of any feeling; her heart and brain froze.

Hari went to her and said, "I'll book the ticket." In reality, he was worried about other issues. It was not a good time for a trip to India. It would be hard on their financial situation; it was not like going to Chicago or Philadelphia. To find a reservation at such a short notice would be hard. And then, no guarantee that the family would keep the body until Geetha arrived there. She might not have the final visit she hoped for.

The all expressed various concerns.

"So, is Geetha going?"

"Booking a ticket at a short notice could be a problem."

"Anyway, what is the point of going there at this late hour? It is a different story if she was alive and ailing. But she is gone. We don't even know if they keep the body for a final goodbye."

"It is also different if mother had a lot of jewelry and other assets."

"Aha, do you think they would keep the jewelry just like that? My mother-in-law was draped in jewelry, head to foot. You should see her; she was like the Goddess Lakshmi with draped in diamonds and gold pieces. We went there after getting the news she was dead; just like now. We arrived there on the third day, and found nothing but a chain of black beads on her. You cannot trust anybody nowadays."

Their comments were no consolation to Geetha. She wanted to scream 'Shut up.' Tapathi noticed it, took her hand, and walked to the bedroom. She returned to

the living room and asked the guests politely to go home; she assured them she would call them if needed.

Bhagyam went into the kitchen, made coffee, and brought a cup to Geetha. "Have a sip. You will feel better, just a little," she said; she as honestly concerned.

Geetha took the cup and put it on the table next to her.

"Call me if you need anything, anything at all," she said before leaving.

Hari pulled Tapatih to a side and asked, "What do you suggest I do? I really can't think; what am I supposed to do?"

"You mean about travel?"

Hari nodded.

"I don't know either. You should ask her."

"What can I say? I know she would like to go. But, look at our situation. Here, I don't have a job. And she just started a new job. It sounds harsh, but it is what it is. Like somebody said earlier, there is really nothing she could do by going now."

"I understand. I think you need to tell her about that yourself."

Hari went in, sat by her side, and said softly, "If you want to go, I will make the reservation." He struggled to say those few words. He did not have the heart to say anything beyond that. Had he said it was not a good time for a trip, it sure would sound like he was stingy and more interested in saving money rather than let her have the consolation of visiting her mother for the last time. He was not ready to shoulder the blame.

"What is the point? What can I do?" Geetha said.

Hari took it as a 'no', returned to Tapatih, and said, "She says not now."

Tapathi sighed a deep sigh. It would have been different if they were within the country, in a different city. Geetha would have rushed home to be by her mother's side in a heartbeat. Times like these remind us how forlorn our lives are on a foreign soil. We refuse to accept it, but that is the harsh reality of immigrant life.

Geetha set out to go to work the next day.

"Take a leave of absence for a few days," Hari suggested.

It was hard for her to sit at home doing nothing. Work might give a bit of relief. "It's okay. I will go to work," she said and left.

That was no surprise. Her colleagues at work respected her. Her computer skills came in handy. She was helping whenever somebody ran into a computer glitch. Her manager was impressed with her computer skills and hard work, and promised to make her a loan officer soon. Making new friends was an additional blessing. But for Tapatih, she had no other friends until then.

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Williams called Hari and said he was going to Chicago to make further arrangements to open the new branch there. He suggested Hari to meet him in Chicago to discuss his appointment and other matters.

Hari was ecstatic. He told Geetha the good news, and he would have leave for Chicago on the next Friday.

Geetha also was happy and wished him well.

After Hari left for Chicago, she was alright for a couple of days, but it became hard. She called Tapathi. No answer. She thought Tapathi might have gone out to run errands. She called after a couple of hours, again no answer. Again and again she called, and each time it was the same; no answer. She got nervous. Tapathi would never be out that late. Her fears were growing by the minute, and taking over, like a huge chunk of dark cloud. She called Radha and asked if she had heard from Tapathi; no, she did not. Maybe, Tapathi went to visit her son or daughter; don't worry, she can take care of herself, she said. Tapathi knew her way around, she added.

Geetha could not believe it. Tapathi would not leave town without telling her. Geetha could not hold herself any longer; she got into the car and went to Tapathi's home.

She knocked on the door; no answer. Peaked into the garage. The car was there. Looked around, was losing hope, then she saw the neighbor pulling out the weeds in his yard. She asked him if he had seen Tapathi.

No, he had not seen her for two or three days, and suggested reporting to the police. The worst of her fears overcame her. She was a nervous wreck. The neighbor saw her predicament and offered to make the call himself.

Within minutes, two police cars and an ambulance arrived. They asked several questions: When did you see her last? When did you talk to her the last time? Why do you think she is missing? Does she have friends or relatives she might be visiting?

Geetha answered all the questions. With each question, her heart was sinking lower. The neighbor noticed it and gave the possible scenarios. While the police continued their questions, a cab stopped in front of the house. Tapathi got out of the taxi. She was just as confused as the others for a different reason, though.

As she walked toward the front door, police stopped her.

Geetha rushed to her, hugged her, and gasping for breath, asked her, "Where did you go? Why didn't you tell me? You nearly killed me by disappearing like that," she vented her anger and frustration in the same breath.

Tapathi was equally bewildered. "What happened? Why the police are here?"

The neighbor was the first to grasp the situation. He told the police that she was the woman they thought was missing, and now she was back, no more worries. The police and ambulance left. Then he explained the situation to Tapathi.

"Oh God! I am so so sorry for causing all the confusion and giving you trouble. Please, forgive me," she said, genuinely feeling miserable.

He said it was okay, these things happen, and left.

Geetha stared at the girl standing by the car. She was absolutely certain that the girl the same Sheethro Behanji, and now understandably, Chitra.

Tapathi went back to the car, took the suitcases from the trunk, and said to Geetha, "Let's go in. I will explain everything to you." Then she turned to Chitra, took her hand and walked to the front door. Geetha followed them with suitcases.

Tapathi told Chitra to go in and freshen up, and said to Geetha, "Make coffee. I will change and be back."

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Geetha gawked at Tapathi; she was ready to pounce on her. She was fuming, felt embarrassed in front of the police and the neighbor because of her actions. "I will never forgive you," she said, with eyebrows knit.

Tapathi poured herself a cup of coffee and started to recount what had happened.

She had received a phone call from a shelter in New York. The gist of it was a young woman named Sheethro was at their shelter; she gave Tapathi's number as a contact number.

Tapathi asked a few questions and believed the young woman could be Chitra. "I am coming," she told them and took the next available flight to New York.

At the shelter, Tapathi learned there had been an accident and Jamie Bhai died on the spot. The police made a few inquiries and found out Sheethro was developmentally challenged, and had no relatives or friends they could contact. The police sent her to the shelter temporarily. The manager at the shelter spent some time with Sheethro and found out she had Tapathi's phone number. For some inexplicable reason, Sheethro had had a small box in which she kept the first paint brush Tapathi had given her, some painting accessories, and Tapathi's phone number. The manager was thrilled to find them, and called Tapathi.

Tapathi finished her story and said, "I am sorry I did not tell you. The news was overwhelming. I could barely think straight. I was so happy to find that Chitra was safe and took the first flight to New York. I thought I would call you from there, but there were so many things I had to take care of, I forgot to call you."

Geetha calmed down, "Okay. What next?"

"Calling Gayatri and Somalingam garu."

Tapathi called Gayatri and gave her the good news. Both the parents rushed to Tapathi's home right away. They were so happy to see Chitra, hugged her tight like they would not let her go again.

"We were so worried. I am glad you are safe," Gayatri said with tearful eyes. Somalingam asked Tapathi why she did not call them the moment she had learned about her whereabouts. Tapathi explained the best she could. She wanted to make sure it was Chitra; she was too scared to get their hopes up without confirming it herself first.

"Never mind all that. Let's go home," Gayatri said with her arm around Chitra's shoulders.

Chitra pulled back. Somalingam tried to hold her hand, but Chitra pushed him away.

After a brief discussion, Tapathi said, "Let her stay here for a couple of days. She needs some time to get adjusted to this environment again."

Chitra's face lit up.

Her parents left, grudgingly.

After they left, Tapathi turned to Geetha and asked, "What shall we do now?"

"That's nice. Why ask me? What do I know? What can I say?"

"Whom else can I ask? You have no children. I have two, but they are settled, living their lives. Therefore, we two are responsible for this young lady."

Geetha laughed. "What kind of logic is that?"

"True, there is no logic. Nevertheless, I have to find a way to keep her safe and happy. And *you* are going to help me."

"Well, you did not expect all this drama when you had introduced Jamie to her. Nobody expected it. You are right. Let's wait for a couple of days and see how things shape up. Maybe she will tell us herself. After all, she did have the brains to save your phone number and give it to the manager there."

"Makes sense," Tapatthi agreed.

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A week passed by. Chitra showed no signs of any interest in going home. One day, Chitra came into Tapatthi's room. She never went there. In fact, her presence in the home was barely perceptible.

Tapatthi invited her in and moved the books on the bed, making room for her to sit.

Chitra sat on the edge of the bed and handed her an envelope.

"What's that?" Tapatthi asked. She took it, opened, and found government bonds for \$25,000.

Tapatthi, startled, asked her, "How did you get these? Who gave you?"

"I don't know. Jamie Bhai gave me."

Strange, Tapatthi thought. It was not consistent with the impression he had given by his elopement with Chitra. Tapatthi was annoyed too. Things just started settling. Why this new wave, out of nowhere? How would her parents take it?

The phone rang before she could decide what to do with the bonds. Gayatri called to tell her that her sons had arrived to see Chitra and asked what would be a good time for them to see her.

Tapatthi told her to come that evening, and told Chitra that her brothers were coming to see her.

"Um," Chitra said. That was it, no trace of any emotion.

In the evening, they all arrived. Tapatthi invited them in. During the conversation, Tapatthi told them about the bonds. They reacted exactly the same way she expected. "They had been doing business in New York for a few years and made only 25k? It should be half a million, at least," the brothers balked at her.

Tapatthi, struggling to hide her ire, said, "I don't know anything about any business. Even about these bonds, I came to know only today, and I have told you right away. I am sure how the life is in this country. It is all loans—mortgage, credit card debts, car loan, and what not. You deal with the probate court yourself," she retorted.

"We will take our sister home," the older brother said.

The younger brother was a programmer. He said he would create a website for her and sell her paintings.

Gayatri did not like it, not a bit. "Enough of all the drama we have had so far. No websites, no selling. Just leave her alone," she said.

"We don't have to make a business of it, like James had done. But it is not a bad idea for her to have a purpose," Somalingam said.

Tapatthi took Chitra to a side and asked, "What do you say?"

"I don't know. You tell me," she replied.

"I think your brothers are sincere."

Chitra was quiet. Tapathi had no choice but to take matters into her hands. "She is just back. We don't know what her life had been like in New York. Let's give her some time to settle first," she said to them.

They all agreed to leave it at that.

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Hari returned home after his meeting with Williams in Chicago. He was bubbling with joy. "I got the job. Will start not Monday, but the following Monday."

Geetha was very happy. She told Tapathi. Tapathi also was happy and congratulated Hari on his new job.

Hari got on the phone and called his friends and told them the good news. They all congratulated him, were sorry he was moving away, and were glad Chicago was not far. They also insisted he should throw a party.

After all that hubbub about congratulations and feelings of sorry for his departure, Hari said to Geetha, "We had better start packing. There is not much time."

Then, it hit her; what his job in a new city meant to her. They would have to move, which meant leaving her job. Her first job! She recalled the conversation they both had had at their first meeting. Probably it escaped Hari's mind.

"That means I have to leave my job," she said.

"So what? You can find another in Chicago," Hari replied casually, shuffling papers in front of him.

That hurt her. It may not be a great job, but it gave her a sense of identity, a special place in the community. Obviously, Hari had no idea of that change in her perception. For a second time in her life, she felt like she had lost everything. She was downcast all day.

Next day, Hari called Madhav. Radha picked up the phone. She said Madhav was not home and asked casually when they were leaving.

"Soon. New office and new job, you know. Lot of things to take care of."

"It must be hard for Geetha, I mean, leaving her job."

"What is the big deal? She can easily find another in Chicago."

His casual tone surprised her, but left it there, and said, "I guess."

A little later, Hari got it. It took several minutes for Hari to sink in the underlying message in Radha's comment. He went into the bedroom.

Geetha was watching the news. He sat by her side and watched the news for a few minutes. "I was thinking," he said, as a preamble.

"About what?"

"About our jobs and the move. I am thinking, maybe, you can stay here and continue in your job for the present. Don't tell anybody in your office yet. Let me go to Chicago first and check how things would be. You can join me later. What do you say?"

Geetha stared at him for a few seconds and said, "Okay."

"I can come home for the weekends."

She nodded. She also felt relieved, and that was a bit embarrassing, too.

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"So, when is the party?" Radha asked.

"Let's wait," Geetha replied. She was not overly excited about facing the crowd yet. Thoughts like being alone for the first time in America on one hand, and leaving her job on the other, threw her mind into a quandary.

"No, no. We won't let you off so easily. Don't worry about the work. We all are here to help you. Or we can call Achala."

"Who is Achala?"

"A student at the local community college. She has undertaken the catering service to support herself."

"Oh! Isn't it customary for us to do the cooking all by ourselves? Sometime back, Bhagyam garu told me her husband would not let her buy anything, not even sweets from the store."

"Well, things are changing. They are from old school, but our generation goes with the flow. Now most of us have jobs, so we don't have the time either. Don't worry, Hari won't object, and I will make sure he does not," Radha said with a little laugh.

"Okay, give me her number. I will talk to Hari and set the date," Geetha said. She was not comfortable with the idea, though. Achala also came to this country, like everybody else, with hopes and aspirations. It felt unfair to take advantage of her unfortunate situation. But, then again, it would mean helping her. She called Achala later in the evening.

"Sure, Auntie, I will help you. When?" Achala asked. She sounded happy to receive the call.

"Not coming Sunday, but the next. About 30 guests, give or take a few. Some of them are Americans. So, the items would have to be spicy, mild, sweet, and savory."

"No problem Auntie. I will take care of all that. I have catered to several parties. I have an idea about preparing the dishes. You just tell me the menu, for how many, and leave the rest to me."

"Okay. tell me how much you charge and what do you want me to do."

"For now, give me the list of items. We can take care of the charges later."

"No, no, Achala. This is new to me. I need to know what is expected of me."

"It depends on the items. Usually, I give 10% discount to new customers. I will give you 15%. Okay?"

Geetha was shocked. "Oh, no. I am not asking for discount," she said quickly and apologetically.

For a few seconds, Achala was silent.

"Our people ask for a discount, Auntie," she said slowly.

Geetha assured her she was not looking for a discount, she would check with Hari about the items and get back to her.

The thought of so-called "our people" haggling for discount left a bad taste in Geetha's mouth. It was disconcerting, to say the least. They all were well settled in life, were making 60 to 100 thousand a year, and they haggled for a few dollars with

a young woman who was alone and putting herself through school by running a catering service? It was not like she was making tons; what was wrong with these people? The thought gave her the chills. She was so disgusted with "our folks," she decided to keep the party simple, glaringly simple.

She said the same to Hari. He did not think it was a good idea. "Look, this is our last party. It does not look good if we skimp on this one. Besides, fewer items means less money for Achala. Do you really want that because you are angry with other people's attitude?"

The last point made sense to her. She called Achala.

"Let's include all the items you usually make for a big party. I have no idea what the menu should be for a party of this size. As I've said before, this is new to me. Since you have been catering for a while, you tell me what would be a reasonably good menu for about 25 adults and a 10 children. Tell me how much you charge. Forget the discount, just give me the usual rate."

In all, it went well; the party was a huge success. Several guests complimented Geetha. She said the credit should go to Achala. "But for her, you would have gotten plain rice, dal and, maybe, rasam²⁷," Geetha said playfully.

Achala made them all happy with a wide range of dishes, which were palatable to Americans, Indians who had gotten accustomed to American food, picky Telugu folks and kids, as well. She herself did not eat.

Geetha noticed it. She went in, put a few items on a plate and went to Achala, "Here, you too should eat."

"It's okay, Auntie. I will eat later. I don't feel like eating right now," she said.

"Well then, I will have to invite you another day for dinner."

Achala smiled, "Alright. Another day, it is."

"I like you," Geetha said as she handed the check.

Achala returned the compliment, looked at the check and said, "You gave me more than I asked for."

"Keep it. You have done a wonderful job. I could not have done without you."

Tapathi brought Chitra to the party. She, Achala and another young man moved to a corner and were having a hearty chat.

"Who is he?" Geetha asked.

"He came with Ganapathi. They are roommates I believe. He is doing M.S. at the university."

Geetha looked at him with curiosity. He was thin, of fair complexion, and was delicate, almost like a girl. He would have made a good actor for the role of a princess in Sanskrit plays²⁸.

"Ask Sunada to sing. He sings superbly," somebody said.

Tapathi looked around, wondering who that Sunada might be. She understood they were referring to the young man who sat in the corner with Achala and Chitra.

He said he was not a great singer, but his friends would not let it go. They insisted he must sing and dragged him to the center of the room. He sang a well-

²⁷ Tamarind water, cooked with salt, and spices like powdered cumin seeds, coriander seeds and black pepper.

²⁸ Traditionally, young boys play female roles in Sanskrit plays.

known lyric. It was about a young devotee saying she had seen in her dream an exquisitely handsome, lotus-eyed lord. The song came alive in his voice. They all were spellbound, and asked him to sing more. It continued for an hour.

Chitra's face glowed. Tapathi noticed it. She was happy she brought her.

"Where did you learn music?" Geetha asked him.

"No, I did not learn; I mean, not systematically. My mother is an excellent singer. Had she given concerts, she could be on par with M.S. Subbalakshmi and M.L. Vasanthakumari²⁹. I have four sisters, well-trained in Carnatic³⁰ music. They sing on All India Radio and at public concerts. The doors and windows in our home make not the crackling noises but resonate the exhilarating musical notes, like the pillars at Lepakshi³¹ temple. It was ingrained in my head; I didn't even know until I started singing myself, casually," he said, smiling.

Geetha, too, smiled and said, "Suits you the name Sunada perfectly."

"Actually, that was my father's idea. He wanted to name me after the seven notes in Carnatic music--sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, da, ni, sa. My mother thought it was too long and shortened it to Sanida. I don't know how she picked those three notes. Eventually, it became Sunada. Sometime back, a Telugu pundit said Srinatha is a Sanskrit term and Sunada is its corrupt form. Either way, I am stuck with it."

As he spoke, Chitra watched him with fascination. Geetha liked his sense of humor. She had a nice chat with him. He said he had brought several tapes of Carnatic music from India. He was excited to talk about the differences between the South Indian and the North Indian styles of music.

"I am not that knowledgeable in any style," Geetha said.

"Did you hear Kishori Amonkar singing?"

"No."

"She is a great North Indian Classical singer. I will bring her tapes for you tomorrow. You listen to her singing, and you will know right away what a great artist she is."

Geetha said okay. As she got up to mingle with the other guests, Tapathi joined them. Because of her music background, her conversation with Sunada took a more serious turn.

It was 11:00 by the time all the guests left.

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Sunada called Geetha and said he would like to bring the tapes of Kishori Amonkar if it was okay with her. Geetha forgot about it; did not think he was serious. So far, her experience had been different; people would not stick to the words they had said in a casual conversation. Anyway, she was glad Sunada called; she told him to bring the tapes. Hari was not home, so it would be a good pastime.

Sunada brought the tapes and played them, explaining various aspects of the songs and the singer. Geetha watched him curiously; the actual music went way over her head. Nevertheless, she enjoyed the session.

She asked him to stay for lunch.

²⁹ Top-ranking singers of South Indian classical music.

³⁰ South Indian classical music. Well-known composers are Thyagaraja, Muthuswamy Dikshitar, and Syama Sastry.

³¹ A famous temple in South India known for its amazing architecture and paintings.

"If it is not much of a trouble for you."

"Oh, no, no trouble at all. It is not a feast, though; just plain rice, a vegetable dish, and sambar from last night, if you don't mind."

"Oh, no. I don't mind at all. That is a feast, compared to what I eat everyday," he said laughing.

After that, they met frequently. Hari was home sometimes, but he did not mind his visits. He kept to himself busy with his own work.

With Tapatih's lessons and Sunada's sessions, Geetha's music skills improved considerably. She mentioned it to Tapatih. Tapatih said he was visiting her too. She too was surprised Sunada was not interested in movies, games, and other activities like others of his age. Instead, he seemed to be enjoying the company of Geetha and Tapatih. "It seems he likes Chitra," Tapatih said with some reservation.

His first visit happened rather accidentally. She was picking weeds in the front yard; and heard a car stop in front of her home. She looked up. Sunada got out of the car, walked to the gate, and said, "Sorry, Tapatih garu, I was driving by and saw you. I stopped just to say hi. If you are busy, I can come back some other time, after calling you first."

Tapathi said fine, no problem, and invited him in.

He sat on the edge of the sofa and said, "Sometimes I like to grab a few tapes and drive around on country roads, listening to the music. That is my best pastime. I know you live around here, but hesitated to stop by for fear I might disturb you. Geetha garu has talked about your knowledge of musical a lot."

Tapathi assured him it was a pleasure to have his company, and that he could stop by anytime he felt like. She also said his idea of having a good time was the best.

They went in. She asked if he would have some coffee or tea. He said the water was fine, looked around and asked, "Where is Chitra garu?"

"She is on the back porch. I will get her," she said and went to fetch Chitra.

"No, it is okay. She may be busy."

"Let's see what she is up to." They both went into the porch.

Chitra was sitting on a lawn chair and watching the birds. She heard the noise behind her, turned around, and saw Tapatih and Sunada. She smiled, barely noticeable. Tapatih could not help recalling the incident at Geetha's home. She went in for something. After 15 minutes or so, she returned to find they were not in the yard. She went into Chitra's room.

There, Chitra was painting and Sunada was humming a lyric in a soft tone. He stopped as Tapatih walked in and said, "What a great gift. Amazing. One thing I noticed is a pair of eyes that seem to stare at you, pierce through your heart straight. It certainly is a gift of God."

The last line startled her. Previously, Geetha also had said the same thing, a mysterious pair of eyes! Maybe one need a pair of god-given eyes to notice those eyes, she reflected; she was bemused.

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Geetha was apprehensive when Tapatih said Sunada had been visiting her frequently.

"What do they talk about?"

"I don't know. I did not see them talk at all. She paints and he sings. Each seems to be living in their own world and, at the same time, enjoying each other's company as well. Quite strange!"

"And you did not mind?" she asked.

"Why should I mind? Chitra is enjoying his company and he likes it."

"True, I suppose."

Tapathi noticed the suspicion in Geetha's voice.

"Do you think it is a bad idea?"

"I don't know. You don't want James' story repeat, right?"

"This is not the same."

"I agree it is not the same. But, you have to be careful, too. You and I may not be as judgmental, but the world out there could be cruel."

"Since when you've gotten so smart?" Tapathi tried to make light of it.

"What did Gayatri garu say?"

"I didn't tell them, not yet."

"What? Why? Sounds like you have doubts; don't you?"

Tapathi was silent for a few minutes. "I think I am afraid of losing Chitra. I have been watching them closely, and I see only two pure artistic souls just enjoying music and art. Those two are unique in their own ways. I do not want to disturb their happiness in any way."

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Chitra's younger brother also came to terms with it. He decided to help her without the unsavory fanfare of a businesslike sales pitch. He created a simple website for her artwork. Tapathi scanned the paintings, and he posted them on their site; free to download. People could buy the originals, if they wanted. Thus, he sold a few and gave the money to Tapathi. She opened a bank account in Chitra's name and deposited it in the account.

Six months went by. One day, a local store owner bought one of her paintings and hung it on the wall in his store.

Sunada saw that and told Tapathi. "If you don't mind, I would like to show it to Chitra. I will drive her to the store, show it, and bring her back," he said, and on second thought added, "It would be nice if you can go with us."

Tapathi told Gayatri. Gayatri had heard about Sunada and accepted it. Chitra was happy and was even doing better; she thought that was good. Gayatri agreed to go to the store with them.

They all went to the store. Gita's painting was hung prominently in a highly visible place. The store owner said several customers paid compliments to the painting.

Chitra's face glowed; a glow worth thousand gems. The entire family was elated to see Chitra respond to the compliment.

Tapathi thanked Sunada.

"Why thank me? Her brother made them available to the public, and the store owner displayed them prominently. You should thank them," he said.

"You don't have to thank me, either. I bought it because I liked it," the store owner said.

His wife said, "Our son also is a special needs child. He turns seven next month. We have consulted several doctors, but no use. We don't know what else we can do."

"I am sorry, I don't know really about the special needs children. We did not plan anything. It just happened. I am sure you will find his talents soon," Tapathi said.

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One day, Sunada asked Tapathi if he could take Chitra to a special ed school.

Tapathi was not sure. "What for?" she asked.

"I don't know. I just thought she may like seeing others like her. May learn a few other things to do. I just want her to mingle with others. That's all. If you don't like it, okay. I won't bring it up again."

The store owner's wife's words came to her mind. "We tried everything," she said. *Maybe not a bad idea*, she thought. Who could tell what is in store for any person? She told him yes, he could take her to the school.

Sunada talked to the School Principal and scheduled an appointment. On the said day, he and Chitra went to the school.

Chitra seemed to like it there. She walked around, watched a young boy painting a scenery. She held his hand and showed him a few strokes with the brush.

The Principal saw that, quickly went to them, and told Chitra gently to watch the other children's work. Chitra nodded and moved to the next kid. Sunada apologized to the Principal. She smiled and said that was okay. She understood; she had been dealing with the mentally challenged students for years.

Sunada told the incident to Tapathi, and added, "Maybe she can teach to other kids."

Tapathi looked at him like she could not believe what he had just said. "How? She has no academic qualifications. I don't think they will take her in."

"What do you mean she has no qualifications? Geetha garu said she had run a school in New York. Now here her paintings are selling well. What else would they need?" Sunada said.

He prepared a resume of Chitra's qualifications and experience and took it to the Principal.

Principal listened to his arguments, looked at the paintings and said she would think about it. After two days, she called Sunada and said, "You are saying she has a unique talent. We don't have funds to hire new people. But she can work as a volunteer if doesn't mind. Let's see how it goes, first."

"That is great," Sunada said, "All I want is some meaningful activity for her."

Sunada called Tapathi and gave the good news. Tapathi was amused by his enthusiasm. She became a bit apprehensive, too; could not help wondering; is he taking too much interest in Chitra, and she is allowing it?

Tapathi said, "I am impressed. I never thought you would do so much for her." She tried to be evasive, but did not succeed. Sunada understood her concerns.

He thought out his words carefully and said, "I know what you mean. I also heard about the incident with James. I promise I am not going to hurt you or Chitra. I have no ulterior motives. I will be done with my school next Summer and then, will go wherever my future takes me to. I just want her to be happy, that's all."

"That is thoughtful of you. Thank you," Tapathi said.

"Send her, Tapathi garu," he said again. His concern for Chitra came from the heart.

"Let's see. There are other practical issues, you know."

"Like what?"

"Like transportation. Second, we also have to consider the possibility that they may never pay for her services, once she has agreed to work for free. And then her parents. We don't know how they feel about sending her to work. I have already done so much without actually consulting them. I need to slow down, I was telling myself."

"I think you should allow her to work there," he said one more time before hanging up.

Tapathi thought about Sunada for a while. In general, he had always been quiet, naive and distant. In that sense, his interest in Chitra was strange. Of course he said he had no ulterior motive and probably he was telling the truth. She contemplated for a while and decided to leave it at that. She had seen enough people to believe that some people do good deeds for no other reason than just to do a good deed. I *trusted Emmanuel. Why not Sunada now?*

She talked to Chitra's parents, got their permission, and told Sunada it was okay for Chitra to volunteer once a week for a starter.

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Geetha and Tapathi were sitting under the Magnolia tree and chatting.

Geetha said, "It was so nice. Achala's mouth-watering dishes and Sunada's heart-warming singing made me think of home. I missed India so much. I wanted to jump on the next plane to India."

"Speaking of India, we will have '*Ma.Te. Veshaalu*' (pun on the term, Telugu association) soon. Are you going?"

"What is Ma.Te. Veshaalu?"

"Short for *maa Telugu samavesaalu*. (A Telugu Group Meet.) We shortened it to reflect its true nature. Basically, a show."

"In the process, you have changed the meaning, too," Geetha said, laughing.

Tapathi also laughed and said, "Well, it is more of a show than a service to Telugu literature. The Telugu elite, singers, stars, and other grandstand seekers get together, and discuss mostly business investments, children's education and marriages."

"In English, I guess."

"Of course, goes without saying."

"Are you going?"

"No. I attended once. That did it. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. You two should go. You will learn a lot. Once would be a good experience. You can also meet your favorite writer Anantham garu. He is invited this year."

Anantham was a reputable writer, had been writing for over 5 decades and highly regarded by Telugu readers, young and old alike. Mention of his name got Geetha's interest. Meeting him in person was one of her long cherished dreams.

"My cousin from India will be there too. Maybe you know him, Ranga Rao. He is also from Vijayawada."

"Sure, I know him. He said he would go to America after graduating from high school. He also suggested the one sure way to land in America. If you have a family member or friend, you can get there, he said. Funny, not in the manner he suggested, but I did end up here. By the way, I did not know he was interested in literature," Geetha said.

"This conference is not specifically for lovers of literature. People from all walks of life gather there. I think he is a businessman."

"What kind of business?"

"I don't know. Export business, I believe; moving things around, from here to there and from there to here. Go to the conference. You can ask him yourself."

That night Geetha asked Hari about the meeting. "It seems there is a conference of Telugu people. Shall we go?"

"I don't think you will like it," he said.

"Why do you think so?"

"Well, I've been watching the way you react to our people here. You don't think much about our folks."

Geetha was ruffled. "When did I say so?"

"You don't have to say it in so many words. On one hand, you say you are trying to understand their psyche; on the other, you dismiss them for not cherishing our culture and traditions. You complain they all are too much into American culture and customs and disregard our culture and traditions. When they talk about you, you are annoyed. But you don't think they may be annoyed about your and Tapathi's interference in Chitra's life."

Geetha sat there, listening to his comments. She never thought he was observing her that closely. Her first instinct was to find fault with his argument. Soon, she realized there was some truth in his comment. True, she could not appreciate the manners and the ways of living of local Telugu people. She, however, did not dismiss their entire lifestyle; she was trying to make sense of it. That was what she said to him. "I am not blaming them. I am just trying to understand the changes that have taken place in their lives and attitudes. Let it be. All I am saying is, maybe, if we go to a place like this conference, I can meet more people and see things in a different light. Besides, you've said you had attended only one conference. Why didn't you go to other conferences?"

"Simple. I can't afford to confine myself to my home, my family, my language, and all that. I came here to achieve something in my field. I need to stay focused on that. In some ways, I too feel puzzled. In the past, we had devoted our lives to please the British lords. Now we are devoted to please the American lords. Besides, during that period, we were on our own soil. Here, we are on a foreign soil. So, we have to work that much harder." Hari finished his speech and laid back on the sofa, feeling exhausted.

There was one more reason Hari did not spell out for her; it was about the attendees at the conference. Most of the attendees were parents, whose interests were raising children, their education, and the marriages in the case of adult children; and retirees, whose interests were about their lifestyles and investment opportunities or playing golf. Hari did not fall under either category.

Geetha noticed the despair on his face and dropped the idea. She did not mention it again.

After two days, however, Hari brought it up himself and said, "Let's go to the conference."

He had called a few old friends earlier and found out four of them were attending the conference. That was good enough for him. "Iron your silk sarees. Polish your gold jewelry. Work on your music. We are going to the Telugu Conference," he said jovially.

"What about my dance?" she said teasingly.

"We skip that for now," he said with a mischievous smile.

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Ma.Te. meeting was held in a well-known hotel. Reputable writers, politicians, businessmen, and musicians were invited to the function. A famous actor, who had received the President's award, was the special guest. The local mayor would be honored for his impeccable services to the community and contribution to promoting cultural diversity. Nearly one hundred participants from other countries such as Canada, Australia, Germany, France, Great Britain, and India arrived. A few other Indians, who were in the U.S. for reasons of their own, also attended the meeting. Then there were a few others who were visiting their sons, daughters, granddaughters, and relatives. The meeting site looked like a mirror site of Andhra Pradesh, with all the humdrum of a wedding ceremony at a rich man's mansion for those three days.

On the first day, after idli and vada breakfast, the priest from Pittsburgh temple performed the Ganesh puja, broke a coconut and finished with lighting up a piece of camphor, called aarti, per custom. A famous singer from Chennai sang the Indian national song and local high school cheerleaders sang the American national song.

The Mayor praised the contributions of the Indian professionals to America. The president of Ma.Te. expressed his gratitude to the Mayor for his services to keep the community safe. He presented the Mayor with a memento and an ivory elephant. The Minister for Education, India, admired the contributions of the NRIs to various organizations in India and requested their involvement in making India great. The morning session concluded with thanking all the participants and announcing the lunch location.

In the afternoon, various sessions were held in various rooms. The organizers distributed a pamphlet describing the locations and topics. Lately, one name stuck out among writers for her radical feminist ideas. A young, aspiring poetess called Durbhara, meaning literally unbearable, was the main attraction for many, Geetha observed.

Authentic Andhra dishes were served at lunch. A few guests murmured those were not authentic enough and the others ignored them.

The afternoon session started at 2:00 in various rooms. The room 105 got the biggest audience; Durbhara read her poetry in that room. Her poetry was full of atrocious, ferocious words with a few scathing comments about male domination and women's oppression. Then she switched to the offensiveness in literature, in temple sculpture, in classical songs, and what not. She went on giving examples, but no analysis or interpretation. Some among the audience looked at each other; they could not figure out what she was talking about. Kids, with minimal Telugu language skills, asked their parents for explanations. Parents avoided answers and escorted them to another room. At the end, the remaining audience enjoyed it fully and cheered her with great enthusiasm.

In another room, Anantham was speaking on nuance in modern Telugu poetry. The room was nearly empty, a sharp contrast to the room where Durbhara delivered her juicy poetry.

Earlier, at the dining table, Geetha had a chance to meet her favorite poet, Anantham garu; it was an unexpected boon for her.

She said politely, "I had read your stories during my high school days. I liked them a lot."

Anantham garu smiled. "I am surprised you remembered my stories, and even more so, you recognized me."

"Of course, I remember you. Everybody remembers you. As they say, good stories are timeless. This group invited you because they remember you, isn't it?"

Anantham garu shook his head, a gesture hard to interpret. Geetha did not know how to take care it.

"I haven't seen your stories in any magazine for sometime now. Did you stop writing?"

"If you mean you have not seen my name in magazines lately by saying 'stop', I would say yes. But, a creative mind never stops; the brain remains at work continuously."

"Alright, I will rephrase my question. Tell me why you are not publishing your stories."

Anantham laughed again. "Are you interviewing me?"

Geetha apologized and continued, "Not that, sir. I miss discussing the stories of those times, I mean, particularly, writers of your generation here. I truly enjoyed your stories. I went to great lengths to find them. I also wanted to meet you. So, now I've gotten the opportunity, how can I pass?"

"Alright. Ask. I came because they have invited me, but I don't see anybody seriously interested in my writings. Now, I see you are interested. How can I pass? Ask," he said, smiling.

"What do you mean? They invited you only because they respect you, isn't it?"

"Seriously? Look around."

Geetha looked around. All the guests formed into small groups. At the center of each group, there was a political persona, a movie star, or a business magnate. Some young writers, wrestling with some kind or other of 'isms', were trying to make their way into stardom. Obviously, writers who write honestly do not get the kind of attention those politicians, movie stars, and so forth were getting. Geetha

understood that. She also saw that Anantam's eyes wandered, stopped on Durbhara for a second, and turned to Geetha. Durbhara was surrounded by the biggest crowd in the area.

"I have another question. Nowadays, we have so many gurus and Babas, I am confused. Which stories you think genuinely uphold our cultural values?"

"True, there are so many interpretations of cultural values to start with. In my opinion, any story that illustrates human values which are cherished over centuries is a good story. I don't mean rehashing the hackneyed phrases like 'Rama was a great king,' and 'Harischandra was honest.' In recent times, stories are spewing repulsive and belligerent language. It has become normal to attack a prominent person, caste or some ideology as evil, mostly, to vent personal grudges or to attract the public attention. Some critics even consider it an admirable quality. Those writers are receiving awards now."

"Are you saying the stories written about social equality and justice, or illustrating the injustices in society, do not stand the test of time?"

"No, I am not saying that. Literature has certain bounds. In a street fight, people spew bad words which are unacceptable in polite society. For instance, the same person who gushes forth expletives in public may not use the same words in front of his parents or grandparents. Now, some writers are using them in stories; they call it being realistic. Another way to bring about the same effect is by indirect means and descriptive phrases. That is why our ancient sages had created Alankara Sastra, the science of figures of speech. That is what distinguishes literature from life. Literature must reflect not the society as such but in a way that provokes meaningful thinking that is beneficial to the society. I am talking about the people who are vulnerable and need a direction. Present generation is not focused on that, and magazines are not inviting it either. "

"Let's take an example of crude language. I think it started with *Digambara kavulu*, who made a point of harsh, uncivil language, to incite the public into radical thinking. Can you justify their poetry in that context?"

"No, I can't. To be frank, they have used some figures of speech, but it served no real purpose. In my opinion, they seem to follow the adage, 'we need a thorn to remove a thorn.' They believed a strong medication is necessary when a horrible malaise eats up the society. The more critical the malaise is, the stronger the dosage, similar to a shock treatment for an intense healthcare problem. In my opinion, a good writer understands the issue on hand, examines carefully, and presents several angles of the issue in a cogent and appreciable manner so readers will have a chance to absorb it, contemplate on it, and draw their own conclusions. It need not be repulsive. If writers want to provoke people to action, they should give them the ability to think about their responsibilities and make their own decisions, not decide for them. But, the theories given by those writers decide for the people. They write to promote their own convictions; those writings are monolithic and devoid of sustainable reasoning."

Geetha tried to understand his logic. She could not absorb his thoughts fully; turned toward Durbhara once again. Durbhara was delivering her highly charged speech. The room was crowded. All the chairs were occupied. A few stood by the walls for want of seats.

"Are you saying there is no merit in her poetry?"

"You are asking me about the abusive language in her writings?" he asked and continued, "I do not believe that you can cleanse the evils in society by cursing and raising a rumpus. There have been such writers in all generations. In the 30s, Chalam did it. In the 60s, Digambara kavulu did it. Did those writings have any impact on society? Has the society changed for the better? I would say no. If it had changed, no need to write more such poetry. Don't you think so? Those writings served only a momentary purpose. Caused readers to get excited, to overreact, or be disgusted. Beyond that, nothing happened. The writings did not survive the test of time but remained a topic for discussion among scholars. I don't believe they can bring about the change in people's actions and their mode of thinking. Suggestion[*dhwani*] and indirect speech[*vakrokti*] are significant parts of literary style in our literature. A writer expects readers to recognize the underlying meaning, contemplate on it, and experience the beauty of it. Readers may even come up with new ideas. The language of Digambara kavulu and Durbhara has only fleeting shock value. Eventually, the shock wears off and there is nothing for the reader to think about."

Geetha looked around and said, "Oh, no. Everybody has left. Let's go into the porch. We can sit there and talk. There is one more question I have to ask you."

Both went into the porch and settled in a corner. "I would like to know your opinion on women writers. You know they had enjoyed phenomenal success in the 1950s and 60s."

"Yes. They have done a wonderful job within the purview of their abilities. From what I've seen, one general comment about them has been 'they lacked social consciousness.' I don't agree with that view. They wrote about everyday family-based problems. Those novels included mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, grandparents, and grandchildren. They have portrayed their lives and did so in a simple, straightforward language. Those stories and novels were successful because the readers could relate to them. I see nothing wrong with that. Actually, male writers did the same. Lawyers like Ra.Vi. Sastry wrote court stories and doctors like Venugopala Rao wrote stories based on his experiences as a doctor. We don't have to hold it against them. If we have to hair-split, I will add women's works were mostly subjective while men's writings were societal. I am not saying this distinction is rigid. There is a crossover like in any other field. To understand our society fully, we need both the perceptions and interpretations."

"What do you think of the style in women's writing?"

"That is an important question we need to address. It started during the British rule, but lately, it has reached an untenable level. In the past 3 or 4 decades, our critics are stuck on Western critical theories, and started evaluating Telugu writings by those standards. They have forgotten that we have a different set of cultural values, traditions, and customs. They forgot our literature flourished basically in oral tradition. Our women writers literally 'told' the stories, meaning they wrote like they were speaking to the readers in person. That was one of their strongest suits. They did not lecture, like some of our elitist male writers do. They did not seek to be teachers or preachers, especially, because women writers of 50s and 60s were not familiar with Western literature, which turned out to be both a boon and a curse."

"I have learned a lot from you today, Anantham garu. I will never forget this day. I am so glad I came to this conference. Seeing you and talking with you is worth it," Geetha said as she got up to leave.

"I am also glad. This is rare for me too," he said, smiling. She reminded of the days when readers were eager to speak to him.

Geetha took leave of him and looked around for Hari. Several attendees split into small groups and were discussing current affairs in various fields. A few feet away, she saw a gentleman pacing; he looked familiar. Then she remembered; he was a superstar two decades back; his fans adored him. Strange, he was alone here! Had this been in India, people would have gathered around him and suffocated him. Today, he was pacing up and down the hallway alone, and nobody cared! Geetha could not help but wonder how the times had changed. Like Hari would say, the power of place, or rather lack thereof!

The secretary announced a child prodigy from Chennai would perform Kuchipadi dance. He said she had given performances all over the world and received accolades; she had proved her talent at the tender age of two, and given her first performance at five.

The dancer walked on to the center of the stage. She had a charming countenance and looked dazzling with alluring attire and brilliant jewelry.

Geetha and Hari sat in a row close enough to the stage to get a good view. People around them were watching zealously. A woman next to Geetha was praising the girl non-stop. She was so cute; her dance was beyond this world; she was almost like the dancer from heaven, and so on. Geetha said, "Yes, she was beautiful," and the second time, she said, "Yes," and then, she could not keep up with the lady anymore. "You know her?" she asked. The lady went into raptures as she said, "Oh, yes, she is one of us."

"What?"

"She is a Kamma girl."

Geetha was aghast. She coughed and got up to get a sip of water. There were a few small groups engrossed in heated discussions, such as who should be the next president, whose nomination would benefit whom, and where the next conference should be held. Geetha was amused to see them so intensely involved in the discussions; it was like their decision could change the course of the Sun and the Moon.

"Let's give it to the South," one of them suggested.

"How can we give it to them? The local president married a Brahmin woman," somebody raised an objection.

"So what? He loves our plans. He respects Godavari Naidu's word."

"He may bring the Brahmin support to our association, too," added another member.

Geetha spotted Hari at a distance. He waved to her. In that moment, she felt like God Hari himself appeared in front of her. She quickly walked toward her husband. Hari said goodbye to his friends and joined Geetha.

Both of them walked toward the Art Exhibition hall. Artwork by reputable Telugu artists, Pydiraju, Damerla Rama Rao, and Bapu, were hanging on the walls, reminding viewers of the Telugu people's artistic excellence. Geetha spent hours viewing those pictures. She was overwhelmed; felt the pride of her heritage at heart.

The following day, she attended a few sessions again. Hari introduced her to several of his friends.

In the evening, entertainment followed dinner. Geetha lost interest after the previous night's experience. Hari convinced her that that night's show was by young girls and boys, who were born and raised in America. She might learn something about how some children had overcome the odds and kept our arts alive.

She followed him halfheartedly, but was not disappointed. First, four children sang classical South Indian music; that was impressive. Then followed Bharatanatyam by a girl and a boy. They performed the Lord Siva and Parvati dance. It was awesome. The next item was a dance drama called Bhakta Prahlada by four children. It was the story of a child prince, Prahlada, who proves the existence of God to his atheist father and king. Geetha was more than impressed. She could not believe those kids practiced, learned the language, pronounced the words perfectly, and gave such an impressive performance. People talk about pressures. What about these kids? How did they manage the school and peer pressure, not to mention the pressures from their parents to succeed in society?

At the end, a young dancer, a student of a renowned Kuchipudi dance guru, Vempati Chinna Satyam, performed. Geetha learned the dancer was a medical student and she traveled to India every summer to learn from her guru. What a dedication!

"I am glad I came," she said to Hari.

"Yes, we should give them credit. These kids are amazing," he said. He knew what a tremendous pressure their parents would have put on those kids.

"I wouldn't have believed if somebody said to me there is so much talent in our kids in America, had I not seen it with my eyes," she said. "You are right. There is a lot I have to learn."

"And unlearn."

"What? Unlearn what?"

"You have to, we all have to, overcome the misconceptions about America, American lifestyle and American mode of thinking."

"I guess," she said, heaving a deep sigh.

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Geetha had been looking for Ranga Rao for the past two days. She had spotted him at a distance a couple of times, but each time missed him. After several attempts, she cut through the crowd and reached him. Within 4 feet from him, she felt the strong smell of a French perfume. Ranga Rao recognized her and smiled. He said, "Hi, how are you? You've not changed a bit."

Geetha threw a quizzical look. He wore a loose silk shirt and dhoti; had a gold chain on his neck and a foreign cigar between his dainty fingers. Three diamond rings adorned his fingers on the same hand that held the cigarette.

It was hard to tell what she was feeling at that moment. He did not seem to have any feelings at all.

"Where is your hubby?" he asked casually.

She pointed toward Hari. Hari noticed it and waved.

"Any kids?"

"No. You?"

"Three boys and two girls."

"What are they studying?"

"Yes. They all are in school except the last one. The eldest is in high school," he stopped for a second and added, "I think," stopped again and then, said, "My wife takes care of those matters. My job is only to make money. I don't mind what she does or how she manages."

Geetha's interest in him dwindled. To her relief, Ranga Rao saw somebody, excused himself, and moved away.

Her spirits died. Something was missing. What was it? Was it because of the time and place?

On the third day, the guests said goodbye to each other and left. The kingmakers lingered to attend the plenary session.

At the airport, Geetha saw the dancer and her father. The girl was flipping Rolling Stone magazine pages at the magazine counter. Her father was on a chair nearby, looking like he had lost the bet.

"Your daughter is talented," Geetha said to him.

He shrugged and said, "That's what everybody said."

Geetha did not know how to respond. She was quiet.

He waited a few minutes, and continued, "I have three sons and this girl, the youngest. Even as a little child, she showed an interest in dance, and everybody, family and friends, insisted I should send her to dance school. I got carried away, I suppose. I found a dance guru for her. Her dance teacher also said she possessed an unusual talent. It became an obsession with our family, and I went along with it. We all believed a better teacher would help improve her chances of becoming a great dancer; moved to Vijayawada at first, and then to Hyderabad. We ended up in Chennai, all in the name of getting a more reputable teacher. Now, here we are. Now I know, nobody cares about her talent, I mean really. It is all a hype." He shook his head vigorously and disapprovingly.

Geetha struggled to find words.

Apparently, his family members and well-wishers pushed him to the edge. They told him it would be a big opportunity to further her career.

"Maybe it is not all that bad. She has gotten some exposure," Geetha said.

"And 15000 rupees debt."

"The Secretary asked the audience to help you. Didn't you get it?"

"Not enough."

"Sorry," Geetha said. Hari came and said it was time for boarding.

"I wish her all the best," she said to him and followed Hari.

Both boarded the plane and settled in their seats. "So, what do you think of the meeting?" Hari asked.

Geetha could not respond right away. She was grappling with several emotions. Meeting with Anantham garu, the children's performances, and the young girl's dance were gratifying. On the other hand, meeting with Ranga Rao was disappointing. So also seeing all other Indians. She did not get the satisfaction she had spent two days among "our people."

"Okay," she said.

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Geetha was on the phone with Tapathi. She told Tapathi about the rebel writer, the young dancer, and her chat with Anantham garu. "Anantham garu mentioned his viewpoints on women's writings in detail and Kutumba Rao's writings, and gave a short speech on portraying familial issues in short stories. It was all Greek and Latin to me."

"Critiques and observations are always ambiguous. They do not present an incontrovertible or definitive truths. They throw in some general views, like testing waters, so to speak."

Geetha felt dejected. She could not get over Anantham's comments on modern day fiction. She wrote two stories--one about Durbhara, the feminist writer, and the other about the young dancer. She showed them to Tapathi.

Tapathi read them and said they were okay. Geeta too thought so, and that was not a good feeling. She tore them up and threw them into the trash bin.

"It is alright to tear them up and throw them away. But don't throw away your thoughts. Sometimes, it takes several days, even months, to write a good story," Tapathi said.

Geetha was restless. Both the dancer and the writer were on her mind for a long time. It was amusing, even funny, come to think of it, that both the women had goals; right or wrong, they had been thinking about their future. *I must admire them for it*, she thought.

"I want to go to India," she said to Hari one day.

"That is the real reason for your restlessness. The meetings reminded you of motherland," he said. "Let me look into the travel arrangements. In the meantime, you ask your manager about taking the days off."

After getting a nod from Hari, she talked to her manager. Just a few days back, he had mentioned something about her promotion. Now she wanted to know if her trip to India would jeopardize her chances for promotion.

"No, no problem. Don't worry about it. Family first. You go ahead, plan your trip. We will work around your plan. How long you will be gone?" he said.

"Not for long. Just two weeks."

"Fine. You check with the HR and find out how many days you have to your credit; the rest of the days will be counted as leave without pay."

Geetha was happy it was settled so quickly and easily. She called Hari and told him the good news. She also called Babayi and told him about her trip to India.

Bhanu Babayi was excited. "When? Both?" he asked several questions.

Geetha answered them, smiling, "No, only me. No, I can't tell when, yet. Hari is looking into the reservations. I will let you know as soon as I know the ticket is booked. Say hi to everybody at home. Will see you all soon. Yes, I am also excited. Okay, I have to go. Will talk to you later."

"You have changed," Bhanu commented.

"What change?"

"I don't know. The way you are speaking, I guess."

"Is that so? Anyway, I will call you and let you know after Hari booked the ticket," she said and hung up.

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After a month, Geetha got on the plan to India. Before leaving, she said to Hari at the airport, "I am worried about you. Might be hard to manage alone."

Hari laughed teasingly and said, "Oh, come on. I have managed before you've come, you know. I will be alright. You be careful. After living here for a while, everything looks and feels different there. Houses are not the same, people are not the same."

"Aha, go away. I don't believe it. It will be same for me," she said. She believed it would be the same for her because she had not changed. That was what she believed, at least.

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Bhanu received Geetha at the Mumbai airport and took her to Vijayawada. It was overwhelming for both of them. "It feels like you are from another world," said Bhanu.

"Take rest. You can visit my home and my wife after a couple of days," he said and left.

Geetha was choked to say anything. She just nodded.

At home, it was like a festive occasion. Everybody gathered around her and kept asking so many questions she could barely keep up with them.

"Let her take some rest. It is such a long journey," father Paramesam dispersed them all.

Father looked much older than she had imagined. Loss of wife took its toll. Geetha's eyes filled with tears; her father's eyes were wet. A lot of things had changed since she had left. Besides her mother's death, Bhanu married his colleague at work, Usha Rani, and moved to his own place. Younger brother, Chitti, had grown tall; was studying second year college. Older brother was working as a clerk in a store. Bamma was the same, moaning and groaning. She was the only person in whom Geetha found no change.

"How would I know if you don't write to me? Why did you not write to me that father is not well," Geetha said; she was genuinely annoyed.

"Father told us not to write to you; he did not want you to worry. You are so far away and all that, you know," the older brother said.

She sat next to her father and listened to him as he narrated various events that had happened in her absence. She never imagined that so many things could have happened in just a few years. She was so engrossed in her life in America, she did not think of the people at home. It just did not occur to her that things could change dramatically while she was far away in a foreign country.

She went to Babayi's home over the weekend. Usha Rani was just another ordinary person, nothing special about her. She greeted Geetha kindly and then, poured her heart out, as if she had known Geetha all her life, "I am always sick; headache, back pain, knee pain, something or other. And the kids! They're the very demons, I'll say. As the saying goes, they are born to destroy. *With them around, no rains in the sky, no crops on the ground.* As for the domestic help, I don't even want to go there. You raise your voice, they are gone. They just drop

the dish they are cleaning and leave in a heartbeat. Your Babayi is no help either. For him, strangers are more important than me and kids. I am crushed with the chores at home and outside."

Geetha sat there quietly, listening to her rambling.

After a while, Usha Rani stopped talking about her miseries and turned to the attractive life in America. "Life is heavenly in America, I heard. They said you have machines for everything. No trouble at all, right? You must be having a great life. Do you have a car? One or two? Babayi says you have a job. I am sure you are making a lot of money. I too have a job, good for blabbering only. We have two incomes, but gone in two weeks. The other two weeks, just a torture. Forget it. *Nobody cries for someone who dies daily*. Lucky me, I can't blame my parents either; they did not arrange my marriage!"

Geetha did not know what to say. She sat there listening. She had lunch went home.

The following day, she called Siva Rao Mamayya and took Satyam's phone number.

Satyam spoke with Geetha lovingly, asked several questions, and told her a few things about herself. She had four children; two boys and two girls. The first child was a girl. She said her mother-in-law was very excited about having a girl in their family.

"I can understand," Geetha said. She remembered how fond Kanakam Atthayya had been of her.

"She was so happy to see your letter to me," Satyam said.

"So, you have received my letter. Why didn't you write back to me?"

Satyam clucked her tongue and said, "No reason, just laziness. I was thinking of writing back to you; time flew away."

They chatted for a while and hung up.

After a week, Geetha went to Guntur. Siva Rao sent his car to pick her up at the bus station.

Kanakam Atthayya put her arm around Geetha's shoulder, walked her to the sofa, and sat next to her. She said, "You are so thin, aren't you eating?" It brought a smile to her face. "Everybody here says I am thin. I am not thin, and, yes, I am eating fine," Geetha said, laughing.

Kanakam Atthayya asked, "How is your husband? Is he nice to you? Are happy there?"

"Yes, Atthayya. Everything is nice there. No problems," Geetha said.

"You are right. It does not really matter where you are. It is all in our heads. If you think you are happy, you are happy," Kanakam said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Atthayya's concern for her was heart-warming. A thin film of tears formed in her eyes.

"Will you just sit there and chat or will you give her something to eat? After two hours on the bus, I am sure she is tired and hungry," Siva Rao chided her mildly.

"Ah! Got carried away, so long since I've seen her last. Poor thing, sure, she must be hungry. Come on, child. I've made dosas and coconut chutney for you," Kanakam said, took Geetha's hand into hers, and led her into the kitchen.

After lunch, she asked Siva Rao mamayya if she could go to see Satyam. He called the driver and told him to take Geetha to Satyam's home.

At Satyam's home, Syam was on the porch playing solitaire. He saw Geetha and asked how she was, sounding casual. He was quiet; not the person she had known in her college days. He had changed, she thought.

Satyam came out, held her friend's hand and said, "Come, come in. It feels like ages since I'd seen you last. You haven't changed a bit. How is life in America? How is your job? Making a lot of money?"

Geetha mumbled yes or no depending on the questions. She could not help but notice Satyam also had changed; she was robust and shrewd. Her status was strikingly obvious in her attire, language, and in the decor of her home. A trace of disappointment passed through Geetha's mind for a split second. She was not sure what it was about.

Within fifteen minutes, Geetha had learned a few more details about Satyam's life. Syam was a businessman in name only. Satyam took over the management. She was a member of all local, reputable social clubs such as Lion's club, Women's Network, and also, some international associations. She was so busy with her activities in the city; she was hardly home on any given day.

"You are lucky I am free today," she said.

Geetha smiled. "It sure looks that way. Thank you for making time for me," she said teasingly.

Satyam went on describing her other activities, and said, "You don't have children. How about adopting my little boy?"

Geetha was stunned. She could not believe Satyam would bring it up, and in such a businesslike fashion!

Geetha wanted to scream, partly because Satyam was not the only one who talked about it. Ever since she had come home, almost everybody--Bamma, friends and neighbors--kept mentioning it in some form or the other. Why did she have not kids yet? Did both husband and wife decided on not having babies, or just his? Did they consult a doctor? Did she try performing this or that puja? Why did she not make a vow to this god or that god?

It got to a point she regretted making the trip, almost. She thought Satyam was not like them; she was her best friend; but, she was wrong. Apparently, she miscalculated. Satyam had changed. She was no more the friend Geetha had known. Now she was Satyavathi madam, a high-class socialite; and a popular social activist at that.

Geetha sat there staring at once her "best friend but not anymore," Satyam.

Satyam did not stop; she reiterated her original question, "You did not answer my question. Have you made a decision already? Who is it? Your brother's son?"

Geetha took a deep breath and said, "No. We have not made any decisions. In fact, we have not thought about it at all; it never crossed our minds."

"Well, you'd better start thinking. I think it is better to come to a decision while you are here. Let me know if you have any questions."

"Stop it, Satyam. I did not come here to discuss my having or not having children, much less about adoption. Anyway, it is getting late. I have to go. Atthayya will be waiting for me."

Satyam said okay and called the driver.

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Late at night, Hari called from America to inquire how she was doing. Geetha told him how everybody was pestering her about having no kids. Hari also was annoyed. "Tell them it is none of their business," he nearly screamed, and immediately apologized. He said, "Sorry, that must be very frustrating for you. Well, that is our people, I must say. Funny, though. We feel good when they help us; we won't call it interference. But, on occasions like these, it drives us up the wall. That is the way we are and our people are. We need to learn to accept both. I am not blaming you for being frustrated. I am sorry you have to go through this by yourself. Just try to ignore them. Think of it as a temporary annoyance. You will leave them behind and come home soon enough."

"Probably, you are right. I didn't think of it as a trait in our people until I went to America!"

"It is what it is. Human nature! In fact, I've come across such people among Americans, too. Sometimes people say things or ask questions only because they can't think of anything else to talk about."

Geetha said, "True, I suppose. We need to find a way of setting aside such peculiarities. Let's dismiss it as human nature."

"Right. Tell them we have not thought about it, not yet."

Geetha was on the porch, lost in thought. She recalled her 5th Grade math teacher, she had met at the Ma.Te. meetings. He recognized Geetha and asked how she was doing. Then, he told her his story. Briefly put, he went to America 10 years back, did not like the environment, and moved back to India, did not like the working conditions there, and returned to America. Currently, his wife wanted to moving back to India because she missed the domestic help she was used to in India.

His shuttling back and forth between the two countries brought a smile to her face. Suddenly, she felt oof on her neck, startled, and turned around. Her friend, Saroja, was there with a naughty smile. She said, "What is it so amusing?"

Geetha said, "I didn't see you coming? You scared me. Come, let's go in."

Saroja and her husband also went back and forth - between India to America, and at the end, settled in Delhi. She was in Guntur for a brief visit with her parents.

"Earlier you've asked me why I was smiling. Well, I was confused. Where can we find happiness? I mean, in the real sense of the term. Since you have lived in both the countries, you tell me where did you find happiness? Here or in America?"

"That is a conundrum, like the questions of Bhethala.³² If we can find the correct answer for that question, we can save many people from plenty of

³² Refers to a mythological story. King Vikramaditya was asked to bring a vampire from the forest. The vampire agreed to go with him on the condition the king would answer his questions truthfully, and, if he failed to do so knowingly, his head would be smashed into 1000 pieces. All the questions were conundrums, and the king succeeds in giving the correct answers.

headaches and heartaches. Never mind that. There is no convincing answer for it. Tell me about you. What are you doing? Where are the children?"

"Oh, no, don't you start on that. Everybody has the same question; it is driving me crazy," Geetha said, vexed.

"Alright, I won't. Tell me about the things you would like to talk about."

Geetha was relieved. Finally, she had found a person, she could share her concerns without reservations.

"Let's go to the banks of the river Krishna. It is peaceful there," Geetha said. She told her father she was going out with Saroja and left.

Saroja looked into Geetha's face keenly. Obviously, she was grappling with an enigma; probably, nobody could resolve her problem.

They were walking in the sand, watching the slowly moving goods train on the Krishna barrage.

Saroja spoke in a low voice, "I have no good answer for your question, Geetha. Do you watch TV?"

"Rarely. Why?"

"I am thinking of a parallel to your question. There is a game show called 'Price is Right.' The host shows an item and asks the contestant to guess the correct price of it. The contestant looks at the audience for help. Let's say there are 30 people in the audience. They all shout their guesses. Each one gives a different price. How can the contestant know who's guess is correct?"

"I don't know. You tell me. I am in no mood for games."

"Exactly, that's what I am saying. The contestant cannot decide, either. He can't tell whose guess could be the right one. In the end, he has to decide it by himself. But then, the question, why did he ask them? He could have done so in the first place, but he does not. That is the way we all are. In the heart of hearts, we all know what we want. Yet, we look to others for, let's say, support. We may or may not get the answer we are looking for. At the end of the day, we do what we want to do."

Geetha stared at Saroja. Is Saroja saying that she would find the right answer by herself?

"I did not finish medicine. Suresh has health issues. So, I follow him wherever he goes. For a couple of years, when my son was a tiny baby, I struggled, but now, I have learned to manage with him. There was no end for folks, both at home and in town, to pester me. They all said I wasted my brains; it was stupid of me to discontinue studies, and I had no backbone. Some feminists howled I had turned the clock back to two decades. I did not care for any of that garbage. You just ignore them and you will have the peace of mind which you can't get in any other way. That is what I think I have achieved, and what I have."

Saroja's face glowed as she spoke. Geetha could see her friend had found what she wanted out of life. She took her friend's hand into hers, and said, "You said you did not know much, but you have said it superbly. That is what anybody wants in life, being happy with oneself."

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Geetha returned to America and got back into her routine. Hari was busy as usual with his work. Geetha was promoted to full-time supervisor position and got busy with her job. She hardly had any time to do anything else.

Hari was traveling constantly, either for consultation or to start a new office in another city. He was spending less and less time at home. Occasionally, he asked Geetha to go to Chicago to office parties. Geetha was not interested in such social events. "You all discuss your office matters. Watching you all would be like watching a foreign film for me. I don't feel comfortable at those parties," she told him.

He tried to persuade her, claiming her absence at the parties could be misinterpreted.

"You mean you want me there as a showpiece?"

"I am not saying 'as a showpiece'. Just to show that I have your support in my activities. You know all my accomplishments are because of your support."

"I can give it in writing that you have my wholehearted support," Geetha said teasingly.

"See, that is what I am talking about. You have a good sense of humor. That is what my colleagues like about you."

Geetha did not like it, but went along with his request. She wore a cotton saree and matching bangles.

"You are beautiful," he said.

Lately, he was using such phrases, somewhat unusual by Indian standards. In India, usually, it would be a nod or a meaningful look, but never in so many words.

Geetha nodded slightly and fell into reflecting on their altered relationship. In her mind, Hari saw only how she appeared but did not see what was going on at heart. Did he not want to see what was going on there? Or, maybe he did not want to see it for fear of finding something he did not want to find or it might not suit his taste.

It was a two and a half hour journey to the home of their host, Mr. Thompson's. The home was big and the decor was magnificent. No question Martha Stewart would be pleased with her taste. Obviously, decorating the home was a favorite hobby of Mrs. Thompson, Geetha thought.

It was a small group. There were only 8 in all. Mr. Williams came from New York. They greeted each other. Geetha asked how his son was doing. Mr. Thompson asked her what she would like to have. She said juice.

Thompson turned to the other guests and asked each what drink they would prefer.

Geetha noticed that even in high class American homes men and women formed into separate groups. After an hour or so, the lady of the house set up the table. Mr. Thompson helped her. She announced that the dinner was ready and showed each their seat, as they walked in. Each took a serving and passed the dish to the next guest. Geetha could not help noticing how methodically it was all done. Again, she reminisced it was so in India too; the one difference was one person would serve the food.

After they finished eating, they moved into the living room. Mr. Thompson told some funny stories and everybody laughed. All the guests laughed boisterously. It looked like everything was planned; well-planned, to be specific.

On their way home, Hari said, "See, you did not want to go. Have you not enjoyed the party?"

"Yes," she said inanely.

Probably, he felt guilty; he tried to explain his situation to her. "If you had not shown up, they would think we have some issues, and that you were not supportive. Then they would say, if I cannot get support at home, how can I get support from my colleagues. They might even say I don't have team spirit. It is all about optics."

She heard him and what she heard did not sit well with her. It felt like they were living for somebody, not for themselves.

Their relationship cracked slightly without either of them realizing it. Time passed by like the train on a railway track, naturally and dispassionately.

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A friend suggested to Hari to buy a house.

"House?"

"Yes, a house. What? You never heard of it?" the friend teased him.

"I didn't think of it."

"Well, start thinking. Now it is the buyers' market. You might get a good deal, if you know where to look for it," his friend said and went on to explain the advantages of owning a home. It would be a good investment, necessary for his income level and, good for tax write offs, his status as a home-owner, and the pride of home ownership! There was a nice ring to it.

Hari said he would talk to his wife about it and ended the discussion for the moment.

He asked Geetha. She said maybe; there was not much enthusiasm in her tone. It took 3 months for them to decide to buy a house. Then two questions arose; where and in what range. If Chicago, the prices were high and Geetha would have to leave her job. If Madison, things would be the same for Hari, meaning driving home on the weekends. They could meet half-way and find a home in Rockford, but the housing market in Rockford was terrible. They might not even get back their investment when they want to sell. Finally, Madison appeared to be their best option. Madison had earned the reputation as the "most livable" city for over a decade.

Hari called Hanumayya since he had been in Madison for a long time and could give him the best advice.

"It is twenty years since I had bought this house. The market has changed a lot since then. Talk to Damodaram. He bought recently," Hanumayya said and gave him Damodaram's number.

Hari had met Damodaram previously at some party, but never really made friends with him. He called him and told him he was thinking of buying a house and wanted his advice.

Damodaram was friendly on the phone, gave a brief lecture about the pros and cons of buying a house for 15 minutes, and asked him in what range he was looking for.

"I don't know. I have no idea. What do you suggest? We are not looking for anything fancy; just a small house in a peaceful neighborhood would be nice, I guess."

Once again, Damodaram gave a short description of several neighborhoods and their prices, appreciation, etc. and concluded with a note, "Don't worry. You talk to Brahmanandam, a.k.a. Benny. He will explain to you in detail and show the right home for you. Here is his number. Remember, he won't pick up the phone on the first ring, may not even pick up at all. They want us to think they are too busy to answer the phone. We know it is a gimmick and they know we know; part of the game. Never mind all that. You call him and leave a message. He will call you back in a day or two."

Hari smiled, thanked Damodaram and hung up.

Even as predicted, the answering machine greeted him. He left a brief message and waited.

Benny called back the next day, apologized for missing his call, and asked where they could meet for further discussion.

"Whatever is convenient for you. We can come to your office tomorrow afternoon," Hari said.

"That would be fine. Actually, I have an appointment tomorrow morning with another family, not too far from your house. I can stop by at your place after that, if you don't mind," Benny said. He knew buyers were usually nervous and felt less threatened in their own environment. Also, Benny could get an idea of the buyers' lifestyle and mode of thinking.

They agreed to meet at Hari's place around noon the next day. Benny was right on time. Hari invited him in, introduced Geetha, and asked if he would like a drink.

Benny said politely he was fine, and said, "Hari garu, there is one thing I want to make clear at the outset. I know the normal practice is to ask you what your needs are. However, I need to tell you my position first. It is three years since I have stopped working with 'our folks'."

Hari and Geetha were taken aback.

"Really!? Why?"

"Yes, really. Let me explain. After explaining my position, if you still are interested in working with me, I will work with you."

"You are right. Mutual understanding is important. Tell us."

"Damodaram garu gave you my number, right?"

"Yes."

"Are you aware he has the real estate license?"

"No. We don't know. Why did he refer us to you then?"

"I am coming to that. Actually, it is important for me to let you know the tricks in this business," Benny said and went on to elaborate on why he stopped working with Indians.

He said, "Buying a home means coughing up a large amount of money. That is scary. That is natural. I don't blame them. They constantly worry they might not get their dollar's worth, might be taken for a ride, and so on. Then, they consult other friends, and those friends feed them more fears. There lies the problem. They get more scared and pester me with their baseless fears instead of trusting my expertise. Tell me, who do you believe? The person who had bought one house or the one who had been watching the market for years and sold two dozen houses? Thus, their lack of trust and constant worry are one reason to dump me. The second issue with them, which actually is worse, is this 'our man' thing. They start with me or another Indian with the basic assumption that 'He is one of us, our fellow. He will look after our best interest'. It starts out with a small chitchat like, 'How is the housing market? We are toying with the idea of buying a home.' That is a music to any broker's ears, you know. I get excited and tell them about a few neighborhoods, how the market is, which area works best for them, and which homes would get the best value for their money. They will ask me to show a few homes in various neighborhoods. That goes on for a few months or even years. And then, all of a sudden, they stop returning my calls. In a few months, I will know that they have bought a house from another Realtor."

Hari and Geetha were stunned. "What? How could they?"

Benny shook his head showing his desperation. "I don't know how, but they can and will do so. They lull their conscience and forget they've cheated me, I suppose. In the process, I lose not only their business but also my respect among co-workers in my office. They wonder why Indians don't stick with me. I have no answer for that. Anyway, what I am saying is, among those who have cheated me like that, Damodaram takes the cake."

Hari was aware of the complexities in the business world, and meanness among Indians, but not to this extent. Horrible, he thought. He could not believe it.

"But he gave me your phone number," he said with a quizzical look on his face.

"That is the beauty of it. After buying his home, he found out that getting a real estate license was easy. He got the license and got into the business of sending referrals. That way, he does not have to go around showing homes and dealing with clients. I do all the work. If I sell a home, he will get a 20% referral fee. If I don't, he has nothing to lose. Additionally, people like you think he is such a nice person, so kind and helpful. Isn't it ironic?"

"Sorry," Hari said.

Geetha went into the kitchen to make coffee.

Benny clucked his tongue and continued, "Anyway, what I am saying is the spirit of 'our folks' in me has died. Usually, I turn my Indian clients to another American Realtor. Funny, all our people give me such a hard time, treat me like my work is not work, but become little kitties before Americans; no doubts, no questions. Please, don't take me wrong. I am angry because our folks don't think I am in business to make a living just like them."

Hari was silent for a few minutes and said, "Well, I think it is in the nature of business. Each for his own interest."

"That's true. I am not saying Americans don't act like that. It hurts worse when it is an Indian, since it started with the assumption that 'we Indians should

stick together.' I must admit, there are some Indians who stood by me all the way to the end. On one occasion, the buyers and the seller were negotiating with no end in sight. Finally, I offered to cut my commission by \$1000, hoping the seller would give in. The buyer, an Indian, would not accept that. She told the seller that her agent, that was me, must be paid full commission. I got it. What a graceful lady!" The thought brought a smile to his lips.

"Benny garu, I am glad you have met some good people, too. We also like to be one of those sensible people. I am a businessman myself and I also believe in honesty. If we start with you, we will stay with you, and become homeowners with your help. I am giving you my word."

"Thank you. I heard you are not that type and that's why I've agreed to meet with you." Benny said.

Geetha returned with coffee and pakora on a plate.

"I am just curious. Have you ever had such problems with Americans?" Geetha asked.

"Of course, they do, too. But, they don't start with this 'we belong together, we should stick together' song and dance, and then let me down. I am aware the clients come and go; that is the way the business is. However, it hurts worse when our own people start like they trust me because we belong to one race, and then, take me for a ride. My standing at work suffers, too, because I failed to bring business from my own people."

"I understand. Let's start. You are our Realtor. What is the next step?" Hari asked.

Benny took a sip of coffee and said, "Well, the first step is to look into your finances. Before that, tell me a little about your needs and expectations."

They talked about their financial situation and possible neighborhoods for an hour. Benny suggested a lender, and added they did not have to stick with only that lender, but could shop around as they pleased.

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Hari called the lender Benny suggested and made an appointment with him. Lender asked him a few questions about their income, obligations, and asked how many credit cards they possessed.

"I am not sure; ten, I think. You know, between me and my wife, we have collected a few. Every store offers it free and we would say 'why not' and take it," Hari said, smiling.

"Well, it is not good for credit rating. Get rid of them."

"We are not using them. There are no unpaid cards."

"Still, they would be taken into account when your credit rating is assessed. Keep only the cards you are using and cancel the rest," Lender advised them.

"Also, your records show you loaned somebody \$3000.00 and no record of getting it back."

Hari was shocked. "That is a hand loan to a friend. It is personal. How does that matter?"

"Yes, it matters. Try to get it back. Tell them you need it. Every bit helps in counting your assets."

Hari and Geeta got their first lesson in purchasing a home. He told the lender he would look into it, and both went home.

Later that evening, Hari called Tesh and explained the situation. Tesh was amicable. He said, "She is impulsive, but has a heart of gold. Don't worry about her. I will bring the check for the amount in a little while."

Hari was glad it was taken care of without hassle.

He called their lender and gave him the good news. Lender suggested the price range based on the information he had gotten from Hari.

Hari conveyed the same to Benny. Officially, their house search began. Both Hari and Geetha were excited and nervous also.

Benny explained a few other details such as finding whether the seller has the property free and clear, and the property was in good condition, etc. He also said he would show a few houses first, which would help him get a better idea of what they were looking for in a home. They agreed and went with their realtor to see a few properties. As always, Benny noticed some areas of disagreement between husband and wife. Hari wanted a modern house with state-of-the-art amenities. Geetha wanted a small house in a quiet neighborhood, and requiring very little maintenance. Benny understood their views and selected a few houses that could help them revise their wishes and needs.

Within 3 months, Hari and Geetha became the proud owners of a mid-range house in a friendly neighborhood.

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A year passed by since they had bought the house. There were major changes in Geetha's bank. "Don't panic. We are fully aware of your welfare," the manager assured the employees. In the next 3 weeks, several employees were fired; they were paid 2 months' severance pay and excellent referrals. Geetha was not fired, but demoted to a lower cadre. Her new boss was young and inexperienced. His only qualification for the job was his relationship with one of the Trustees on the Board. He could recite rules but no practical knowledge how things work in real world. That became a problem for Geetha.

In Hari's case, it was the opposite. His business burst like fireworks and spread to other countries as well.

During one of those days, Geetha told Hari that working with her new boss was getting tiresome.

"Quit the stupid job," He said, with his head buried in the files in front of him. His words 'stupid job' stung Geetha. She never thought Hari would belittle her job like that. It was thoughtless of him; and, for the first time, she saw he did not think much of her job. She valued her job dearly. After arriving in the U.S., it was only that job that made her think of herself and her identity. She felt like a person. Her colleagues at work treated her as a person. Anytime anybody had a computer glitch, she fixed it for them. For that reason, they all treated her with respect. It never occurred to her that her husband would think of her job as 'stupid'. It might not be a great job, but it gave her enormous satisfaction. She also got friends like Kesha because of that job. It meant a lot to her.

His comment pulled down her spirits. It reminded her of the day she had arrived at the New York airport. The thought that "Here, I am for myself, I am the

only one for me," was sown deeply in her heart. He had changed. Did he? Or was it her?

Within a week, Hari got a new project in Hong Kong. He went home, bubbling with joy, and told Geetha the news.

"Good," she said.

"This is a good opportunity for you, too. You are not happy with your job at the bank. A change of place will be good for you."

"What can I do there? You are always swamped with your work. What do I do? Sit at home staring through the window?"

"New place; new people. I am sure you can find something. There will be other women like you, you know."

Geetha nodded vaguely and went away. She was in a fix. There was some truth in what he had said; new place, new people, and also new attractions, maybe. Nevertheless, there was some uneasiness too. Can she find the same satisfaction she had found in her job here? The thought of her new supervisor was a plus for her move to the new place. Could not think straight. Maybe, I should ask Saroja; she is level-headed. But then, what can she say? She had made her point of view clear when she narrated the game show episode. She would say, 'Do what you want'. At the end of the day, I would have to decide for myself.

Geetha made her decision. She told him, "You go first and check out how things are there. I will join you later."

"Alright. Whatever you would like to do," he said.

Hari left for Hong Kong. Geetha returned to her normal routine. To her surprise, Hari's absence did not bother her as much as before. Showed how far apart they had drifted, she told herself.

A month went by. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, Geetha received a phone call. It was not normal for Hari to call that late at night. She picked up the phone. Her heart was racing.

"Ah! Oh! Geetha dear, guess what! Great news! I am so so happy, I can't speak." Hari was so overwhelmed he could hardly speak.

Geetha was relieved it was not bad news. "Wonderful. Congratulations."

"I have clinched a great deal. Millions. We are ... "

The phone line went dead; scary. Tried to call back but got only a busy signal. She was baffled; her heart was thumping a hundred miles an hour. Why the line went dead? Why did he not call back? *Is he busy calling other friends to share the good news?* She waited for 20 minutes, but to no avail.

She lay back on the sofa, closed her eyes, and contemplated on their life up to the moment. After all, we came here for this; for this success, leaving behind mother, father, siblings, sweet home, and everything! No wonder he is overwhelmed. Poor thing, he worked so hard to accomplish this; clinching a deal worth millions is not a small matter ...

She dozed off, unaware for how long. There was a knock on the door. She woke, rushed to the door and opened it. Hari's colleague Tom was standing there.

"May I come in?" he asked.

The look on his face sent chills down her spine.

"What happened?" she asked. The words sounded like coming from the depths of her heart. He walked into the room, took her by the shoulder, and walked her to the sofa. He said, "Hari is an amazing person, a perfect gentleman."

"What happened? Is he alright?" She was about to break down.

"Cardiac arrest, they said. I am sorry."

"What?"

"Cardiac arrest. He was gone in a split second, they said."

Tom gave her the details gently and with concern. While Hari was on the phone the previous night, he choked and fell to the floor. Nobody knew until the next morning. Possibly, too much champagne the night before and the excitement; he was hysterical; it threw him into a chaos and led to his death.

"Do you have any relatives here?" Tom asked.

Geetha gave him Tapatih's number. She told him she was on her way, left Chitra at her mother's place and rushed to Geetha's home.

After Tapatih arrived, Tom left, after telling her to call him if she needed any help, assured her he would look into the matters at work concerning Hari's sad demise.

Tapathi called Ramana to give him the sad news. Answering machine picked up the call. Tapathi left a message and hung up.

Within a few hours, several friends gathered. Some of them brought food.

What next? Is there anybody to be with Geetha until she feels better? Are there any relatives to look after her? Anybody coming from India? Did he leave a Will? Does Geetha know about their financial matters?

Will she stay in the States or go back to India?

Questions, questions, questions. Geetha could not understand any of the questions; not one word; nothing was registering in her brain. She could not think, could not feel; she sat there with a blank look on her face.

Until now, she did not think about the future; the days passed by without her consciously making an effort for it. She had not thought something like this could happen; it just never occurred to her. In a split second, her life turned upside down. She thought she stood on a sturdy rock, and it slipped away from under her feet in the blink of an eye, without a warning. Her entire life came down crumbling like a sand castle. Darkness engulfed the room.

She was worried, not about tomorrow, but today and about the moment she was in; she was struggling for an answer to the question why it happened. *Maybe I should have listened to him and went with him.* No, it was no consolation.

Tapathi went into the living room, told the guests Geetha needed some rest, and it would be best if they left. They all offered to help Geetha anyway they could. Tapathi said okay and waited until they left.

After they all left, she went into the bedroom again and sat next to Geetha. Geetha hid her face in her friend's lap and broke into heartrending sobs.

The following day, a few more things became clearer. Nobody from India was coming to be by her side. Her mother was dead; father was too old to travel; brother was busy with work, and sister could not leave her family. Hari's mother

said, "What is the point of my visiting her? Everything is so different there. I would be no help; somebody would have to help me."

It took a week to bring the body home. Hanumayya and Madhav took care of the funeral arrangements.

Geetha kept nodding for everything they said without actually absorbing what they had said. Basically, she was insensitive to her surroundings.

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Things were settling down slowly. All her Telugu friends took turns to be with Geetha and made sure she was never alone. They also took turns to bring food; made sure Geetha was not left alone. But, it was not in her nature to commiserate with others; she would rather handle her tragedy by herself. But, she was not equipped with the right language to say so to them. It was a kind of double tragedy. She had been staying away from most of them after the unsavory incident with Sumati. Now, the same people came to be by her side. She told Tapathi about the quandary she was in. Tapathi suggested she might consider going back to work. Sounded like a good idea.

She called the manager and told him she would return to work starting the next Monday.

The first day, after a long leave of absence, she set foot in the office. Her colleagues expressed sympathies. Somebody put a huge flower bouquet on her desk. She felt awkward as each person came to her and said sorry. She was exasperated and gave up. She told herself she had to accept all that in stride.

Eventually, the subject of financial matters came up. Hari's company declared bankruptcy. Tom, who had promised to take care of the finances, disappeared without a word. "Sue them," Madhav said. Hanumayya discouraged it, saying it would not be in her best interest.

Her life turned upside down in the blink of an eye and without warning. She had to start all over again.

She could manage with the flimsy income from her job, but it was not enough to cover the mortgage. She called Benny and told him to sell her present house and find a smaller one. He expressed his condolences and promised he would do the best he could. He added, "I will tell you the truth. It is hardly a year since you've bought it. I will try, but you may not get much from the sale; at best, may just break even. Finding a smaller house to fit your budget might be very difficult."

"Do whatever you can. I trust you," she said and signed the contract, giving him the right to put it on the market.

Friends' visits slowed down; eventually, fewer and fewer came to visit with her. Only Bhagyam continued to stop by and inquire about her welfare. She also brought prasadam since Geetha was not going to bhajan at her home. One day, she suggested Geetha should go to the bhajan upcoming Sunday. "It gives you a peace of mind. Consider it as a diversion," she said.

Geetha felt awkward, but expressed her unwillingness politely. "Maybe I did not mention it before, Bhagyam garu. I don't believe in Baba or any other preacher. Please, forgive me," she said.

"Don't think of it as worshiping Baba. A god is a god in any form, right? Or, don't think of it as a bhajan, but a social event. Come for prasadam, if not for worship," she quipped with a smile.

Geetha could not help but smile and accept it. It was hard to say no to her; she was a nice person.

Geetha went late and sat at the back of the room by the wall. Bhagyam was happy to see her. A few others greeted her and asked how she was. None of them got into a meaningful conversation; felt weird. As soon as the bhajan ended, she got up to leave. Took leave of the hostess and turned toward the door. A little girl approached her and stretched her arms; "pick me up" posture!

Geetha smiled, picked her up, and looked around.

Achala went to her quickly, said, "Hi Auntie," and took the little girl from Geetha's hands with a smile.

"Is she your baby? Cute. I did not know you have a girl," Geetha said. It was a surprise to her. She had known Achala for a while, but never asked if she had children. Achala never mentioned it either.

"Yes, Auntie. She was in India with my mother. I brought her back last month. She mistook you for my mother's younger sister. In fact, I too can see the resemblance," Achala said.

"Nice," Geetha said, spent a few more minutes with them both, and left.

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One day, Achala visited Geetha, along with her little girl.

Geetha was happy to see them and invited them. Achala brought a few books. They were The Essence of Upanishads, an interpretation of Bhagavad Gita for beginners, and a collection of articles on Vedanta.

"Nice of you. Usually, I don't read this kind of books, not interested, Achala!" she said, and asked the little girl what was her name.

"Gagana," she said, spreading both hands wide.

"Meaning huge as the sky, nice," said Geetha.

"Don't ask me; those two little feet are never stay steadily on the ground, not even for a few minutes; firecrackers always."

Geetha laughed. "You gave her the name when she was born. So, you must know how she was going to turn even then?"

"Good question. Maybe she likes to behave as the name dictates."

Geetha made coffee and snacks. As Achala was ready to leave, Geetha said, "Please, don't get me wrong. I am not much of a reader, and not at all in a mood to read, especially now. Keep them with you for now. I will ask you, if and when I want to read."

Achala would not listen. "No, Auntie. You must read them. Or else I leave the books and this firecracker, too, with you," she said jokingly.

Geetha told the truth when she said she was not much of a reader. As a matter of habit, she read selectively and very slowly. She would spend more time reflecting on a sentence or an incident rather than reading the book to the end. Nevertheless, Achala kept insisting it would be good for her. Geetha had no choice but to take one book, an anthology of articles on Vedanta by a popular Swami.

Out of curiosity, Geetha flipped a few pages but found nothing that captured her attention. Most of the articles were common knowledge among Indians. Even

a vegetable vendor would know that much about our Vedanta. She could not understand why or how Achala got into reading these books.

Geetha asked her the same question one day.

"A kind of funny story. My parents do not believe in our religion and traditions. So, I grew up without knowing our religious customs and traditions. One day, I met an American, Franklin. I was stunned by his knowledge of Hinduism. He could lecture on our rituals for hours without fumbling on even the smallest detail. Then the umpteen questions Americans ask about our culture, traditions and customs, also got to me. I could not answer their questions, most of the time. That was humiliating. That's how I started it. I have learned a lot and I like it too."

Geetha smiled. "Well, whatever the motivation, it did you good. Never hurts to learn about our culture."

"There is one more story; even more interesting. A few years back, I met a girl from Kerala. The family moved to America when she was 12. Imagine that. I moved to America when I was only one-year-old. Yet, I know Andhra Pradesh is a state and, so also Kerala. When I told her I was from Andhra Pradesh, guess what she said."

"What? Did she ask if it was a neighborhood in Delhi?"

"Almost. She said she never heard of it, and that it was probably a small village!"

"Unbelievable. How could an Indian, who had lived in India until she was 12, not know the states?!"

Achala added, "Some parents think it is a requisite to forget our roots in order to assimilate into American society. They force their children to speak only English and embrace the American way of life, totally. I am not saying all Indians, but many think like that. And then, there are others who make their children to follow our traditions to the tee."

"Yes, I also noticed it. It must be hard to find a compromise. We all are pulled in one or the other direction."

Then the conversation turned to books. "Did you read them?" Achala asked.

"I was going to mention that. I skipped through a few pages. I have some knowledge of our religion, got it from my mother. She used to read spiritual books and talk to me about them."

"Then how come you are not interested in them?"

"I don't know. I outgrew them, I suppose. The more I see the world, the more questions I've got, empirical, I mean. I decided I need to figure it out myself. Books are not the answer for me; not now, at least," Geetha replied.

"Okay," Achala said and left it at that. She, however, kept visiting Geetha occasionally. Gagana got close to her.

One time Achala asked her if she could take care of Gagana for a few hours since she could not find a babysitter for the day.

"Sure," said Geetha.

Achala brought Gagana to Geetha. She told Gagana, "Be a good girl. Don't bother Auntie."

"She will be fine. No trouble," Geetha said.

"Are you saying 'bother mom' is written on my forehead only?"

Both laughed. Achala hugged her daughter and left. Geetha agreed to babysit, but did not know what to do. She had never dealt with children before. She turned on the cartoon channel on the TV. Gagana was quite spunky; she was not the kind of kid that sat steadily in one place. Watching TV was not to her liking. She was running around all over the place; would not play with the toys Achala had brought. Geetha gave her color pencils and a few blank papers to draw. Nothing worked. Gagana would not leave Geetha alone, not even for a minute. She was worn out in less than one hour.

Now she understood what Achala had said about Gagana; the girl was a firecracker, for sure. It reminded her of her childhood. She could spend hours making dolls with coconut leaves or paper boats. Mother was so busy with chores, she hardly had time to spend with little Geetha. Now, here the children are so impatient! They want a new toy every 15 minutes. What a change! *Is the change because of the times or culture?* Geetha fell into a reverie; lasted only a few minutes.

Gagana came up to her, snuggled in her lap, and looked into her face with a naughty look.

Geetha smiled, taking her two cheeks into her palms. The little naughty expression on Gagana's face amused her. She asked, "Why are you naughty?"

"Cause I like it," Gagana said, and started whirling around again.

The answer beguiled Geetha. Of course, is it not so with everybody?

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Geetha was getting used to the life without Hari. Her friends' and well-wishers' visits ended, almost, but for a few.

One day Tapathi called Geetha and said her friend, Holly, was coming to visit her.

"From where?"

"Washington. You may like her. She loves our culture. She has done research on Sangam literature. Why don't you stop by tomorrow or the day after?"

"Alright. Will see you on Sunday."

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Tapathi and Holly were in the backyard. Geetha joined them.

"Holly spent 3 years in Madurai³³," Tapathi said, introducing Holly to her.

"Oh. What took you to Madurai?"

"I went for field work," Holly said.

"She worked on karma theory in Sangam literature. She has received her Ph.D. in Tamil Literature, joined Washington State University as Assistant Professor. She speaks Tamil fluently."

Holly laughed and said, "Fluently? She is joking."

³³ A famous temple town in Kerala, South India. The temple of Goddess Meenakshi is acclaimed for its exquisite sculpture.

Geetha looked at her keenly. Holly was very thin, more like a pale skin covering her bones; wore a scarf around her head, and was struggling to appear normal. She asked Geetha what did she think of life in America, what part of India she had come from, and how she had met her husband.

Then she continued to tell about her experiences in Madurai. "I loved India. I fell in love with Madurai at first sight, I should say. Such a beautiful city. And people are so friendly and kind. I wish I could go back again."

"I am glad to hear that. Our movies and fiction present India as dirty, and people as uncivilized. I was shocked to see even Indians write like that," Geetha said candidly. For whatever reason, she thought she could express her opinions without qualms.

"Yes, it is sad. They think that is what Americans hope to hear, I guess. Ill-conceived perceptions. I was, however, perplexed by one thing; they allowed only Brahmins in to the Meenakshi temple."

"That is common in all temples," Geetha said.

"Yes, but in Madurai, Ramanujacharya³⁴ chanted the sacred mantra, making it known to the people of all castes. Does it not mean that they did not respect their own preceptor?"

She stopped and took a sip of water, and continued, "I went to Tirupati also twice. The first time, no permission to enter the temple. But, the second time, they asked me to give in writing that I would not proclaim 'the god in the temple was not a god,' and then, allowed me to enter the temple. What I am saying is, all those edicts were not etched in stone, but dictated by humans in power."

Geetha was stunned. Was Holly interested in religion or traditions in India? She did not ask, though. "I understand your research topic was karma. So, what conclusions you have drawn on the subject?"

"I did not draw any conclusions. No matter how much we have read and tried to understand, we still are outsiders. We cannot appreciate it the way you native speakers appreciate. That is what I think."

"Should I take it as your deduction?" Geetha asked.

"Yes, I noticed it, too. It must be hard to find a compromise. We all are pulled in one or the other direction."

"That is true. Still, I am sure you have come to some conclusion to finish your dissertation, is it not so?"

Holly laughed. "I understood that there is no one definition. The term Karma seemed to take different definitions, depending on one's mental state, circumstances, and time. That flexibility is probably the key for its acceptance across the country, and even across the world. It has become part of the English vocabulary, too. Today I am sitting here with you, and that is my karma. My cancer is also my karma. However, it's interpretation differs depending on which situation you are referring to. I came here of my free will. That is my intent. But there is no intent in me getting cancer. I can also say my karma caused my intent

³⁴ A 11th Century Hindu philosopher and theologian. According to the legend, he was advised not to pass the sacred mantra to the undeserved, and if he did, he would go to hell. The philosopher decided, if he was destined to go to hell, so be it, and recited the sacred mantra aloud for the benefit of all the people, irrespective of their caste or creed, from the temple top.

to come here," Holly smiled a mischievous smile and continued, "Maybe we were related in our previous births."

Geetha was amazed. What prompted her to study our culture, and what captivated her so deeply?

Tapathi sat listening to their conversation.

"Do you believe in previous birth?"

"I can't say I believe but, I think there is some mysterious driving force. I can't find any other explanation. During my stay in Madurai, I found an astrologer. Everybody said he could predict the past and future with extraordinary precision. So, I went to see him. He said I had been a *devadasi* in my past life and that caused me to return to the temple."

"Do you feel that way?"

"Let me put it this way. That thought gave me a peace of mind. As long as science cannot provide explanations for every incident and metamorphosis of every object, we have to believe in some extraterrestrial force. You can give it whatever name you please, but it is there. If you believe my visit is based on Tapathi's kindness, probably there is another reason for her kindness. Let's assume another experience of hers instigated it. Then, something else should be behind that experience. What I am saying is we can keep digging like this forever. There is no end to this search; it is like *talakaveri* ((the origin of River Kaveri)), nobody knows where it originated."

"Did you visit Talakaveri?"

"That is what I am saying. Somebody showed me a spot, but no explanation how water got to that spot," Holly said, sounding disappointed.

"Let's eat. I will bring the food," Tapathi said, standing up. Holly told her she had kept her food far back in the fridge. She turned to Geetha and said, "I have been a vegetarian for a long time. You are a Brahmin; you don't eat meat, I guess. I don't want to, but my doctor suggested I needed protein and should eat meat." She was not happy about it, obviously.

"Nowadays, very few people stick to those tenets. It has become a personal choice, irrespective of caste and creed. In fact, I am happy about that change in our community," Geetha said.

After supper, Holly asked Tapathi to read a chapter from Bhagavad Gita.

"Which chapter?"

"You pick."

Tapathi opened the 15th chapter and read in an enchanting voice. Holly sat down with her legs crossed and eyes closed; she went into a trance.

Geetha could not believe her eyes as she watched those two friends. She had never seen this side of Tapathi until now.

We spend plenty of time with somebody and think we know them; then, one day, we realize that we do not know that person as well as we think. Amazing, Geetha pondered.

Geetha, literally, basked in the environment the two friends had created that evening.

After Holly left, there was a noticeable change in Tapathi; was forgetting things and looking weak; and, fewer calls to Geetha.

Geetha noticed it and was concerned. She asked her one day, "Are you okay? You are not looking good. What is wrong?"

"Me? I am fine. Why are you asking?" Tapathi said, but it did not sound like she was fine.

"You are supposed to call me yesterday. You told me you would. Why didn't you?"

"Did I say I'd call you?" Tapathi said, looking confused.

Geetha wondered if she was thinking too much about Holly and became depressed.

"You are looking pale. See your doctor just to be sure nothing is wrong," Geetha tried to persuade her.

"Okay," Tapathi said, but made no appointment. Geetha waited for a couple of days, could not wait any longer. She made the call herself to the doctor and made an appointment for the following Monday. That visit led to a few more visits and more tests. After several tests, the doctor told her she had a brain tumor, not to worry, though; it was a mild tumor and could be removed surgically. Then, he asked her if she had any family members to help her.

"Yes, I have two kids; one daughter and one son. I will contact them and get back to you," she said.

Her son, Vasu, became nervous as he heard the news. He hopped on the next flight. He arrived at Tapathi's place the next day. He asked several questions. It was comforting to know the tumor was mild; and he was glad the tumor was diagnosed while in its early stage.

He thanked Geetha for taking his mother to the doctor and asked Tapathi to go with him to his place. "Come with me to Minneapolis. Your daughter-in-law and I will take care of you. I know an excellent surgeon there. Besides, your grand kids love to have you around," he said.

Tapathi was not inclined to leave her home. "Why move now? I like it here. No other doctor knows my condition better than the doctor I have here. I would rather my doctor perform the surgery."

Vasu did not agree. "I did not mind it you being on your own, as long as you are fine. I understood that. But now your health needs attention. You must go with me. I am not going to leave you here alone," he insisted.

His suggestion made sense to Geetha. It was okay when things were going smoothly. But when her health needed medical attention, she must be close to her near and dear. Not that the thought of letting go of Tapathi was pleasant, but she also understood she had to, when the occasion demanded it. Geetha needed to reconcile her own preferences with the harsh reality.

Tapathi was also in the same predicament. All her life in the States, she had known only this place; this home was both her maternal home and the mother-in-law's. And she had gotten accustomed to being close to Geetha. She felt torn apart, but Vasu was adamant; he refused to let her be by herself all alone at a time of need; and she could see his viewpoint as well. She was also aware her staying there would put an enormous burden on Geetha.

Both mother and son argued all afternoon. Tapathi accepted her son's proposal halfheartedly. She sent Chitra to her mother. Geetha and Vasu helped her in sorting out the items to be discarded, given away, and taken with her. As she took each item in her hand, her heart felt heavier. A deep sense of sadness the filled house.

She called Emanuel, explained her condition, and asked him what to do with the house. He expressed his sympathies, was glad she decided to move in with her son. About the house, he said she could dispose of it as she deemed fit, and he would stand by her decision. Tapathi thought about it for a while and suggested to Geetha, "You are looking for a smaller house. Here it is, move into this."

Geetha was not sure if that would be appropriate. "This is your house. Your children should get it, not me," she said.

"How can I say it is mine? I did not buy or had it built by myself. I have asked Emanuel what should I do with it; and he left it to me. Since I've gotten it free, it is only fair I pass it on to someone free. Why not you be that someone? I am ever grateful to God, my two children are doing well. This is not much for them. In fact, they would be happy I left it to you. They know how much I love you. Don't say no," she begged Geetha.

Geetha agreed to take the property. Vasu told Geetha over and again that she should visit them whenever she could. Geetha promised him she would. "Yes, of course I will. I would love to," she said.

After they had left, Geetha moved into the house; several feelings beset her. She was happy her housing problem had been solved; she felt her friend's presence in every inch of every room.

The following weekend Achala came with Gagana to visit her. She got a job in California and was moving soon. "You should visit me," she said.

Geetha said she would.

"Not just words. Promise me you will visit us for sure," Achala said.

"I miss you too. Of course, I will visit you as soon as I can. I promise."

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Geetha sat on the porch with the book Achala insisted she should read. Achala also said she would test her. Geetha took the book but never opened it. After a while, she opened the book and kept staring at the pages; nothing was reaching her brain. Lately, she was feeling down. The two most important people in her life, Hari and Tapathi, dissolved quietly into the past. Until now, she let the time pass by without worrying about anything, and watching things as they passed by. Some powerful force was pulling her down now.

Suddenly, she heard birds chirping in the sky. She looked up. Some pigeons formed into a cone shape and were flying homeward after spending the winter in the south. The noise was charming; the formation of the pigeons looked like a battalion of well-trained foot-soldiers; so pleasant to watch. She felt good for the first time since Tapathi had left.

The birds reminded her of a story on Chataka birds she had read in school. They fly around in the sky holding their beaks up toward the sky, hoping to catch the fresh raindrops, according to the legend. The Chataka birds would not drink any other water except the pure raindrops from the sky, and only during a specific

season. The birds must possess the knowledge to recognize the time of the year and be ready to catch the freshest water in the universe. Amazing, she thought.

The thought of the Chataka birds pushed her further into a deeper brooding. What did she expect from life? Was she also looking for pure, well-rounded life, like those birds? The question came to the fore only now. All the events in her life such as birth, education, and marriage had happened one after another, like steps in a math problem. Satyam judged her correctly. She lived as if she was playing a role in a puppet show; never got involved emotionally in any incident or event; and never worked hard for any specific thing. Even arriving in America happened casually, like a blade of grass floating on the flowing river.

She was annoyed with herself. *Why did I not take me seriously, consider me as an individual, strive to have a goal, and work toward that end, like everybody else?* A famous writer, Bucchibabu,³⁵ said we all are left only with our memories, in the final analysis. It was not so in my case, she thought. Each one of them, who had entered into her life, had a message for her:

Siva Rao mamayya and Kanakam Atthayya had taken her under their wing, put her through college, and performed her wedding. Satyam taught her the ways of the world. Syam showed her, in his own way, the meaning of the phrase 'all words but no action.' Saroja had a goal: to become a doctor, but changed the course and revamped her priorities after her marriage. It was the same with Hari. He knew what he wanted in his life and went after it. He was a nice man, but their marriage did not bring them together.

Tapathi was smart; she reconciled her situation with the resources she could muster, with great acumen, and made a wonderful life for herself and her children.

Achala was decades younger, yet she clearly understood what life meant to her, and worked around it.

Everybody thought Chitra was not smart, but she found a way to express herself through art and proved her mettle.

Holly believed in karma with all her heart; it did not appear to be her choice, but she went along with it.

Belief had a different connotation for Bhagyam garu. In her belief, there were no questions.

The 3-year-old Gagana could state with conviction that she liked being naughty!

They all contributed in their own ways, so Geetha could define her own values. Each of them introduced her to a different aspect of life or a direction - music, literature, metaphysics, moral and ethical values, and worldly wisdom.

She waited for the fresh, uncontaminated raindrops, like Chataka birds. Raindrops happen with no one person's efforts. Now she understood that she also expected to have something drop in her lap without effort on her part.

She sighed a long, deep sigh. *I never attempted to decide what I wanted out of my life and never worked toward that end. That is the tragedy in my life,* she told herself.

Tapathi kept in touch with her. Geetha would inquire about her progress, and Tapathi would ask what she was doing. Geetha was happy she had such a unique

³⁵ A famous writer, 1916-1967, known for his psychological novel *chivaraku migiledi*.

friend. Achala also kept in touch with Geetha. She kept insisting that Geetha should visit her and her daughter. The thought of that mother and daughter duo lifted her spirits, always.

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On the outskirts of the east side of the town, Geetha sat down on the porch with her laptop and continued to type seriously, totally immersed in her work.

People on the street watched her as they passed by.

One day, a gentleman asked her what was she writing.

"History," she said.

"What for?"

"Just for my satisfaction."

"I've been watching you for years. When does it end?"

"It won't. There is no end to history."

(The End)

Malathi's Publications:

Note: e-books are free to download on author's blog, <http://tethulika.wordpress.com>. Printed books may be available with publishers for purchase.

eBooks

Fiction

[All I Wanted was to Read](#) (short stories)

[My Little friend](#) (short stories)

e-books non-fiction.

[Telugu Women Writers, 1950-1975. Analytical study \(Revised 2021\)](#)

[Eminent scholars and other essays](#) (anthology of articles published on thulika.net.)

Books in Print

Stories from Andhra Pradesh. Mumbai, Jaico, 2006.

Penscape. Anthology of Short Stories. Hyderabad: Lekhini, 2011

From My Front Porch. Delhi. Sahitya Academy, 2009.

On the Otherside of the River Exentialsim, An Anthology of Short Stories by Munipalle Raju. Translated by Nidadavolu Malathi. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. In Print.

About the author.

[About Nidadavolu Malathi on en.wikipedia.org](#).

Website [Thulika.net](#). A site devoted exclusively to translations of Telugu short stories, and informative/analytical articles on Telugu literature. (In English)

Blog: [Telugu thulika](#). Malathi's short stories, analytical/informative articles on Telugu writers and various aspects of Telugu literature. (In Telugu).