



# SOFTWARE FOR LIFE

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“Today is an important day in your life” amma said weaving jasmines into my hair. I looked at her with shyness and trepidation. Amma sensed it and gave me an affectionate smile.

“Ramya, this is the day you are going to share not just your body but also your heart with your partner in life. Don’t get worried unnecessarily. Learn to love him without offending him. Also take his strengths and weaknesses with equanimity.” As she was talking to me, my friends arrived on the scene.

“Aunty, why do you give her these outdated suggestions? Just leave her alone with us for a while and we will take care of her.” They said naughtily. I felt very awkward. The people I knew so well seemed like strangers now. I liked their teasing and at the same time didn’t like it all; I wished they would leave me alone.

“On the whole, Ramya made a good catch!. She got a good husband. - A product of IIT and a software engineer in Hyderabad on a pay packet of seventy thousand rupees a month! What more do you want? He agreed as soon as he saw her in the first ‘boy meets girl’ session. Ramya! You are truly lucky” There was a tinge of jealousy in my friend’s voice. I felt proud of it.

Just then amma came back with a small unhappy face. “Ramya, Avinash is in the car waiting for you. Go to him” She said in a curt voice

“Why is that?” I was surprised.

“It seems he has booked a room in a hotel. Anyway it is better than our rituals. You will also feel a little free.” she said looking into my face as if giving me reassurance. I felt bad. I knew how much trouble she had taken to decorate the room and call all the neighbourhood ladies to get their blessings for me.

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“Why hotel amma, should I talk to Avinash?” I asked her. She got scared.

“No, no there is no need! What is important is that the two of you should be happy.

Go, don’t make him wait so long in the car”, she hurried me up.

She packed my bag for three days and put it in the car. When I came to the car there were fifteen other ladies to see me off.

Seeing so many people Avinash, who was in the driving seat became very serious.

My peddamma<sup>1</sup> said, “Son, you must at least take the betel leaf offering before you leave.”

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<sup>1</sup> Mother’s elder sister

Avinash was a little inconvenienced to reply. "I have only four days leave. If you can leave us free for these four days"... he stopped midway in the sentence. My peddamma wanted to say something but I stopped her. I understood his sentiment. He wanted to spend the little time he had completely with me. I was happy.

The moment I sat in the car, it moved forward. He released a long breath in relief as soon as we got on to the main road.

"I can't breathe freely amidst so many people. I have always been so used to privacy." he commented.

"If I come with you now won't it be a violation of your privacy?" I asked him innocently.

After a while he understood the light heartedness of my comment and smiled a wee bit. When the light turned red, he took my hand, kissed it and asked me candidly in English, if I want to spend the first night with him.

I had not anticipated this question so I just nodded my head in a non-committal way. There was no further conversation till we reached the hotel. So far I had occasionally been to restaurants, but I had never seen a hotel room in my life.

As soon as I entered the room I felt like I had entered Indra's <sup>2</sup> palace. "Marvellous!" I uttered spontaneously.

"I paid 15000 rupees for three days" he said a little proudly. I thought it uncalled for to talk of money at that time but then concluded it was alright as it showed his love for me. I thought of my room at home. The moon peeping in through the bedside window, the jasmine creeper entwined along the window, the pervading fragrance of its blossoms, and the cool breeze wafting through the south side window- how much trouble amma had taken to decorate it. Simply and so beautifully! She has a great aesthetic sense, my mother. I came out of my reverie when the room service entered.

He left the room after setting the dinner. Avinash silently finished his dinner. Whatever I noticed in this short time I could see he talked very little. I am also not very talkative but to remain this silent is difficult for me.

"You talk very little, no?" I said "Yeah! What is there to talk all the time? Isn't it a waste of time?" he said checking the greetings he had received on the net.

I kept quiet as I did not know what to say to that. After some time he got up from the computer and sat by my side.

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<sup>2</sup> A Hindu God known for his lavish lifestyle.

“Now I think we can talk.” He smiled. Placing his arm around my shoulders he drew me into his arms, “You took Electronics in your engineering, no?” he asked.

“Yes!”

“I don’t think you have thought about your career carefully. Learn computers! It is a good field”

“I like my field very much” I told him.

What has interest got to do with it? Your liking hardly matters. Your father must have got your admission by paying the donation in whichever branch the seat was available.” His voice was slightly sarcastic.

“I am a merit student” I said angrily.

“How much merit do you have, on par with an IIT student?” This time it was clear mockery.

Are IIT students the only intelligent people in this world? I wanted to argue vehemently. But who is this man in front of me? My husband! I am not supposed to talk back. I kept quiet, though, unwillingly. This man who talks little threw me into greater confusion now.

I felt constricted as if I was having breathing difficulty. I was really not at ease. He seemed to have no sensitivity to anything other than his own feelings, and was acting according to his convenience.

He started cleaning his contact lens before going to bed. "What is that?" I asked.

"I got this weak eyesight when I was in intermediate. I used glasses for a few years. Now even the glasses have become so thick it looks bad, so I started using contact lenses, as they look better on me," he told me.

I drifted into sleep thinking of the precautions I should take to prevent his eye sight from worsening.

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The four days that Avinash stayed were quite hectic. He would work on his computer even when he was with me. He would focus all the time on the projects, deadlines and his work while eating and talking to me. It is going to be very difficult this way. I was worried.

One day he was working while eating dinner with a spoon "When one is combing hair, the focus should be on the comb." I quoted a popular saying.

He looked at me. There was a shadow of anger in his eyes. ‘Then you sit at home the whole day combing your hair.’ His lips twisted downwards in mockery. I was shocked not just at his words but also at the tone. How did he learn to speak with so much sarcasm?

He saw the light in my eyes dimming. I thought he would pacify me. But he did not. He sat unmoving with an air of satisfaction in his posture; as if he felt I deserved it.

I reasoned with myself that I too should not have spoken like that. I should have affectionately told him to focus on eating, without quoting the proverb.

Even amma and nanna must have observed him at home. I could see they were getting worried. I just smiled to myself, ‘Nanna, are you worried to send me to my in-law’s house?’ I asked, and nanna immediately became normal.

‘Why should I be afraid? The boy is bright, earning well and is a good fellow. We are happy, as everyone is complimenting us on this alliance.’

Before my marriage, I was teaching Electronics in a private PG Engineering College in Hyderabad. I was quite happy with my job. I enjoyed sharing my knowledge with the students and the affection they showered on me. I wished to continue working there as my college was close to Avinash’s work place.

‘But I feel sad to go away leaving you people, Vizag, and the sea’ I said.

“You call us whenever you feel like seeing us. We will come immediately,” mother said.

“But don’t ask us to bring the sea. We can’t.” nanna laughed.

The day of departure to Hyderabad was fast approaching Amma prepared the *saare*<sup>3</sup>, We booked railway tickets for the three of us. It seems nanna<sup>4</sup> called up my mother-in-law and told her about our programme. It seems she didn’t say much, just gave her consent.

That night Avinash called me up and said “I booked a flight ticket for you. Come on your own.”

“How is that possible? All the things that amma prepared, and amma and nanna...?”

“Which time and age are you living in - talking like a grandmother...!” Avinash said with irritation.

“What will your mother and everyone think if I come just like that without any *saare*?”

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<sup>3</sup> All the things a mother gives to a daughter when she goes to her in-law’s house for the first time

<sup>4</sup> father

“No one will think anything! My mother told me herself,” he said.

I did not know what to say and gave the phone to my father.

“How can we send Ramya all alone...?” My father started to say something. But as he listened he decided to compromise.

“I believe Avinash will take you from here.” my father said. Doesn't it really mean he was telling my parents that they were not welcome to his home or was it that he did not want to trouble them, I did not understand, so I kept quiet.

Avinash came on the morning of the day I was to start for Hyderabad. We were to take the evening flight. He told me to pack only my expensive saris and my jewellery. True, how can I take anything else on a flight?

Amma and nanna came to the airport to see me off. All three of us had tears in our eyes. Avinash noticed it. He put his arm around my shoulders and told my father, “I will take good care of your daughter. Don't worry, uncle.”

They were happy on hearing these words. “Just see how much strain your stubbornness causes me. One day's leave is wasted and the flight charges too” He started as soon as we boarded the flight.

“It is not me. You are the stubborn one!” I retorted.

He looked at me smiling. "For the past four days I have been thinking only about you," he said in a casual tone looking the other side. Why couldn't he say that looking at me, I thought? We reached Hyderabad.

I was anxious about the elaborate customs on a bride's arrival, the welcome aarti, crossing the threshold with the right foot in first. But to my relief, there was no such welcome. My mother-in-law came as soon as she heard the noise of our arrival. I greeted her with folded hands.

She came to me smiling and asked, "How are you?" "I am fine." I replied.

"Keep the luggage in your room." She instructed me, pointing to the room. As I went in, I saw Avinash getting ready. I looked at him questioningly.

He left in a hurry saying, "I will go to the office and come"

"Will you be back soon?" I was worried.

"Umm..., Controlling me from now itself?" laughing he said bye and left.

I didn't know whether to sit in the hall or go back to my room. I was just standing in the centre of the room, when the maid came and told me to go to the dining hall for tea. I followed her. My mother-in-law and brother-in-law Sandeep were already

there having their tea and snacks. Sandeep stood up as he saw me and asked “Vadina<sup>5</sup>, how are you? When did you come?”

“Just half an hour back!” I replied.

My mother-in-law made tea for me. “I do not know your taste. For today have this tea and from tomorrow you can have whatever you want.”

“It is okay. Anything is fine with me,” I said.

There was silence all around.

There was a strange seriousness in the atmosphere... I did not like it. “Sandeep, how is your preparation going on?” I asked. He was suddenly alert and looked at me, unnerved.

“Sandeep,” my mother-in-law said in a warning tone.

“Okay” said Sandeep.

Avinash had mentioned to me that he was taking long-term coaching for medical entrance. He did not get through in the first attempt. He was trying hard this time.

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<sup>5</sup> Vadina: Sister-in-law, an elder brother’s wife. In the south Indian culture vadina is a cherished relationship – a combination of a good friend and regarded as next only to a mother.

While we were chatting my mother-in-law kept looking at her watch. I did not understand. Here was Sandeep, talking as if he had not talked for ages. My mother-in-law tried to get his attention by coughing, and clearing her throat. When that did not work, she called out to him, "Sandeep"

That's it! Sandeep got up, went to his room and closed the door. I wondered at the despair and frustration on his face in that fraction of a second.

"For him every minute is valuable" My mother-in-law hinted to me. I nodded my head in agreement.

She went inside. I sat there not knowing what to do. She came out after a while, and told me 'go to your room and rest for a while.'

I came back to my room. Within one hour of coming to this house, life seemed very mechanical. Everyone was behaving as if they were dolls fully keyed up; dancing and they were like actors duly playing out their roles on a stage. Then I thought it might be because this place was completely new to me. Maybe I would feel better when I got used to it. I must mingle freely with people. Confused and tired with these thoughts I fell asleep almost without realizing. I woke up startled, when I felt the brush of lips on my cheeks.

“Lazy girl, why are you sleeping at this hour?” Avinash was right there. I sat up and put my arms around his neck.

“What is the time?” I asked in a sleepy voice.

“Ten o’clock. Everyone is waiting for us at the dining table”.

I felt ashamed of myself. I got up hurriedly, had my bath and went to the dining hall. My father-in-law was also there. He asked me, “How is everyone at home?” I nodded my head to say everyone was fine. Sandeep was holding a book in one hand and a spoon in the other hand with which he was eating his food. As soon as he saw me he smiled from behind his book. I smiled back.

My mother-in-law noticed it and became a little serious. It is very difficult this way, I thought.

“Avinash, Look for a house nearer to your office. In my opinion, better take an apartment.” she said. Avinash nodded his head. I looked at both of them alternately and understood that she was suggesting that we should have a separate establishment.

I thought of the traditions of our families and the advantages of joint families and said “Why should it be so? Let us all stay together. I can adjust with everyone. I will

help you in running this house.” As I went on and on all of them stared at me like statues.

Avinash tapped my knee from under the table and said in a whisper, gritting his teeth “Stupid, shut up!”

“We should stay together in our joys and sorrows. Also I don’t want anyone to say that as soon as I entered the house I split the house. Even if it is not about this talk...I continued to talk and when I turned my head I noticed Avinash was staring at me angrily. Both my in-laws were looking at me strangely. Sandeep was smiling secretly.

Then I understood I had said something wrong. But I didn’t know what mistake I had made.

After that I finished my dinner silently. I came back to the room. After a while Avinash came in and hugged me tightly.

“I don’t want it!” I struggled to free myself.

“Why” he asked. I went and lay down on the bed angrily.

“My God! Are you angry?” He looked at the clock. It was going to be 11 o’clock.

“You called me stupid there!”

“Oh, that! Then what else could I have done? When amma was talking about a house for us what were you talking?”

“What did I say that was so wrong?” I asked angrily.

“On the one hand amma and nanna were tense as there has been no progress in Sandeep’s studies. He did not make it in the first attempt. If he doesn’t get it this time what would happen to his life? Have you thought about it? As it is, a lot of time was wasted due to our marriage activities. That is why amma thought of all these things and told us to shift. You did not think of these things and kept on talking something or the other. They must have really felt bad.” Avinash said in a tone of irritation and I just stared at him.

I felt very sorry for Sandeep.

“Did you also study like this?” I asked him pitifully.

“I worked harder than this. Sandeep lacks concentration” He said in disappointment.

“Let it go. It is not as if only those who study medicine are great.”

“What! It is okay if you say such things to me. Don’t say these things to amma. She cannot tolerate... He must get a rank this time in medicine,” he said emphatically!

Two days passed for me, it was like being imprisoned.

“I saw one house close to the office. We will shift tomorrow. Today you go and buy all the things we need and tell the transporters to send them to the house. They will take care of all the arrangements for you.” Avinash gave me his credit card.

I looked at it in great confusion.

We should be going together to buy things for the new house. The debates about things necessary and unnecessary, the little arguments – talking, fighting, arguing...it would be so much fun.

“What, will you go?” he asked again.

“Alone?” I asked.

“Why, does this queen need a fleet of maids and servants?” his sarcasm again.

“There is no need, I will go myself. I called my colleague and she came on her scooty.

Both of us went to buy the things we would need. Meanwhile, Avinash himself called two-three times and gave suggestions on what should be bought and at what price range.

His hand was a very generous one and we ended up spending quite a lot of money.

“You are truly lucky” My colleague said.

The definition of luck changes from person to person, I sighed deeply. It took me a week to set the house in order. Avinash constantly complained that I was wasting a lot of time.

I did not pay attention. I arranged the house the way I like it. I like flowering plants. Since it was an apartment I had to satisfy myself with potted plants.

Eventually, he must have thought there is no point in giving me any more time. So he asked me, “Now tell me. What plans have you made for your career?”

“What is there to plan? I have a job, I will continue. Already our principal is making call after call.” I said.

“What job?” he displayed shock and surprise. He started swinging in his chair to and fro... and burst out laughing, holding his stomach.

When he laughs like that his teeth sparkle, his hair falls on his forehead and his cheeks and ears turn red – I looked at him and thought fondly, ‘my husband is quite handsome.’

“Hey, Ramya, sorry pantulamma (teacherji)! In which job you want to continue?” he asked controlling his laughter.

“In my lecturer’s job” I answered with dignity, confidence, and a sense of pride.

“How much is your salary?” He asked again mockingly.

“It is eight thousand five hundred.” I replied

“Just enough for our house rent.”

“Then let’s change to a smaller apartment”

“You must always aim to grow in life, not slide down,” he said firmly.

I had tears in my eyes at these words. I bent my head lower so as not to show my tears and said, “What should I do then?”

“You resign that job; learn computers. Everybody is doing it now-a-days. After you gain some grip over it you can enter the field. I am trying to shift to another company with a better salary. Both of us can join the same place. There are a lot of advantages if wife and husband work in the same place,” he said thoughtfully

“I’m not interested in computers. We don’t work for salaries alone. There is something called job satisfaction too. I like the work I am doing. They said they will increase my salary.” I tried to convince him.

“Ramya, you must think a little more responsibly. How long can you get on with this ten or fifteen thousand salary? We have so many burdens. My parents have taken so much trouble to bring me up and give me this education. I must build a house for them. We must get money ready for Sandeep’s technical course. Then we will have our own children, their education and increasing family expenditure. In this competitive world if we are a little bit complacent, we will lag behind. People will go forward leaving us behind. We must be alert all the time.” As Avinash continued I had a sinking sensation in my heart.

“Let’s not join the race. Let us live our lives on our own terms with peace of mind” I said.

His eyes became red as soon as he heard my words. He got up and kicked his chair with great force. The chair fell back with an explosive sound.

“Can you not understand? Is that your head or a lump of clay? Don’t make me angry” he showed his finger in anger and left the room.

My heart began to beat faster. Why did he react so violently? Should I not express my opinion especially when it concerns my career? Should he decide my career? I

felt sad. More than that he was so angry, would he talk to me now? I walked towards the bedroom with a heavy heart.

He was lying with an elbow covering his eyes. I stood holding the door. "Avinash," I called him tentatively. He did not reply, did not even move.

"Instead of me you should have married a computer or a girl who did computers." I said with anger and sorrow. I could see his lips twisting in a smile from under his elbow, in reply to this.

I stood there stubbornly. Avinash sat on his elbows and looked at me with a smiling face. "Why should I marry that girl or this girl? You continue with your interesting job here. I will leave you and go abroad for three-four years to earn the money we need and come back."

I jumped up with that and ran to him, "Leaving me behind?" "Yes!"

"Really, you mean you will go away?"

"What else should I do? You are not helping me fulfil our responsibilities. We must make compromises. There is no other option"

A kaleidoscope of painful images flashed in my eyes- me staying here alone and Avinash going away alone... just for money... No way!

“Where should I join here?” I asked weakly.

He hugged me happily. He immediately picked up his cell phone and spoke to the management of one computer institute. He assured me that I will get a grip on the subject in one year as I already have some experience in the field. I can always practice with his projects, there is no problem there.

I started going to the institute. I made a resolution before joining – since I have chosen this as my career - I must work hard and prove myself even though I am not very interested in this field.

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That day I was in a hurry getting ready to go to the Computer Institute. Avinash had already gone at 9 o'clock. I had started going for computer classes between ten and two in the afternoon. Then I would come home and practice, otherwise Avinash would get angry.

I was hurriedly plaiting my hair when the door bell rang. I put a rubber band on my hair to the part that I plaited and opened the door. Surprise! I found Sandeep standing at the door. Six feet tall just like his brother; his eyes still have some child-like innocence. But, unlike his brother, a naughty boy's smile plays on his face. “Vadina! Can I come in?” He asked hesitantly.

“Arre! Why? Sandeep, come in!” I invited him into the house and showed him the sofa. He sat on the edge of the sofa, leaning forward.

I was surprised at his visit. My attayya felt it was a waste of time when I spoke to him for fifteen minutes. Now would she keep quiet if he wastes his time visiting me like this?

At this time he was supposed to be in college. Does attayya<sup>6</sup> know that he had come here? There was hardly a month’s time for his entrance exam.

“Didn’t you go to college today?” I asked him. He turned pale. What happened to Sandeep?

“Is there any problem?” I asked. “No” he said.

Have you had your breakfast” I asked again. “Umm...” he replied in affirmative

I did not know what else to say. He noticed that I was getting ready to go out. “Are you going out?” he asked me

“I joined a computer Institute. I have to go at 10 o’clock” I told him. There was disappointment on his face. “Do you have to go?” he asked hesitantly.

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<sup>6</sup> Here mother in law, also in relationship terms, maternal uncle’s wife or paternal aunt

“What happened, Sandeep? Is there anything I can do?” I asked him with concern.

“Yes”

“What is it?” I asked with keen interest. He did not reply, just kept looking at his fingers. “Tell me” I asked softly.

“I want to just talk to someone.” He looked at me and said in a low tone.

“Why, have you been on a vow of silence in college and at home” I asked jocularly.

“Those...? They are not conversations” he said immediately, a little loudly. I was surprised. He said again “Anything but studies...?”

“This is not the time for you to enjoy. If you work hard now you will shine in studies. If you develop and settle in a good profession then you can really enjoy.” I tried to persuade him

“I have been hearing these words thousand times right since my childhood. I am sick of these words,” he said tiredly.

“How can you say that? You should become a doctor...” He stopped me with a raised hand.

“I just don’t want to do M.B.B.S. This time also, I cannot score enough to get any rank.” he said firmly and clearly.

I was again surprised. Attayya, Mamayya, and particularly Avinash were banking on his getting a rank..., with high hopes. I am sure they would not dream of Sandeep talking like this.

“Did you tell them at home about this?”

“Many times! In fact I did not want to take Bi.P.C<sup>7</sup> in intermediate. I told them. I wanted to take MEC<sup>8</sup> and take commerce in graduation and later go for MBA or CA for post graduation. Nobody liked the idea. Just because my brother is an engineer, they said I should become a doctor. I cried a lot and tried to make them understand, but of no use. Mother..., my mother stopped eating. I was scolded all the time at home and everyone started preaching. So I had to agree.”

“Even if I do not like this course I am studying hard, but there are others in my class more meritorious than me. Merit at state level, I don’t stand a chance. It is all a waste- all this harassment! I cannot say anything to amma. Nanna and annayya<sup>9</sup> ! They are of the same bent of mind. For them I have to earn lot money by becoming a doctor. Only I know that I cannot and will not be able to become a doctor.”

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<sup>7</sup> Biology, Physics, Chemistry – A subject combination in pre-university and a prerequisite for studying medicine

<sup>8</sup> Maths, Economics, Commerce

<sup>9</sup> Elder brother.

I kept looking at him in surprise while he spoke. I never realized that he was going through so much agony. I did not know what to say to him.

I had never felt this kind of pressure when I was studying. I used to get reasonably good marks. I used to study with a happy disposition. My parents never put any pressure on me. Nanna would definitely look at my marks. But whatever the performance he would encourage me; never scold me for not getting marks. And he never spent this kind of money on my studies.

But both Avinash and Sandeep study under great pressure. Now how should I console Sandeep? Who should I support? While I was debating what I should do, Sandeep continued, "When I first saw you I felt you are my friend. I never could see friends either in my parents or in annayya. Today as I was taking the test there were some bit questions for which I did not know the answers. I got mad, angry at someone I do not know. I thought something will happen if I stay on there. I had a splitting headache. So I asked for sick leave. They gave me leave after one hour of procedures. I thought of telling them at home about my being on leave. Luckily, amma and nanna went out for a marriage."

"They will be home by the time I go home. So I am free till 5 o'clock in the evening. No one to control my movements! My time is now, mine! I felt very happy. But I do not know whom to share this happiness with. I do not have any friends. Then I thought of you. The other day amma told me this address. So I came searching for your house. Can I stay here till evening?" he asked hesitantly.

My heart melted at his words. "Stay, Sandeep! It is as good as your house. You don't have to ask."

"Then... What about your institute?" he asked.

"Dumma! I will skip" I said happily.

"Thank you" he said with happiness written all over his face. We smiled at each other like comrades-in-crime.

In the evening when Avinash comes home may be he would take both of us to task. He would say that we were lazy and we do not have any concern for our careers.

"Vadina! We must plan these six hours as our happiest hours," said Sandeep like the chairman of the planning committee. "Okay tell me! What should we do?"

"Let's first cook."

"I have already cooked!"

"Cooked? Already?" there was disappointment in his tone

“It is okay! I did not make any specials today. Since you have come we will make something different now.”

“Okay follow me then” he led the way like the ‘King of Kings’, His Highness! ‘The Emperor’! I followed him like the court jester who follows the king.

“Do you know how to cook?” I asked him.

“No, but it can’t be a difficult thing. Only you must follow the logic, that’s all! Just sit there and tell me how to cook. I will use my logic and cook!” he said.

Impressive! He followed my instructions and did a very good job. Vegetable fried rice was ready in twenty minutes.

“You are quite smart” I complimented him. He smiled proudly.

We came and sat in the hall. “Let’s play chess for a while.” I said.

He agreed. I brought the board. He set the board for both of us. I like outdoor games more. I was a champion in my school. Badminton, tennis, long jump, volley ball... what not? Those days are gone.” he said sadly.

“Doesn’t matter! You have a long life ahead of you” I consoled him. We played hard to win. I won both the games. He did not lose his smile and congratulated me heartily.

I played the songs of his choice on the CD player. He sat back and listened to them closing his eyes in a relaxed manner.

We had our lunch at one o'clock. He regaled me with jokes about his friends, his teachers, and at times at his own expense too. It was nice to watch his table manners. He did not just come and plonk himself in the chair. He helped me lay the table, arranged the plates and glasses, and then helped me serve the food. He ate neatly without leaving any food on his plate. Afterwards he washed his plate. I also did not object to his doing all these things.

"Now my mind is free, vadina! I will study for a while." I had tears in my eyes as I watched him taking out his books. In fact, after a certain age we need not repeatedly tell our children what to do. They know their responsibilities well enough. We should not create an allergy to studies by telling them ten times.

"I have some computer work. Shall I do it?" I asked him.

"Sure vadina! Go ahead"

"I will finish this chapter in one hour. Can you finish your work in one hour?" there was a challenge in his tone. "Done!" I gave him a thumb up sign.

For the next forty five minutes we lost track of our surroundings. "Eureka!" I shouted in joy. As I looked up, I saw Sandeep, his book already closed in his lap, looking at me and the screen alternately. "What happened?" I asked. I finished my chapter in half an hour. I burst out laughing. He joined in my merriment.

I told Sandeep to sleep for half an hour and came to my bedroom as my eyes started burning. I dozed off without realizing and woke up at four o'clock. I hurried into the hall and saw Sandeep watching TV.

"Wash your face and come, tea is ready!" He said showing me the flask.

"Sorry! I slept like a log" I said apologetically.

It is okay. I also slept for half an hour, studied for another hour, made tea for us and started watching TV just now.

I washed my face and brought some snacks. Chatting we had our tea. When it was 4:15 Sandeep became dull. I felt very sorry for him.

"Prepare well, Sandeep! You do your effort. There should not be any lapse on your part. Whatever the result, stay balanced." I said, consoling him.

He simply nodded his head. Time dragged for ten more minutes. Sandeep looked at the time. It was 4:30. He got up reluctantly and put all his books in his college bag.

“I always felt bad that I don’t have brothers, younger or older. Now I will regard you as my younger brother.” I told him patting his back.

Sandeep moved his head in negation. “These relationships and blood ties are all weights people place on my shoulders. Pch! Not anymore. I need friends, people who can understand me, people who will like me without any expectations. Only such friendships can instil a love for life in me. Can you be such a friend to me?” he asked expectantly with hope and sorrow. There were tears in his eyes.

I was deeply moved, “Sandeep! Don’t feel like that. Your parents are focusing too much on you as they are probably worried about your career. It doesn’t mean they don’t love you anymore. If you come up in life they will be happy and proud of you. Even if you have friends would they not tell you to study? If it comes to me, I will help you in every way I can. You share all your sorrows and conflicts with me. I will be your friend. My only concern is that you should be happy. Okay?”

“If I ever get time I will call you.” he said at the lift.

“Sure! I will also call attayya (her mother in law, his mother) and enquire about you. Don’t worry!”

The doors of the lift closed. Lift went down. He kept looking back as long he could see me. I was haunted for a long time by that innocent childlike face. The despair I

saw in him at the last minute and his anger like that of a caged lion moved me to tears.

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My parents kept hinting that they have not been invited to visit my new home. Their unhappiness could be sensed in the phone conversations. Even my parents-in-law who live in the same town came only once for an hour. If my parents come and if I spend time with them would Avinash keep quiet? He exploded when he came to know that I did not go to the institute on the day Sandeep came... he also flared up that Sandeep skipped classes. He did not listen even when I told him he did not go as he was quite unwell. According to him, whatever the condition Sandeep should study. I stopped him with great effort from calling his home to scold Sandeep. Even when I told him he studied here Avinash did not believe me.

I have seen many people who are diligent about their studies. But I have not seen any one who creates so much stress in the name of studies. Maybe I did not know as I did not have any deep friendship with anyone. Maybe everyone is like that.

Then I started observing people and realized...They all talk only about studies... college EAMCET, IIT, ranks... only these and nothing else, as the aim of life.

In today's world education is business. Only commercial outlook is seen everywhere. People who teach as well as people who go to learn have all succumbed to crass commercialisation. These studies do not foster any human values in people; on the

other hand they are causing a steep decline in values. Studies have become the means to amass money, more and more money!

Avinash and I differ vehemently in all these ideas. But he has this tendency to somehow or the other establishes his point. He doesn't care for anyone else; I don't think he feels the need to respect his wife's views. Are all husbands like this...? I was so engrossed that I did not notice Avinash coming home.

'What? Why are you always so preoccupied?' He asked in irritation. Every time he comes home that is his tone, irritation. He could have asked me the same question with a smile on his face. I got up and served him dinner. Even while eating he is volatile, angry about something or someone. I did not know the reason for this anger, was it me or someone else. He brings home all the worries of his office. I used to tell him that he should forget his office worries when he comes home, but in vain.

After dinner I gave him a napkin to wipe his hand. He threw it on the sofa and said "After all what is he and what is his knowledge" as a beginning to a conversation.

"Who?" I asked relieved that his anger was not directed at me after all.

"There is one fellow in my office, my assistant.. He studied in a donation engineering college. What does he know to advise me!" he said still seething in anger.

Avinash is the leader of this project. He has four assistants working under him. One of them must have given him an advice today. “Why, is he not supposed to advise you?” I asked.

“He doesn’t have any manners. He should not give advice unless I ask for it. While I was on the system, he kept on telling me the programme shortcuts. Just wants to show off in front of everyone. Wants to tell everyone that our project leader is an idiot,” he said in anger.

I got worried, “What did you say, Avinash?”

“I told him, he should mind his own business,”

I did not like his answer. Why did you say that? If you praise him with dignity you don’t become small. He might have given you good tips and had you shown appreciation your leadership qualities would have shown in good light.”

“Yeah, I praise him, garland him and take him in a procession on my shoulders! Then he will gradually ride on my shoulders, step on my head, and suppress me. How can we grow if we do not suppress others and show them their place?”

I felt so irritated by his attitude. “Where would you be if your superiors think like that?”

He could not digest this question of mine. "It is my fault. I thought you know a little bit and tried to tell you. It is all my foolishness" He retired into the bedroom to sleep.

At times I get scared when I see Avinash's attitude. Undoubtedly, he is very intelligent as far as education is concerned. But this intelligence alone cannot give him contentment in life. He should also have some worldly wise practical intelligence. If you do not have it, everything else is useless. Avinash is unable to realize this small fact. If I try to tell him, his ego comes in the way of accepting it. Just as I don't like whatever he does maybe, he also doesn't like whatever I do.

Are these the differences of opinion people talk about? How do we resolve these issues between husband and wife? I must be patient. Time alone can bring about a change in him. Career and money - these two alone would not make one happy. He will realize soon enough. When he does realize he cannot stand the emptiness in him. I must support him then.

But in the meantime, what if he brings about a change in me? I jumped at the thought. True, it can happen. As it is, now my wishes are never respected. I cannot even fulfil the small desire of seeing my parents. I have lately forgotten the basic duty of enquiring after their well being. Maybe I am also turning into a mechanical tool. I got scared and firmly resolved not to change, not to become like Avinash. I gave suggestions to myself by reliving all the values of my growing up years and told myself at any cost I must retain my human qualities.

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However busy I was I thought of Sandeep off and on during the day. Whenever I called home the phone was always received by either attayya or mamayya. If I asked for Sandeep they discouraged me by saying that he was studying. I used to request them to inform him of my calls but I was not sure if these messages were conveyed.

Sandeep also never called again. Uncle dropped him in college while going to office and picked him up on his way back from office. When can he actually call without their knowledge? Not just friends, even to talk to his annayya and vadina he needed permission. Maybe they told him it was all a waste of time.

So should he study twenty four hours in a day? He would get a break for fifteen minutes now and then. During that rest period he was instructed to close his eyes and refresh all that he had memorized earlier.

He told me that his entire time table was drawn by my mother-in-law. His menu was also decided by her. She only gave him food that would help keep his brain sharp. I consoled myself that he would get relief after EAMCET. One day when I was watering the plants the phone rang. "Vadina!" Sandeep's voice! I was so happy to hear it, "Sandeepu, How are you?" I had tears in my eyes. There was silence on the other side.

“I am under great stress; I feel I cannot take the exams at all.” He was talking in a hurry.

“Isn’t attayya at home?”

“She has just gone for her bath. I am calling without her knowledge. Look at my plight!” he said piteously.

“It is okay! What is wrong in that? If you are under stress share it with attayya or mamayya.”

“I did that too!” he sounded dejected.

“What did they say?”

“They said I must look at my friends and feel ashamed of myself”

“Okay, leave it! We will plan a picnic as soon as your exam is over. Okay!” I tried to encourage him.

“What exams? I have many sets after EAMCET!” I did not know what to say.

“I can’t bear all this. I am feeling so dejected with life. I will put the phone down. Amma...” Suddenly he disconnected the phone.

I panicked. I did not console him properly. What is this pressure without actually realizing their son's state of mind? I got very angry with my parents-in-law. There is no point in telling Avinash. I must meet Sandeep even if I cannot speak to him. If he meets other people, may be his spirits would lift. I thought quickly and took my cell phone and left the house. When I was nearing my in-law's house I called up Avinash. "I came out for shopping. I am going to meet attayya. You come here for dinner directly from office."

"Okay, just see if Sandeep is studying well! Don't disturb any one there. I will tell amma that you are coming. Do the cooking bit yourself" He agreed without any fuss, must be in a good mood!

I reached their house in fifteen minutes. She greeted me with a beaming smile. After talking to her I eagerly looked at Sandeep's room. The doors were closed. "Sandeep?" I asked hesitantly. "He is studying!" the usual reply. I was anxious as to how he is doing in the room. I told her to take rest and walked into the kitchen. As soon as I saw it I picked up the watermelon from the fridge. I got an idea. I quickly made juice and gave it to the maid to give it to Sandeep. Attayya enquired "what is it?" "Watermelon juice, attayya! Good for him. His brain must be tired with continuous study. This would cool his mind." She kept quiet. The maid brought the empty glass back in five minutes.

"What is he doing? Did he drink it?" I asked anxiously.

“Yes, he drank it. What studies are these? I feel sorry for this boy. He did not even bother to look at what I gave him. Just drank it, gave the glass back and buried his head in the book again,” the maid said.

I was relieved. I cooked the curries after discussing with my mother-in-law. Then hesitantly I told her I would prepare vegetable biryani. “Why that spicy dish in this heat,” she countered.

“No, I won’t make it too spicy. Since it has all the vegetables, it is actually good for Sandeep” I said.

“Okay, do it! We think so much about him. But he doesn’t realize it. Constantly complains that he is not interested in all this and he cannot study. How can he get anywhere with this attitude? We did not have so many problems with the first one. He was much better. He would also complain but eventually listened to us. Now see, how well he is doing in his career.” She was saying softly and I listened to her.

Avinash came home at 9:30 pm. When we all started eating the maid was told to call Sandeep. As the maid was about to go, I said I would call him and went to his room.

The doors opened softly when I pushed. He was sitting back in his chair with eyes closed. The veins on his forehead were swollen and his face was haggard. He did not open his eyes at the sound. I was so moved I went to him and touched his forehead.

He opened his eyes quickly. He looked at me in a confused state. "Friend," I called him affectionately. He suddenly realized I was actually there. There was first joy and then relief on his face, "When did you come? I did not know!" he was like a man who got a support while drowning at sea.

"I came soon after your phone call" I told him

"Did you send me the juice?" "Umm" I nodded.

"Had I known I would have studied with more energy these three hours" he said with regret.

I smiled at his innocence while he smiled at my smiling face.

"I came to wish you all the best. Don't worry. Just write whatever you know. I will respect you, love you, with or without rank. All of us feel the same, not just me. Be happy. Let's go! They are all waiting for us at dinner". I walked out of his room.

He got up excitedly, followed me into the dining hall, washed his face near the sink and greeted his brother. Attayya tried to stop me but I started serving the dinner. Sandeep looked at me questioningly when I served vegetable fried rice. "I thought logically and made the dish." I said. While attayya understood it one way, Sandeep smiled to himself.

Sandeep was deliberately eating in a leisurely manner. If he talks people might snub him so I went on cutting stupid jokes to keep up the conversation. Anyway I am known to be a chatter box. They were all putting up with my jokes and Sandeep was enjoying it all. That is exactly what I wanted. He should feel the relief. He should not talk of things like getting tired of life at such a young age. I wanted to reduce his stress to the extent I could.

“Do not keep yourself awake till very late in the night. Look at your eyes! At this rate you will get weak at the time of examination.” I started cautioning him while everyone was listening.

“If he eats properly there can be no weakness. He does not eat well’ attayya started reciting the complaints. I did not pay attention. That day I only wanted to say, not listen. After dinner Sandeep joined us again in conversation. Atayya started feeling restless.

“Sandeep! Now go and start studying. I will call you on the day before the exam.” I told him as if it was a prearranged deal so that she would follow my hint.

“Good night annayya and vadina, good night.” He went to his room to study. He looked at me while closing the doors too. I conveyed confidence to him through my smile.

I felt relief at the expression of peace on his face.

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That day when I came back from the institute I found my father waiting for me in the **basement**. I jumped up to him in one step. “When did you come, nanna?”

“I came at 10:30 this morning. They told me you will be back by 2. So I came back now. We took the lift and I leaned on his shoulder throughout. When did you come to Hyderabad, nanna?” I asked.

“This morning, I had some office work. So...”

“Where are you staying?” I asked as I noticed he was not carrying any luggage.

“Some colleagues have also come with me. So we all checked-in to a hotel.”

“Is that so or you thought you should not stay in a daughter’s house?”

“Oh, my little daughter is now grown up!” he laughed and I joined him in his laughter.

I quickly put the pressure cooker on the stove and made the lady-finger fry that he always liked so much.

What I had cooked for myself earlier was anyway there. We had our lunch, Nanna complimented me on my cooking. I imitated my mother and said, "If your daughter cooks something, you will anyway like it, big deal!" Nanna burst out laughing.

"Your amma thinks of you all the time. She wanted to come too. I stopped her as I was coming on office duty. Avinash and you must come when you get leave. I spoke to Avinash in the morning. He insisted that I should come home. He also insisted that I should stay till he comes back in the evening. But I have a meeting in the evening and I have to leave for Vijayawada tonight. It is a tight schedule" my father kept talking to me and I felt very sad. "You could have planned to stay for a couple of days, no?"

"Next time I will surely come and bring your mother too. Or you two can come," he said

He left in the evening. I lived for twenty-three years with people who have now become almost strangers to me. I realized how the lives of girls are dictated by the rules that make them slaves to the system.

Avinash asked as soon as he came home, "Did uncle come?" I said that he did. "I tried to come at least for one hour in the afternoon. But I am sorry I could not at all find time" he apologized.

"It is okay! " I felt happy that at least he felt he should express his regret.

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It was the day of Sandeep's entrance exam. Avinash and I wished him on phone.

"Are you in good spirits?" I said sensing his tension. "I am okay!" he said.

"Don't feel any tension!" I counselled him.

"I don't have any. Only amma has 170/110" Sandeep said. I did not understand. "Her blood pressure- 170/110! She is very tense since morning. If I have any tension it is for her health, nothing else." he said in a detached manner.

"It doesn't matter! It must be due to a bit of anxiety. Even I feel some." Avinash snatched the phone from my hand, "All that is none of your business. Don't think of anything other than your subject. Be relaxed! You should remember everything that you have studied one by one," he tried to give hypnotic suggestions to his brother.

My parents-in-law took him to the exam centre and brought him back after the exam.

The next day newspapers highlighted the anxiety of the parents more than that of the candidates. This is like mass hysteria, I thought in irritation. After he came out

my parents-in-law asked Sandeep how he performed, he said he wrote okay. For this reply he had to hear a lecture from his parents.

He was not allowed to take rest even for two days. He was just given permission to watch TV for one night. That's all! Next day onwards his preparation for national level test started. But they had high hopes on EAMCET.

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EAMCET results were out in record time, within fifteen days of the exam. They were scheduled to be released at four that evening. They were on the net. Avinash told me that he would try on the net and he told me to check the result at home. I came back from the institute, had lunch and went to their house. My mother-in-law was waiting eagerly and told me to open the net. I saw the time, there were fifteen minutes more. I asked for Sandeep. They told me he had gone to the coaching class and would be back by 5:30.

I sat in front the computer and opened the net. The results were yet to be uploaded on the websites. Suddenly, at four o'clock all the internet connections got jammed. Millions of people must be trying anxiously to see their results. I could not see the result at all. Avinash didn't get it either. I told him I will call as soon as I get it. Then my father-in-law called. Friends and relatives also started calling. Attayya got so distressed she put the phone off the hook.

We got it at 5 in the evening. I scrolled down the screen looking for Sandeep's number. I started sweating heavily. I can imagine attayya's state. "What is the rank?" she asked shaking my shoulder vigorously

"I am trying. I think it is only an average rank. Give me the number I will verify it again." Same number, same rank! "What is the rank!" she asked sweating profusely.

"His rank is fourteen thousand one hundred and forty two!" I told her bowing my head. She left my shoulders that she was holding tightly; took two steps backwards as if she heard something untoward. Both Sandeep and uncle who had just entered the hall too heard me. They stood stock-still for ten seconds, like painted pictures.

Attayya went to her room and closed the door. Uncle looked at Sandeep with contempt and told me, "All these days I neglected my work and went with him everywhere. Without that job how can I earn my livelihood? I will go to office and do my actual duty. Just take care of your attayya"

We were left alone in the hall. "Did I ever ask him to go with me everywhere leaving his office?" Sandeep asked angrily.

"Okay, Sandeep they may say all these things now out of frustration. Don't worry about all that. I replaced the receiver on the hook as Avinash would also be worrying about the result. Sure enough, Avinash called. I told him. There was silence for one

minute. "He is nowhere near any rank. Is he studying at all? Or just enjoying life?"

His voice was quivering in anger.

I did not say anything. "How is amma?"

'She is upset!'

"Where is she? Call her to the phone."

"I think she is sleeping. Her door is closed."

"Okay, don't leave her alone. Stay with her. She cannot stand this shock. She had so many hopes on him. Rascal! He simply destroyed all that." He was gasping in anger.

If you heard his words you would think Sandeep had committed a huge crime. What did he do? What kind of shock had he given her? I was also very angry seeing everyone's insensitivity, but controlled myself.

I looked at Sandeep. He was still standing leaning against the wall with his hands folded.

"Okay, I will put the phone down." I walked towards her room. I knocked on her door. There was no response. I knocked louder; I called out to her "Attayya! Please open the door!"

Sandeep looked at me and the door with wide open eyes. I got scared. What is she doing inside?

I called out to her again, loudly asking her to open the door. Sandeep came and stood by my side. "Amma, Open the door!" His voice was breaking with tears in it. I felt pity for him and tension for her.

"Amma! Please, Open the door. I am getting scared. Please amma! Sorry! I will study well this time. Please open the door."

For the last time I called her again. Since it was an AC room all the doors and windows were closed. I moved towards the phone to call Avinash. Suddenly the doors opened. She looked furious.

She started slapping Sandeep left and right on his cheeks. "How can you even continue to live? Are you not ashamed to stand before me with this rank? Had you died when you were born it would have been better. I would have reconciled that I have only one son. How many times you misled us and scored this deplorable rank? You wanted to take long term coaching and improve on your last year's rank. How can I show my face to any one now?"

I intervened in her tirade, "Attayya, Please stop it now. There is no point in feeling bad, for what's over!" I said.

How can I not feel bad about it? I felt so happy that my first son had become an IIT engineer and the younger one will be a doctor. Now it is all the same to have this son or not. Don't show your face to me. Don't worry about me. My life is quite strong. Go and do whatever you want"

Listening to her words all the nerves on his face seemed to tighten. Sandeep was seething within, it showed on his face. His fists clenched, jaws rigid he was looking at me. I could sense that he was controlling himself by drawing strength from my presence, knowing my affection for him.

Every mother loves her children. It is a natural emotion. What is this devil which has totally overshadowed this natural maternal instinct for care and affection? It is globalization that is driving people to earn more and more money and ruthlessly aspire to reach the pinnacle. It is actually driving people to totally forget natural human affections.

Can she not understand that she is breaking his heart? How can I rescue Sandeep from this onslaught? I took her hand and led her into the bedroom.

"Attayya! He has to write two - three more exams, please"

"I don't have any confidence that he can do it!" she declared with contempt.

"It does not matter! We will pay donation and send him for higher studies."

“Where can we get thirty-forty lakhs now? Avinash started working recently. We sold all our property in the village and got a transfer for your mamayya and came here. I left my teacher’s job for their studies. In return this is how he cheats us!” she said angrily

How can you impose all your hopes and ambitions on them and blame them for the failure? I did not argue with her. I told her to take rest and asked the maid to be with her and came into the kitchen. Sandeep also came in and sat on a stool. “Are you feeling bad?” I asked Sandeep taking the vegetables out of the fridge.

“About what?” he asked me.

“That you did not get a rank.”

“No, I told you early on, I would not get it. Why worry about it now? My worry is only for amma and nanna. Why aren’t they able to understand me? It is just that they have no love for me. They can’t even respect me. You saw how amma hit me? Don’t you think it is wrong? Why should I be subjected to this torture? What is my fault? Don’t I have the right to study what I want?” His words only had questions! Is there one wise man in our society who can answer them?”

“What am I going to do from tomorrow?” He asked in puzzlement.

“Just don’t worry till you finish the other exams.”

“It is all a waste! Vadina, I tell you I won’t get it! I just don’t like the medicine field. I am not talking about good, bad or earning more money or anything like that. I am talking about interest and of the happiness one should feel while studying. How is it that nobody wants to bother about it?”he complained bitterly.

“Okay, first finish those exams too. I will talk to your parents and your brother.” I assured him.

As soon as I finished cooking, I forced him to eat first as I felt if he ate with everyone else, someone or the other might start scolding him.

Mamayya entered while he was having his dinner. He got so angry that his eyes turned red. In an unexpected gesture he grabbed Sandeep’s collar and pulled him out of the chair, “How can you eat food? Everyone outside keeps asking me what is your rank and I cannot raise my head outside for shame. And you eat plate after plate of food. Don’t you feel ashamed?” He took out his belt and started hitting him with the belt. I started crying. I went to save Sandeep “Mamayya, please don’t beat him. I was the one who forced him to eat even when he refused. Please leave him.” I begged.

Sandeep was shielding himself from the belt. In the meantime attayya came out and told me,” You don’t interfere. Don’t you know that one should not interfere when parents discipline their children?” She shouted at me. I ran into Sandeep’s room.

I could see everything from there. Mamayya got tired out beating. Atayya got tired of screaming at him, Sandeep stood straight and tall after taking all the beating. His hair was dishevelled, his cheeks carried the scars of his father's fingers. His hand was bleeding due to the deep belt marks.

He was like a volcano about to explode. I got so scared that a shiver ran down my spine. I had never been hit in my life. People - my parents and teachers – had always pampered me as I was a good student. I never saw people beating each other till then.

Here they were beating a son who is as tall as them, my head started reeling.

I called out to Sandeep from the room. He came into the room stamping his feet, walked restlessly around. Suddenly, he hit the table with his fist with all his strength. Crack! The plank broke into two. The books, pens and paper weight, scattered all over the room. He kept hitting the wall in wild fury.

I ran to hold his hand. It was bleeding. "I don't think any of you is human!" I said gritting my teeth.

"Yes, I am an animal. That is why they whipped me like cattle. But this is the last time for them. Now if any one lifts a hand to beat me I won't keep quiet. Sure, till now I

respected them and loved them as they are my parents. But they don't love me. No one loves me. I am a useless fellow." He started saying wretchedly.

"Deepu, Don't say all these things. The anger of parents is very short lived. Just think! All this suffering is for your sake, because they love you"

"No, it's for their own sakes!" he said in anger. I was shocked.

"Yes, if sons earn a lot of money, they can maintain cars and bungalows. They want to get recognised as rich people with their sons' earnings. What they could not achieve, they want to get through us," he continued.

"No, you are wrong!"

"No what I say is right. If they don't have any such ambition they could have allowed me to study what I want. I told them too. I will not depend on them for my support once my studies are over. I will look for a suitable job and support myself. Now I am beginning to think. Today, children are the best investment for parents. Yes, the investment they put on me is not a waste if I succeed. We will earn hundred times more and give them good profit. That is their plan..."

"Okay, this is not the age for you to think of all these things, neither is it the time! Go and sleep."

"I don't want to go on like this. I must do something," he said impatiently.

“Don’t think now. Keep your peace of mind. Everything will be okay!”

“At this rate, I cannot stay in this house. It is not possible for me. I must go away somewhere.” He said obstinately.

“Don’t talk rubbish! Go and sleep” he lay down on his bed and started looking at the ceiling. I did not know how to console him.

“I don’t know how God made us such good friends but you must believe that I always think about you. My affection is beyond these studies and the career and all. So you should never do anything that makes me unhappy. You must tell me every step you take” he nodded his head.

“Anyone can laugh when one is happy. But one who laughs when he is unhappy is the real genius.” I recited a film dialogue and Sandeep smiled. I served dinner to my in-laws and then had my dinner. Avinash came late and they did not talk to each other. Avinash looked very serious and preoccupied. He did not mention Sandeep at all.

As we returned home I told him “Sandeep is very disturbed. Call him home once and console him” I suggested. He did not question or **say anything for that matter**, just nodded his head.

Next day till evening I was busy on various errands and could not call Sandeep. In the evening we had to attend the marriage reception of Avinash's colleague. By the time we came home, it was 10:30 in the night. The phone was ringing as we entered the house. As he was feeling restless he told me to pick it up and walked into the bedroom. He lay on his bed after switching on the AC.

The phone got disconnected as soon as I picked it up. But it rang again almost immediately.

"Hello, who is this?" I asked. There was silence at the other end. I could hear a lot of noise in the background. I said 'hello' again loudly.

"Vadina, it is Sandeep!"

"You? At this time? Are you at home?" I asked anxiously.

"No, I am calling from the railway station." He said coolly.

"Railway station? Where are you going?"

"I don't know!"

"What do you mean, you don't know! Who is with you?" I asked agitatedly.

There was a sound of heavy breathing sound from the other side “I am leaving the house for good”

“My God! Sandeep! Are you mad? Tell me where are you? Your brother and I will come.

“No use vadina, I told you I will not keep quiet if they beat me again. Non-stop abuses since yesterday and beatings too. Don't I look like a human being to them anymore? I think it is better to die than face all this torture. Why can't any one understand? I want to live alone happily and laugh to my heart's content. I want to breathe on my own. I can't have all these things here. They will either kill me or drive me to killing myself. I can't stay in this house. That is why I want to leave.” He was crying and talking at the same time.

I shivered when I heard his words. “Deepu, please don't talk like that! If you can't live there come and live with me. I will look after you. I will see that you get the course of your choice. I am there for you. Please believe me. Don't you believe me? Just forget whatever has happened, for my sake. Nobody will beat you now.” I promised him.

“It is not in your hand” he said despondently.

“No, you are like my own child. I will fight for you with anyone in the world. If you walk out of the house what will happen to your parents? Have you thought about it?”

“Nothing will happen. They will think they have only one son,” he said angrily.

“They just want to create some sense of challenge in you. That’s all! They can’t hate you. Leave it. Come for my sake,” I pleaded.

“Since I have affection for you and you told me to tell you whatever step I decide to take, I called you now.”

“Okay, I believe you. Again for my sake, come home. Listen to me this once and I will see that no one will beat you. Don’t go to your home if you don’t want to. Stay here. You can join B.Com.” I made so many wild promises so that he would not leave home.

“Can you really do all that?” There was a small flicker of hope in his voice.

“Sure, everything will be done according to your wishes. Don’t go anywhere now. Your brother and I are coming there. Stay there.”

“No, you need not come; I will take an auto and come there.” I gave him many precautions and told him to hurry home.

Avinash came out of the bedroom talking on his cellphone. ‘It seems Sandeep is missing,’ he said with worry. I briefly told him the whole story. Sandeep would come

home soon and told my in-laws not to worry. I also told them not to come in the middle of the night and let him stay with us for a week. But they did not listen. Both of them were in our house immediately.

Avinash was walking up and down restlessly in the hall. Both my parents-in-law were livid with anger. At least now I hoped they would show him some affection. I told them about his psychological condition and requested them not to give him any pressure, scold him or beat him and allow him to stay with us for at least one week. The three of them did not respond. They just listened to my request and kept quiet. One hour! “Do you think he will come? We did not lodge a police complaint as we believed your words. If we act quickly and alert them they will catch him before he leaves the town. If he gets a good thrashing there, he will come round easily.” As Avinash looked at me questioningly, I was shocked.

Sandeep came home at 12:30 in the night. His face was haggard and he was taken aback seeing his parents there.

He looked at me with mistrust. I reassured him with my eyes. “Come, Sandeep, and sit here” I called him to my side before they had time to react. My parents-in-law were looking at me in irritation. What would they have done if I was not there? “Ask him what he wants!” Mamayya instructed Avinash.

“Sandeep is tired. You are also worried. Mamayya, why don’t you just sleep now? We can talk tomorrow.” I said.

“No Ramya, it is better for everyone to resolve this issue now.”

I was about to say something, but Sandeep stopped me, saying, “I already told all of you about my decision. I am not interested in studying medicine. It is a waste to appear for entrance exams. I won’t take any more exams.”

All three of them were shocked at his bold statement. They were all trying hard to control their temper. “What do you want to do then?”

“I want to join B.Com...” he did not complete his sentence; Avinash got up angrily and picking him up from the sofa, started kicking him wildly with both his legs. His parents simply watched the scene, silently.

“Go beg and eat! That will serve you right.” He shouted. Attayya and Mamayya watched in some satisfaction as Avinash went on kicking him.

I was shocked at the unexpected turn of events. I rushed to Avinash, pleading, “Please leave him.” I could not take the manner in which they were simply establishing their right over him, just because he was a member of their family; and how they were deceiving themselves that it was all for his good and his career. More than anything else I could not stand the look Sandeep was giving me.

“So far we ignored it, thinking it is all because of your immaturity. Now if we lock you up and starve you for two days, you will come round. Let’s go,” said Mamayya.

Attayya\* stood up. They were taking Sandeep with them. I was totally confused. I told them about his psychological state before he came here. They just did not seem to care, I thought to myself.

“Let him stay here for one week” I begged, picking up courage. “No, you cannot control him,” he said.

“No, I will see that he studies. First let him recover his cool, then we will think of his studies” I said firmly.

Avinash reacted angrily, “What is this Ramya, You’re being very foolish! Don’t you understand?”

“No I promised him that I will keep him with me and take care of his studies.”

“What does that mean?” Avinash said knitting his eyebrows.

“He doesn’t want to go home. This is also his house. Let him stay here.” I insisted.

Sandeep refused to look at me. As I begged him, he stood looking the other way.

Attayya had tears in her eyes. “He is my own flesh, Ramya...” Avinash shouted at me

as he saw tears in his mother's eyes. He raised his hand, "You came to this house just the other day. You think you have more responsibility and more affection than his parents. Do you know what you are saying?"

I looked at his raised hand and angry face in utter disbelief. Attayya shouted at him "Avinash, what are you doing? Put your hand down. You can't lift it on a girl."

I was shocked. Differences are common in every family. For this how can he lift a hand at me, his wife?

"Come let's go home," they pushed Sandeep forward. He followed them like a sacrificial animal. Before he left he pointed his finger at me and said, "You trapped me into coming here with your lies. You are all in this together. I will never talk to you again. I won't ever believe you. You are not my friend."

Every word of his pierced my heart like an arrow.

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After that incident I kept my distance from Avinash. He apologized to me the next day itself. But I was angry. Sandeep's issue was like an arrow slashing my heart. Preoccupied with this, I did not realize that I missed my period. After one week I thought of it and went to get the test done. Pregnancy colour test result was positive. I felt happy.

We are going to have a tiny baby in our midst. She will put a noose through his nose and make Avinash dance to her tunes. He has to listen to all her demands. I rehearsed many times preparing to break this news to him. I kept thinking how he would react and how happy he would feel; the thought itself was so exciting.

When he came home, I took extra care to be for him and talked to him happily forgetting my anger. "Why is madam so happy today?" he asked.

"Guess!" I tried to excite him.

"Was there a phone call from your parents?"

"No!"

"Are they coming?"

"Yes, coming! But not my parents!"

"Who else? Who could be coming that can make you so happy?"

I started enjoying his predicament.

"No, I can't guess!"

“Okay, listen! Sri Avinash, the king of this household is going to be visited by a little princess with a cane as he hasn’t been listening to his queen Ramya Devi.”

He looked as if he did not understand. “In another seven months!” I told him. The light had gone out of his eyes. He became very serious.

“How is it possible? We have not even planned our careers. What is the hurry?” he said in a disappointed tone. All my excitement vanished in a second.

“Why should we link career to this? We have to eventually have children.” I asked him.

“Yes, we shall have them. But there is a time for everything. You have not even started earning.” He said in an accusing tone. Instead of feeling happy at the news he was talking like this, all these accusations, I was really angry at his attitude.

“Go and consult a doctor and get the abortion done tomorrow,” he instructed firmly.

I started crying. “Don’t you have any sentiments for anything other than money?” He looked at me with a hurt look. “It is because I think of everything, I am telling you this. We should have all the facilities ready by the time we bring our children into this world.”

“Were we born or brought up like that?” I asked

“No, we faced so many problems. My parents had to sacrifice so much to give me this education. They sacrificed all their comforts. We have to plan, precisely because we should not suffer.”

“Whatever you say, abortion is wrong. I don’t have any such intention.” I said categorically.

He went into the house looking angrily at me. For two days we did not talk to each other. He tried to talk to me but I did not respond. “Okay, let’s tell my mother. We will do whatever she advises. I will have no problem then.” My stomach revolted again. Even if she says yes, I am the one who has to give birth to this baby. No one can stop me now.

After he heard what she said on the phone Avinash was convinced. According to her it is difficult to get maternity leave once I get a job. There will be a break in the career. During study time I can deliver the baby without much pressure. Afterwards the baby can be taken care of either by me or his mother. He came to me with a smile and said congratulations to me. Suddenly where did this affection come from, for his yet to be born baby? Can love spring according to plans and convenience? How sincere is this love? I can never forgive Avinash for this.

I found it difficult to balance household work and institute tasks. The morning sickness made me weak. He did not agree when I said I will apply for leave for a few days. He engaged a help so that I need not do any work at home. It was not actually

out of any love for me. I know it was because he was afraid that I would stop going to the institute.

After the fourth month I reconciled myself to all these disappointments. The baby in me could be physically and psychologically healthy, only if I keep myself happy.

I went to meet attayya twice but could not meet Sandeep. Whenever I asked she used to say he was studying or he had gone to the coaching institute. Third time I wanted to see him somehow so I stayed till late in the night. Mamayya brought him along with him at about 9 in the night. He was looking very run down and tired. "How are you, Deepu?" He did not pay attention to me and turned his face away as soon as he saw me.

"Look at him! Please don't mind. You were so affectionate and looked after him so well when you came to this house as a stranger. But he doesn't think about all these things. For him, his stubbornness is important." Attayya said feeling sorry.

"It is okay. I think he is restless. I went to his room to find out and tried patting his head, "Are you still angry with me?" He did not reply. He got up from the chair pushing my hand away and sat in another chair. I felt hurt, but was patient with him.

"Shall I give you some good news? You will shortly get another small friend and you will soon become an uncle. He looked at me with wide eyes and for some reason his face assumed an emotionless tough stance. He left me standing there and went to

the bathroom taking his towel. Then I understood; his anger is too deep to penetrate my entreaties, only time will heal it.

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What I tried to avoid, what was my constant fear, what I warned every one about, happened. Sandeep ran away from home. The family's reputation suffered with the police complaint and investigations. No one could eat for one week. At last we found out that Sandeep went to his grandparents' house in the village. For the first five-six days he wandered aimlessly. Then he did not know what to do. He was too young to think or live independently. So finally he thought of his grandparents. He told them he would run away if he was forced to go back to Hyderabad. So they allowed him to stay in the village. His grandparents, Shakuntala and Bhaskar Rao, lived in a village near Vijayawada. Avinash's mother was their only daughter. After she was married, they settled down to live on their own, in the village. Grandfather still occupied himself with agricultural work. When my in-laws heard that Sandeep refused to come home, "Let him stay there in that village kneading the earth, no one should take his name in this house" ordered Mamayya in anger.

Attayya cried for four days and had come to terms with the fact. Initially, they were worried whether he was dead or alive, but now that he was fine somewhere, they did not worry much. Gradually everyone forgot about Sandeep. Only Avinash's grandparents tried to tell them of his wellbeing now and then but they never listened. Needless to say, Avinash used to flare up with the very mention of Sandeep's name.

I often think of what they finally achieved? They could not hold their son for whose career they pressurised so much. They lost their place in his heart. For what did they do all this? They did not get the career for the son but lost the son. Their eyes were covered with the thick dust of the dreams of ranks, career, and money. They could not see any other value in their son. When would these parents change and realize that the children are driven to suicide, and are driven to run away from their homes? When would they change? How many more have to sacrifice their lives before the intellectuals of this country think rationally and provide some solution?

Fortunately Avinash crossed this stage. But my children...? They should not grow up like Sandeep. Definitely, there should be discipline, but it should not oppress them. They should blossom naturally like flowers. If you try and force them to flower they will fade and destroy themselves. I must bring them up carefully without any pressure. I thought firmly.

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I was fast approaching my full term. My mother said she would take me to Vizag for delivery. But Avinash did not agree. He told I would stay on in Hyderabad for the delivery and he had already spoken to the gynaecologist. My parents were hurt. I went to my mother's house only once after marriage, that too with Avinash. My amma thought she could see me for three months at least on this pretext. She had to come here for my delivery. Attayya too wanted to come. But Avinash told her

there was no need. “You lived with tensions all these years. At least be free now” he told them.

His salary had also risen to Rs. 85000 now. He would keep twenty-five thousand and give the rest to them. They were busy with a number of financial plans now-a-days. Since they had already bought a plot of land, they were planning to build a house investing twenty-five lakhs. Avinash had applied for a loan and the banks sanctioned it.

Life seemed to be going smoothly without any problem; still there was some restlessness in me. Some vague suffocating feeling - is this what good life means? In me, a kind of disinterest? Avinash is intelligent and he was earning well. Is this enough for a human being to be happy? What exactly is the yardstick for intelligence? What are the qualifications required for a good job? If people are proficient in their subjects can they be intelligent enough to live their lives?

Why all this? Take Avinash, he hurt me so many times from the day he married me. What happened to all that intelligence when it came to managing the family? Leave alone my life; he could not even help Sandeep with his problems. He was not given to worldly-wise smartness.

Just as I thought about him he also thought that I was lazy and did not care for my career. But I know I am not lazy. If we do things that satisfy us how can it be laziness?

It is a waste of time to listen to music, to read novels, and to paint. Even to sit and talk pleasantly is a waste of time.

To think of money and career from the time we wake up to the time we go to bed, is beyond my comprehension. In fact, the happiness we get with the money we earn after going through so many tensions is nowhere comparable to that of the people who lead ordinary lives.

One should grow in life, true! But the definition of growth cannot be just earning money. We should grow in our values. Self confidence, respect for other's views, time and space for our individual interests, and to try and help people in need of our support, will actually make us well-rounded persons in addition to our capacity to earn money. That is why whatever Avinash's influence on my life be, I will have to take care to keep my own values. If possible I must change his view of life. But now, I feel he will change only when life teaches him tough lessons.

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I gave birth to a baby girl after an easy delivery.

When I went into labour I noticed Avinash looking tense. He is not actually a hard-hearted man, I thought to myself. He avoided coming near me. He would just look at me from a distance and send either my mother or his mother to me. He looked at the baby in the cradle and smiled to himself. "Pick her up" I said.

“No, I am scared...” he said touching her fingers softly. I could not keep myself from laughing.

“How can you say you are scared? Tomorrow onwards you have to carry her on your shoulders and play with her,” I said.

“Okay, but only when she grows up!” On the third day I returned home from the hospital. Avinash went back to office the second day itself.

“Can’t you apply for leave for a week?” I asked hopefully.

“Impossible! I have so much work to do. Over and above that, we have a daughter now. We must work harder” he said anxiously.

That irritated me. “Please don’t say that! I don’t like it. There is no difference between a boy and a girl, expense-wise.”

Amma had gone back after the baby entered her third month. After that Attayya stayed with me for a month.

Avinash was ready to change his company. His salary would now be one lakh twenty-five thousand rupees. I too got a job. They offered me also a job with twenty five thousand, looking at my confidence in replying to their queries in the interview. I

cleared the software exams well. “You got a job without my recommendation? Very good! You turned out to be quite intelligent” Avinash said in surprise.

We both started going to the same office. There was a baby care centre within the office complex, making it all very convenient. I had not wanted to work till the baby turned one year old. But Avinash forced me to change my mind.

Every two hours it was mandatory to go and feed the baby. It was so uncomfortable working amongst so many, to hide my discomfort, I asked the doctor for tablets so that I need not feed her. He scolded me and advised me to use cotton. Everything was new- motherhood, job and colleagues, and in every way it was very uncomfortable. But I did not neglect my job. In the interview I told them that I would work only for eight hours in a day from nine to five. “If you had not given that time restriction you would have got more money, at least fifteen thousand more.” Avinash said in dissatisfaction. As it is, I felt it was unfair to leave the baby for such a long time. Attayya offered to take care of her. But I thought, in this way the baby will be closer to me and she would not have to depend on market milk.

Gradually, I got used to my routine. I used to get up early in the morning get the baby ready, give all the necessary instructions to the cook and get the lunch boxes ready, and then get ready to go to office. I used to have my breakfast and go to the office in the car. Avinash used to leave with me on most days or occasionally leave early. He would come back after nine every day. If he was not tired by then he would play with the baby or sit in front of the computer. If everything went smoothly with

his project he would display a very arrogant attitude, otherwise he would bring earth and sky together with his tension. I never saw him taking things in a balanced manner. High ambitions and high expectations from life are not good, I told him so many times. He never listened and never used to relax for a single day. All the activities to instil relaxation appeared like a waste of time to him. He also got a small paunch due to lack of exercise. If I teased him he used to laugh it off if in good mood, or shut me up angrily. During the baby's naming ceremony he took the initiative and named her Keerthi, he hopes that her 'fame' would spread all over the globe. "Are you so obsessed with fame?" He did not talk to me for one whole day because I asked that question. I used to call her chinni, munni, bujji, whatever appealed to me at that moment. Since both us were earning well we were financially quite well off. We had earned a good name not just in our apartment complex but in our colony too. We used to get invitations for meetings and cultural programmes. I used to attend the interesting ones, though Avinash never looked at them. For him they were all a waste of time. "Instead of wasting time on these useless programmes, could you not spend one more hour in the office" he would ask me, as if the time he spends there was not enough. I stuck to my stand. I understood one thing clearly right from the beginning, Avinash and I are two different people. We won't mix like milk and water but they won't completely break too.

My hope springs mainly from this. Avinash cannot live like this for long. Not only he, any one has to change, I must be patient and wait for that day. Now I spend time with the baby. Earlier with just Avinash, life was so dull; we never had any of the things that are in order for newly-weds. When we got married, we had no sweet

nothings. He never spent time with me in love or affection. He used to do everything as a matter of duty. Sometimes he used to come to me at eleven in the night. When I refused to entertain him in anger, he would meekly go away to sleep. I did not know whether to laugh or cry. Avinash is a total stranger to the normal romantic nothings or even petty fights that are so common between couples. They were never a part of his dictionary. I never expressed my dissatisfaction. But then in another corner of my heart I also loved him deeply. There was a bond between us. Not only that I could clearly see his love for me the day the baby was born. But it would not come out at all times. If he could recognize what he wanted he would surely change. I was sure he was not a cruel person. That was my hope.

That day, someone came from our colony to collect donation. Avinash was at home. He told me to talk to them and send them off. I begged him, it is not correct. He came into the hall, every one stood up in respect. His happiness brightened his face. He offered them all seats. Our maid served them all drinks.

“Tell me,” he said with dignity.

“We came to collect colony development fund,” they said.

“Okay, what will you develop?”

“We will improve the parks and roads, plant trees and other social help activities...”

they continued

“But this is the job of the government, no?”

They looked at each other. “Of course, you know it all, sir!” He did not say anything. One of them said again, “two hundred, three, five people are giving whatever they can!” they showed him the receipt book.

“Ramya, bring my cheque book” their faces brightened at that. He put the amount, signed it, and gave it to them- Rs.15000.

“Thank you, sir, if everyone thinks of society like you this country will surely improve. Thank you for your cooperation.” As they praised him he felt satisfied and smile smugly. I was astonished at his new generosity. I would not have given that big an amount. While talking to them he casually asked “Every year you give awards to people who have contributed to the colony’s development. Who will get that award this year?” I suddenly grew suspicious.

“Every year we have obligations like money or politics. But this time we are firm on giving this award to Satyam master. He has been here right since his childhood. We got government sanction for all the parks because of his efforts. Even now he plants trees wherever he finds vacant space. He is always on the forefront of everything that is related to the colony, good or bad.” I could see a trace of disappointment creeping into Avinash’s face now. He listened to them quietly. They praised him again for some time before going.

After one week or so one elderly gentleman amongst them came to our house in the evening enquiring for him. I told him he would not come home till nine in the night. He stood there as if in a dilemma. "Is there anything I can do? Please tell me. I will give him the message." I asked.

"The cheque he gave bounced. They say there is no money in his account" he said awkwardly. I was surprised as there is always a minimum balance of fifty thousand in Avinash's account. "There must be some mistake. Did you talk to the bank?"

"Yes, they told us he withdrew the entire amount six days back. They returned the cheque saying there is no money in his account."

I was confused. I had some vague thought, but ashamed to think in that direction. In the night I told him about the bounced cheque. He just said "Is it?" and kept quiet.

"What is this? It is a great insult to us if a cheque bounces. You should have ensured that there is some money before giving them the cheque." I admonished. "What is the great loss now?" he asked in an indifferent tone.

"Loss? Isn't loss of face in the colony a loss to your reputation?" I asked

“No, I gave them a cheque for Rs. 15, 000 when they asked for just one thousand. But they did not show enough respect for that.” “What does it mean?” I did not understand.

“Many people find pleasure in planting and growing trees and going round the government offices for something or the other. If they can give awards for that, I gave them my hard-earned money. Don’t I deserve an award for that?”

Now I understood his inner thoughts. “Have you donated money for this?” I asked him suppressing my revulsion.

“You can think whatever you like!”

“Your thinking is wrong, Avinash!” I tried to tell him calmly.

“You have no business to be judgmental. I know what I am. I am not at a stage where I have to be told by you what is right and wrong.” He said arrogantly.

“So did you empty your account?”

“Yes.”

“Deliberately?”

“Yes!” he said triumphantly.

“What should I tell them tomorrow if they come and ask me?”

“Say something!”

“Something means what?” I shouted in irritation.

“Whatever comes to your mind!” It was all some kind of a joke for him. The gentleman came the next day early in the morning. I was so ashamed to go out and meet him. I told Avinash to go. He sat in front of the computer and refused to go. He told me to tell him that he was not at home. I had to go.

As he looked at me with the question in his eyes I told him “He is still sleeping!” I felt bad for telling this lie.

“It is okay. I have some work today. I will come tomorrow.” He had gone and for the time being the crisis was over.

He came for three days in a row. I gave him excuse after excuse with a bowed head unable to look into his eyes. Then he must have understood, as he stopped coming. Afterwards people used to look at me with sympathy whenever I met them. I could imagine how they would look at Avinash. He earned a lot of disrespect in an effort to gain a reputation and respect.

He had no understanding of social relationships. The things he did were actually aimed at earning fame or good name. He just refused to believe that he had a responsibility towards the society he lives in. He failed not only in maintaining family relationships but in acquiring social skills too. This was not at all good for him. Whenever I tried to make him sit and understand these things, his ego would assert itself. He was, after all an IIT product earning lakhs and that there was no need for anyone to give him any lessons in social behaviour. He need not listen if someone tells him.

We stopped getting invitations for any functions that the colony organized. I was also unable to participate as freely as before. My life was thus chained and I was feeling suffocated.

But my daughter was like spring that came into my life everyday.. I used to find happiness in all her activities. She used to sleep by the time Avinash came home.

“Why does she sleep so much?” He used to wonder at his two-year old daughter. “We must teach her to work hard right from the beginning. She is already two and doesn’t know her alphabet. Many children recite rhymes at this age. You are not teaching her anything,” he started complaining. All I could do was stare at him.

By the time my daughter turned three I settled to a routine in my life and my job. The eight hours I was in the office I would concentrate on my work with full focus. Other times whatever the pressure; I would never think of my office work at home.

For me both office and home are equal commitments. I never thought I should sacrifice one for the other. I used to utilize all the leave I was entitled to, as I didn't believe in encashing my leave. In the same way, it was not in my nature to put myself through undue pressure just to please the management. I used to make adjustments according to my needs. Avinash was not like me. He would never apply for leave. He would willingly spend more time at office. In addition, he would bring office work home and not take enough rest at home. That would impact his work the next day in the office.

Of late he had started complaining of weakness and frequent headaches. He never liked other people giving him advice. It wasn't just me, even his colleagues used to be afraid of giving him suggestions. They were constantly apprehensive of his moods and would not know at what point of time he would react and shout at them.

He treated his subordinates with great contempt. They had no knowledge and compared to him, they were simply nonentities. Generally, the project leader should win the trust of the subordinates and try to get work done with his efficient management of intrapersonal relationships. But Avinash was of a different temperament. He believed they had no professional value and should simply obey his orders. At the same time, he would expect superiors to respect him as they were dependent on his intelligence.

Though his style of functioning was always autocratic, it was his intelligence which bailed him out most of the time. He was proficient in his subject. Moreover, he

would keep himself up to date on new software, hardware and latest developments in his field by downloading the information from the internet. His knowledge of the subject and his unending curiosity to know every new development were the two great assets in his work.

But his other drawbacks used to completely overshadow his positive qualities. I don't know if it was a good day or a bad day for me when I too got my promotion as project manager along with Avinash. His salary reached the stagnation point of one lakh ten thousand and mine was also raised to the same level.

We work in different departments. Along with the rumours of my promotion, word also spread that he would be downgraded and sent to another department. With all his intelligence, lately Avinash was unable to achieve the set goals. He was unable to complete some projects and one got rejected for technical reasons. The Company would not bear this kind of loss. So he was demoted. 'Now how could she accept the promotion given to her in such a situation?'

When he heard of this, Avinash applied for leave and stayed at home one day. It was a big blow to him, more than his demotion my promotion hurt him. "For people who work eight hours promotions and for people who break their back day and night demotions!" he taunted me. I kept quiet as I knew his demotion upset him. He started making moves to change to another company. But with a bad record it was not so easy.

The person who earned crores for his company was now suffering all these setbacks simply because of lack of career planning on his part. With all those humiliations he did not know whether to stay or leave that company. That is not all! Now his attitude to me also started changing.

At one time he encouraged me in every activity whether it was for money or for my career. Now for everything he discouraged me. He started finding fault with everything I did, passing taunting remarks, and interfering in my office work. I just did not know how to deal with this unbearable situation at every step of the way. I did know how to bring him back to a normal mindset. He even stopped paying attention to office work. Instead of improving his image in the office he started doing everything that would further ruin it. He was actually harming his career irrevocably. He stopped coming home after office. He started going to pubs, became addictive to drinking and started coming home at 1:30 in the night. First I found it difficult to accept that he had got addicted to drinking. I also came to know that he was spending most of his time dancing with girls in the pubs. All my pity and sympathy have to repulsion. I tried talking to him. When it didn't deter him I told attayya. She consoled me saying that it was the natural life style of software professionals. Obviously, she would support him. If she didn't how would they repay the loans they had taken? I asked her, "Am I not a software professional?" She did not know what to say.

During these past five years my parents have not come even five times to Hyderabad. As I am their only daughter they would have liked to see me more often.

I used to feel miserable whenever I heard my father's soft voice on the phone. My mother was bolder and tried to console my father. I started getting news about his deteriorating health. Avinash would not permit me to go...on one pretext or the other. After all who is he... to stop me... just because he was my husband how could he assume the right to stop me from visiting my father? At last, after a big fight, I went once. For a month after my return he gave me literal hell by not talking to me, by not playing with Keerthi, going to pubs every night, and spending all his earnings on his addictions. My mother-in-law started taking money from me to pay the monthly instalments on loans.

Once Kirthi had fever. I did not send her to school. I decided to call attayya for one day as I had some urgent work at office. He said no. I requested him to stay at home, that too he refused. Keerthi was having hundred two degrees fever. I could not avoid work unless I was sick... He knew my problem. But he was trying to harass me like a sadist. I asked him what was I supposed to do. "Totally up to you'," he said nonchalantly. I said I can call attayya as she was free. He said "She is not your servant to come whenever you call her!"

"What? If she looks after her granddaughter for one day would she become a servant?"

"Think whatever you like. I am going to the office. It is not proper to call my mother!" he left for the office threatening me. My helplessness brought tears to my eyes. My colleagues started calling me to find out if I had started for the office.

Keerthi was still running a high temperature. I made up my mind. I took the car out and took her to the hospital. Our family doctor checked and prescribed some medicines. I requested her to admit her as an in-patient and allot a room.

“Why Ramya? It is an ordinary fever. Keep her at home for two days and she would be fine.”

“No doctor, please allot a room for her and keep two nurses to look after her. I will pay whatever you ask.”

I requested her desperately. I think she understood my problem. She said, “Cool down, Ramya! You seem to have some work tension. I will take her to my house and look after her. Don’t worry about your daughter. Go and focus on your job.” I folded my hands with tearful eyes. As soon as I entered my office, Avinash looked up in surprise. He called up somewhere and replaced the phone. I knew where he had called. He was about to come to me. I entered my office and closed the door indicating that I should not be disturbed. I knew he would not dare to disturb me. I did my work calmly, picked up Keerthi in the evening and came home. Her fever had come down. She was playing actively. I switched on my cell phone which I had kept in switch off mode. I thought of calling my parents. The phone rang. It was from Vizag. My maternal uncle was calling, “Ramya, start immediately and come here. Your father is quite sick!” I could hear the cries of people. My tears started blinding me. “What happened to my father?” I asked.

“Heart attack!”

“Where is he?”

“In the hospital! You come as soon as you can.”

“If he is in the hospital what are you doing at home? Who is crying behind you?”

Silence on the other side. “You just come now!” He said controlling his sorrow.

I was in shock and kept calling my father. As I started crying, my daughter got so scared that she went and brought our neighbors. They all came in a hurry. Sobbing I told them the news. They called Avinash and my in-laws. They all came within half an hour. I saw some guilt on Avinash’s face as soon as he saw me. He did not come near me. Attayya consoled me. We took the car and reached Vizag by next morning. I started shivering as soon as I saw my father’s body. My mother maintained a stoic silence when I took her in my arms crying. After the cremation was over I came to know that he had suffered the attack the previous night itself, and even after being in the hospital for twenty four hours he could not be saved.

“Amma, why didn’t you tell me? You thought I am not required for you.” I asked crying.

My uncle got angry with that, “What are you saying, Ramya? After admitting him in the hospital I called you at 11 pm. Your cell was switched off. Then I called Avinash on his cell. He said, ‘Is it so? Okay, okay!’ and disconnected it. I called again next morning. He did not pick up the phone.” He said in an accusing tone.

“Had Avinash known that nanna was not well beforehand?” I was shocked.

“I told him, Ramya and he heard me too. Ask him if you want.” He said clearly.

There was a smile on my mother’s face, like that of milk gone sour.

Then I understood what she must be thinking of us. I lost my father and lost my place in my mother’s heart. Avinash was responsible for all this. I lost so much because of marriage to him and I was waiting for him to change. I couldn’t see my father before his death and lost my place in my mother’s heart. These were the two blows I could not take.

Next day my parents-in-law and Avinash went back to Hyderabad. I stayed back with Keerthi. My mother was not talking to me even when I tried repeatedly. One reason could be the death of father. I knew! But she was under the impression that I had become money-minded. She thought I did not come even when I got the news because of this change in my attitude. It was so hard to bear this heartache.

She had sent word through my uncle that I should go back with my husband. “I believe you are in a responsible position. Go Ramya, you can come on the day of final ceremonies again.” he said hesitantly.

I folded my hands and requested him not to torture me anymore. He felt bad about it.

“I told you because your mother told me to tell you. What else do I want if you want to stay?”

Avinash came for the final ceremony. Everything went off well. I said I would stay for four more days. There were some vague thoughts in my mind. Avinash told me that since the project work was pending I should go back early. I stayed with my mother for four more days. That day my uncle came in the car and got my mother’s luggage packed. “Where are you going, uncle?” I asked in surprise.

“How can your mother stay alone? I will take her with me.”

“Why? she is my responsibility. I will take her with me.” I said firmly, though I knew Avinash well.

“We are born of the same mother. He also has some responsibility towards me.” my mother said clearly indicating her choice.

“But am I not born to you?” I asked stifling my sobs.

“Ramya, now your family is different from me. Your thoughts and ideas are different too. The value you give to me and relationships is different. I cannot adjust there!” she said.

It was as good as slapping me. I could see her broken heart in every word she uttered.

“Okay, I will not go anywhere. I will stay here!” I said firmly, thinking this way I can change her mind

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“Good! You can, with full right. He willed the house to you. It is yours now.” amma said.

I was stunned. “I did not mean that, amma!” She refused to listen to whatever I said afterwards. She had gone with him. My life began to look like a vacuum to me. I began to feel stubborn also. Avinash called, “How long are you going to stay there? Are you not planning to come back? You have your office and Keerthi has her school.”

“Avinash, can I ask you something? Will you tell me the truth?”

“What?” a hesitation in his voice

“My uncle called you when my father got his heart attack. You did not tell me. It was a question of life and death for my father. You were just indifferent. You just forgot about human relationships, why?”

He was silent for a while.

“I...my... I forgot to tell you.” He said fumbling for words.

“You forgot as you were enjoying your drinks in the pub at eleven in the night, no?”

“Why are you getting so insistent? The old man had to die anyway. What could we have done in that one day? You are talking as if I have done it deliberately. I just forgot in the pressure of my work. Is that a great crime?” he started shouting at me.

I could not bear to hear his voice even on the phone. I was so disgusted. I could not allow myself to get trapped in the frame of his false values any more. It was beyond me to live with him.

My father died, my mother left me. I left all my friends and my world when I married Avinash. The only bond I still had was with Avinash. Could I bear to live without this one bond?

My daughter came and put her hands around my neck, and I came out of my thoughts.

I must live, there was no option. How could I think there were no bonds for me any more when I had my daughter? I must bring her up. She is my responsibility. I determined myself to face life.

I did not go to Hyderabad, sent in my resignation by email. Avinash came as if by return post. He threatened me... yes, threatened! He did not tell me how difficult it would be for him without me. He tried to scare me that I would have to live a life of misery without him.

I told him I will face all those miseries. He went cursing me all the way. Then my uncle came to tell me that I should not ruin my life by severing ties with my husband. He just warned me but never tried to convince me. Then I understood what all I lost in my effort to build a life with my husband.

I stayed back with my daughter. Only the two of us...and the loneliness...the haunting loneliness. I had been running a race with time so far, now I felt trapped in the claws of the ghost called despair. I was consumed by a disinterest in everything. I just stopped thinking - my career, my daughter's education, money and running expenses for living in this house – I was not interested in anything. Our maid used to bring the meals and we used to eat whatever she brought. She would clean the house and take care of all other tasks at home. The money I brought from Hyderabad would not last longer now. I was unable to think of my fixed deposits or bank balance or anything else. I could not control my sorrow as I looked at my daughter. She had become very thin for lack of proper care. She did not have school

to occupy her and no games as she did not have any friends to play with. She must have been at a loss to understand the sight of a mother who was crying all the time. She would watch TV for sometime or sit outside on the steps and watch the world outside. My heart wept for her.

I had become a victim of depression, I could understand it. I was not interested in anything in life. The despondency that I had controlled for so long took over every aspect of my life and overwhelmed me like a waterfall. I just meekly submitted to this wave of depression. As I thought of my parents my heart twisted in pain. I could not take care of them even though I was their only daughter. I could not even visit them often and make them happy.

My future appeared very bleak to me. I thought I should get rid of these thoughts and started talking to my daughter drawing her to my side. But the evenings would bring back my loneliness and insecurities.

It was the time to switch on the evening lights. The maid had finished work and gone. It was turning dusky and dark outside. Keerthi was sitting outside in the veranda. I thought I should get up and turn on the light, but was unable to do so. Tears started swelling up in my eyes.

I noticed a tall figure in the darkness. "Who is that?" I peered into darkness.

“Amma,” he says he is my babayya<sup>10</sup>.”

“Babayya? Which babayya?” I could not recognize the man.

The shadow came into the house, groped for the switch and turned on the light. In that fluorescent white light, I saw Sandeep, Avinash’s brother, my friend, the younger son of my in-laws. Sandeep! He is my daughter’s babayya, no doubt!

I was stunned and kept looking at him. Sandeep who used to be restless, angry, sad and annoyed was now looking at me and approaching me with affection, care and a reassuring smile. He came to me like a grown up and asked me affectionately with a soft smile, “How are you?”

I felt like crying. I wanted to cry resting my head on his shoulders. I wanted to remove all my sorrows with one gesture and transfer them to him so that I could relax.

“Amma! It seems this babayya has come to take us away.!” my daughter told me.

I could not say anything. I felt myself shrinking in front him. In these five years I thought Sandeep must have forgotten me and I too forgot him. But he came to console me in my hour of grief. He had not forgotten me, I thought happily. “Is your anger gone now?” I asked him

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<sup>10</sup> Father’s younger brother

He laughed- not the laugh of a young boy! It was a mature man's laugh! "Why didn't you call me up?" I asked, complaining.

"Your life is linked with my brother's. Our life styles were totally different. I did not wish to disturb you."

"But now?" I asked.

"I always made it a point to know everything that was happening there!"

I looked at him seeking reassurance. He nodded his head. "Let's go to my grandfather!" he said.

"I will not come anywhere! I can't shoulder any responsibilities!" I said harshly.

"This is to reduce your burden, vadina!" he told me calmly.

"Leave me alone!" I said to him again as I watched Sandeep packing our clothes.

"If we start tomorrow morning we will reach there by lunch time." He was talking to my daughter. She started clapping her hands happily.

"I do not know them. I can't stay there in traditional obedience and politeness. I don't like it!" I said angrily.

He still did not pay any attention to me at all. He started telling Keerthi things about the village. I threw out all the clothes he had packed in the suitcase and told him I will not go with him.

He looked at me raising his head. I thought he was angry. But he came and sat by my side. He took my hand and led me to a chair with a calm face. "I am there for you vadina! Believe me! I won't do anything that hurts you. No one will cause any inconvenience to you there. You will stay in your own house. People will talk to you only if you want to talk to others." He said softly but firmly. In a no-nonsense voice he told me I had no option but to go.

Keerthi brought back all the clothes I threw out and he set the suitcase again. While the two of them were busy talking to each other my loneliness and insecurities seemed to recede.

I told my uncle that I was going with Sandeep. He was indifferent, he just said it was up to me. I slept without any care or worry as Sandeep was in the next room. We woke up at 5 o'clock next morning with the ringing of the alarm and got ready. I gave the keys of the house to an aunty next door and asked her to give them to my mother. We took my car out and drove all the way. Sandeep took the steering. Keerthi sat beside him. I asked him from the rear seat, if he had learnt driving. "Do I look like a young kid to you even now?" he asked.

“Aren’t you?” I said

With the morning breeze caressing my face I remembered that I had come out of the house after a long time. Where is my life taking me now? I was suddenly scared. But the hand that Sandeep extended to help me to stand on my own gave me immense reassurance.

We reached Naidupalem village by two o’clock in the afternoon. I was mesmerized by what I saw. The green fields, the pond and temple at the entrance of the village, the well kept houses, the rice flour patterns adorning the thresholds of the houses, and fruit trees in every house were the scenes that greeted me.

The car stopped in front of a small house. Sandeep got down and said “Welcome home,” affectionately.

I got down with a smile. A small house in a large area and the garden in front of the house are a feast to the eye.

It was a two bedroom house. It was constructed with a mix of traditional and modern amenities. Sandeep gave me the key and said “From now onwards this is your house. We all have to stay with your permission here,” he said faking fear.

“Okay, I will think about it,” I said with assurance.

“Thank You!” he bowed his head like an Air India maharaja. Keerthi was so happy that she already made friends with the girl next door.

“What about her studies” I asked with worry

“Vadina, millions of India’s children go to schools in its villages.” He said and I nodded agreement.

My daughter should get the foundation for her study here. I don’t know how the school would be here? If I start a school here without introducing the ranking system for children, it will be good. The children should be free to study whatever they want with any pressure. As soon as I that thought occurred to me I told Sandeep.

He listened to me with wide open eyes. There was sudden excitement in his face. “See, how you have started thinking, within an hour of stepping into this place! If you stay here you can think radically and implement some good ideas. I will speak to the people in the village today itself.” I took out a paper and a pencil, drew the plans then and there as Sandeep gave suggestions throughout.

I thought of his grandparents in the evening. Guiltily, I enquired about them.

“Don’t feel any such formalities. They are all fine. They will come when you are settled a bit. Don’t worry what others would think about you here. Ours is an ideal village. Nobody bothers to make wrong propaganda about others. Also, you are planning to get good education for the children of the village. They will not allow

even an insect to harm you now.” I felt relieved after hearing his words. After dinner that day Sandeep brought a twenty year-old girl Sarojini and told me, since she has no one to take care of her she will stay with me and give me company. She was brought up by his grandparents.

I was not worried when Sandeep left that day. There were so many dreams and plans taking place in my head and I started planning my life anew with new dreams and hopes.

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Sarojini was full of things to share about Sandeep whom she called her annayya. I got to know everything about him through her.

She told me how his grandfather convinced Sandeep, who was determined to do B.Com, into doing agricultural B.Sc, She told me how he took to farming while studying and how he changed the agricultural processes in the village from traditional to modern farming techniques like using the more practical fertilizers like the organic ones, raw materials around us and using seeds that yield more with less water.

Now under Sandeep’s guidance a huge cattle-rearing project was being run there. He was helping them to use cow dung in the biogas plants and how the resultant waste was again used to generate fertilizers free of pesticides and growing organic vegetables.

Not only that! In every progressive step that the village took, Sandeep was in the forefront of it all. I was so surprised that he could achieve so much in such a short time.

I woke up early in the morning with a new energy. But Keerthi was already up having a conversation with all the flowers and trees in the garden. I had never seen her so happy and I felt very fulfilled. I saw Sandeep coming from a distance. I waved to him from the house and he waved back. He picked up Keerthi and entered the house carrying her on his shoulders. "I never saw a place more beautiful than this. I feel like spending my whole life here," I told him.

"That is my intention too!" said Sandeep mysteriously. All my loneliness that suffocated me all these days, all my disappointments vanished in no time.

"The farmers of the villages are coming to talk to you," he told me. I looked at him questioningly and he said it was about the school plan.

"Yes, my dream project." I said with confidence.

"Yes, we have to discuss about plans for a building, funds and other things; before it gets too late, as they have to attend to their work in the fields later."

I finished my bath and got ready within half an hour. By seven about ten farmers were in my house. Even though we all met for the first time they talked to me as if they knew me well and enquired after my well being. We all sat on the stairs of the veranda. I remembered sitting in AC rooms and getting backaches. Now it is so comfortable.

“Sandeep babu told us that you are planning to stay here and open a new school...”

One elderly man started as if in introduction.

“Yes, sir, however the school is going to be started not by me but by us.”

“All of us?” they were all confused.

“Yes, we must a build a school that would not build up any pressure on the children. It does not mean that studies will be neglected. We should promote and train the children in the vocations of their interest.

“I heard that there are many educated people in the village. Along with them Sandeep and I will prepare the syllabus. We will pay the teachers and the people who maintain the school as much as we can reasonably manage. We will charge the children only nominal fee. We will collect funds for all other development activities and we can run the school with the interest the fund earns. Here is my share, Rs. 10,00,000. I called Sarojini to bring my bag and wrote the cheque for the amount. I gave it to Sandeep and told him we must first form a trust.

Immediately, one of the visitors who was surprised at my gesture, stood up and said in great excitement, "If a woman can give so much money why should we all lag behind? Take from me too. I will give one acre of land as my donation. Build your school there. I will get it registered tomorrow itself."

"Wait, Uncle, you must discuss this with your family first" Sandeep tried to stop him. He flared up in anger. "Why should I tell anyone? This is all my hard earned property. I expanded two acres into fifteen acres by my own hard work. If I want I can give all the fifteen acres, my sons cannot object. What will my wife say to this, you ask? She may grumble for a while but will eventually agree."

All of us laughed at the way he was enacting the anger of his wife.

Sandeep had already been in the forefront of creating community assets and the school would become another such asset for the village as combined property of the village. It would automatically be looked after by the entire village.

A rough calculation was made as to how much fund should be raised and how much should be spent on organizational aspects and people got a rough idea of the whole scheme. They were busy discussing how much money should be donated by whom and then they told me they would send the educated young men who were then unemployed to be involved in this activity. Sandeep saw them off till the gate, came back into the house and showed me a victory sign.

“We tried all these years to bring about a change in this uncle of ours. But today thanks to you he gave away one acre of land. This piece of land is just adjacent to the village, a right place to construct a school building.” He said with excitement.

I was also very satisfied and felt happy with the result of this effort.

“What shall we have for breakfast?” he asked walking into the kitchen.

“Do you get time to cook too?” I asked in surprise.

“What do you think, I have no time? I have plenty of leisure, I listen to music with a relaxed mind, I read books, and by evening get ready to play volleyball and kabbadi with the teams that come across from the villages around.”

“Are there no adversities for people around here?” I asked in wonder.

“Why, there are lots of problems! People are still caste discriminatory, the hutments of the untouchables are still outside the village and they cannot ever hope to build their house in the village along with other communities. But that change too will come. The day is not far off! They will all realise the happiness one can get in living together as one family” I just nodded my head in reaction to this optimism.

I entered the kitchen and saw an unusual stove. When I asked about the arrangement he pointed at a well in the backyard which was covered with a large drum. There was a tank by its side and some rubber tubes. Sandeep told me it was a biogas plant. I lit the stove and saw a bright blue flame emanating from the stove. "This is very amazing" I remarked.

"Every day the cow dung is collected in the village. Once it is poured into the small tank and a large amount of water is added, it starts moving freely in the tank and goes into the well. It turns into gas and comes into the pipes through the drum that is placed on top of the well. The gas comes into our kitchen through these tubes. We don't depend on the government for the supply of gas. Almost 70% of the houses in the village have adopted this technology, which is totally homemade. We also make fertiliser out of the waste material from these plants. The cattle that we tend to, give the raw material needed for producing the gas. Each house has a minimum of ten buffalos. Even in the production of milk we are in the forefront as we have done away with the middlemen, and are trying to work out mechanisms to sell milk and vegetables directly to the markets. They will bear fruit in a short while.

"Similarly, I have a friend in the neighbouring village, who is experimenting with solar energy. We are already using the solar cookers. He aims to make vehicles that run on solar fuel. His efforts at present are aimed at producing solar batteries to run our vehicles for at least three months, if not throughout the year. Our friends are actually collecting donations to fund his experiments." I thought of the earlier Sandeep who came to my house to ask if he can stay for one day. Now the situation

has been reversed and I am depending on his support. It is true time is never the same for people.

While we were preparing breakfast he asked teasingly if he should make something logically. I could not control my laughter.

“It is not just with logic. You have been doing many things here with your intelligence and sensitivity.” I gave him a knock on his head.

He patted his head and looked at me with a broad smile. While we were eating our breakfast sitting on the steps outside, tears came into my eyes unwittingly.

“Life is so good now. After my marriage I had forgotten that life can be so nice and smooth.” Sandeep patted my head consolingly and said, “Your life will be better than this. You will be happier than this. Soon you will get to understand this.”

“Did your grandparents enquire about me? I did not go even once to meet them. They must be thinking of my ill manners.”

“No one will think anything. Till your mind settles down you don’t have to meet any one. If you want to see them they will come and see you, Okay?”

“Okay! But then whose house is this?” I asked looking around the house.

“Till today it was mine, from now on it is yours. From the moment I came here I worked with commitment and honesty, while continuing my studies earned enough to build this house according to my taste. It is yours now.” he assured me.

“Then it is your hard-earned property. I don’t want to take it away from you. Just see if I can get a house on rent.” I said hesitantly.

He appeared to have taken offence for a minute, but said “What is this yours and mine business, vadina? You just gave me a cheque for ten lakhs which was your hard-earned money. I took it happily as if I have a right over it.”

“Oh, I am sorry! From today, it is my house!” I looked around happily. Sandeep just laughed. “Though you are much younger to me I want to start my life anew with inspiration from you. If your support is assured I will spend my entire life along with my daughter here,” my voice trembled. I thought of Avinash as I said these words.

For a while I paused to think of him –how he must be, what would he be doing, I felt sad but I must live for my daughter now. I must give her a good life- that is my only aim in life now.

Sandeep was with me through- out the day and gave me company with his chatter. By evening many educated young people of the village came to meet me. They were all under thirty. There were women too amongst them, and I was happy about it. We all discussed the school and prepared plans for shaping its future. We thought of

applying for all the necessary permissions and starting the school by next academic year.

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It is one week since I came to this village. Time flew past so quickly and yet there was no hectic, busy activity. Every single day brought the thought and wish for a return to the previous day. When Sandeep came that day I said to him “everyone in the village is all praise for your grandparents. I want to see the couple who nurtured you this way.”

Sandeep said, immediately in excitement, as if he was waiting for me to say it, “Let’s go!”

“Yes, they also must be looking forward to meet their great granddaughter.”

“Let’s us start then!” he said like a deer eager to take off on a run.

We started at about ten in the morning. It was just a quarter kilometre from our house. We met many people on the way. No one, except a few elderly people, ever asked anything about me. They all talked to me, smiling broadly and affectionately. Sandeep did not stop anywhere. We went directly to a house which had a huge veranda in front of it. I had seen such houses only in pictures, not in real life. “Come in” he took me into the courtyard of the large house. Both grandmother and grandfather were sitting in the veranda and reading a newspaper. They immediately recognised me.

“Come in, my dear! I saw you only in your marriage, not afterwards” she said with a broad smile. Their glances settled on my daughter then. Grandfather called her to come closer. She looked at Sandeep. He picked her up and carried her to his grandfather and placed her in his lap. Keerhti at once was shy and kept watching them sideways.

We all went into the house. We greeted each other, enquiring after each other’s health. They did not mention Avinash and I also did not tell them anything. “You can live freely here, no restrictions of any kind on your movements. But you were qualified in the field of Electronics and the government had spent a lot of money on you. And all that was public money. You should use it for the people. You can run an ideal school; it is okay, but think of what you can do to society around you with your area of interest and expertise ” I was so excited when grandfather said it that I felt inspired to do something about what he said.

I was relieved to see my daughter in their hands. I thought of the time when I was living in the town, earning lakhs; and how I had to struggle to find someone to take care of her when she was sick. Grandmother noticed my change of mood and said “In our village all of us try to put away the sad moments aside and make an attempt to live happily. Even at this age we are so active, it does not mean we do not have any tensions in life. We have problems that we are bound to have at our level but we try to forget these by getting involved in some work. Many people in the world crave for love and attention. Our job is only to give this generously. Then we get in return

the love of people around us in abundance. Simply lap it up. Just forget your yesterday's troubles and try to keep yourself happy. Just one thing I want to tell you. Sugar tastes sweet even when you eat it at a sad moment of your life."

I understood the message in her words.

"When this young fellow came here he also came with lot of bitterness, hatred and anger. He developed a strong hatred for you unnecessarily and we felt sad about it. Within one year his mindset changed. He used to think of you always but never tried to meet you. He thought by meeting you he would cause unnecessary disturbance in your otherwise trouble-free life. If his brother does not like this contact and this influence, you may get into problems. Not only that he must have also thought that he should meet you again only when he makes something of his life." grandfather said.

I looked at that young fellow affectionately. Sandeep had grown very tall in my eyes. We spent our time the whole day happily in their house. Grandfather and Sandeep cooked food for all of us and I enjoyed it as never before. This old couple though of a previous generation live with such progressive outlook, especially when you think of the value they attach to individual freedom. I felt like returning to this house again and again. Grandmother said as if reading my mind, "We have given you separate accommodation with a view of giving you some individual space. Otherwise feel free to come here whenever you feel like. This is also your house"

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It's been two months since I came to this place. Our plans of building a school proceeded with good speed without excess pressure on us. I also thought of what grandfather's suggestions when I met him first time. I thought of starting a factory to manufacture electronic spare parts. Being a large scale industry it would in fact provide employment to many people around here. I kept exploring all these possibilities.

That day I sent word to Sandeep to see me. But I came to know that he had gone out of town with grandfather. I met grandmother and she said she had no idea where they had gone. "It is very common for them. They must be having some work, getting some plans sanctioned. They often go together." said grandmother. One week had gone by. They did not return, nor did they call. I felt bad that Sandeep who came everyday to enquire after my welfare did not come for one whole week. He could have rung me up. Was he so busy? Even my daughter must have missed him as she started asking for him every day. She never had any bonding like this with Avinash. Even though he cared for her, he never spent time with her. That's why she did not miss him, in spite of not seeing him all these days.

She did ask once or twice. When I told her he was working in Hyderabad and could not get leave to come, she did not bother me again. But she asked for Sandeep and grandfather almost every day. They show their affection by spending time with her that is why she got so attached to them. All humans are like that... they crave for attention. The thread that binds our lives together depends on these bonds of affection.

These last two months Sandeep stood by me and helped me to stand on my own legs and choose my lifestyle. One need only have the will; age is no barrier, for people to help one another. Now that he had stopped coming I started worrying, but it is not a crippling worry that in any way distracted me from my work. While doing the duties I have to do I kept thinking of the place now Sandeep occupies in the lives of both me and my daughter. I never expected that he would stay without communicating with me for so many days. I did not take his cell phone number for the same reason. I sent Sarojini to grandmother and got his cell number but throughout the day his number was switched off. I got so frustrated that I decided not to think of him. Strangely I could manage to do it with the amount of work I undertook to forget the worry.

Till Sandeep came back and knocked on the gate one day I did not think about him. Sarojini started talking excitedly when she saw him. My daughter got up with the commotion and as soon as she saw him she went and stood away from him under the guava tree pouting in anger. I too imitated her by standing under the neem tree with an angry face.

Sandeep looked at both of us, smiled to himself shrugging his shoulders. He came to me first. "Yes, ma... why are you so serious?" lately he had started calling me 'ma'. Keerthi looked at me with widened eyes, indicating I should not talk. Sandeep noticed it.

“Oh, the actual culprit is under the guava tree! Yes, my dear guava fruit, do you know what I brought for you?” he asked trying to excite her.

She was in a dilemma and looked at me to ask what she should do. It was now my turn to look seriously at her.

“It was such a nice gift! Okay if you don’t want, I won’t give it to you.” Sandeep turned as if to go.

“Wait, wait” she ran to him ignoring me totally. “Give!” she said.

“I am your gift!” Sandeep teased her. When she realised that he did not bring anything she ran after him with a stick. Sandeep took shelter behind me, entreating me to save him. After playing for a while he picked her up and said “Now all anger is closed”

“Why should it be closed? We will also hide from you for ten days. Then tell us this.”

I said angrily.

“We did hide from each other for four and half years, was it not enough?” he asked me emotionally.

“Okay, now tell me where did you go?” I asked him anxiously with a heavy heart.

“We have got the sanction for the school building but there were many other formalities to be attended to. That was done in two days time. But tatayya had other plans. Without actually vitiating the atmosphere he wanted to involve other villages around us in our developmental activities. He felt we should all utilize the computer knowledge for growth. For this we need selfless software professionals who can come to our villages and work here. He said we should not come back without achieving the result. So we stayed back”

There was a sudden silence in my heart. The kind of trauma I had faced in my life due to my entry into the software industry suddenly came back to me.

“We know that we can’t find any one better than you. But grandfather does not want to impose on people something they basically do not want to do. So we did not discuss this with you. Also you are already shouldering so many responsibilities; to dump some more would be unfair. We may create stress for you. We thought of all this and took this decision.”

“No problem! Did you find someone? Whenever I can I will surely help whoever comes to work here.”

“Yes, we did get someone very knowledgeable. He agreed. That is what took us so long. When we told him about the aims of our village and our dreams he was really surprised. He wondered if such a village can ever exist. We told him to come and see it for himself. He came with us; he is staying with grandmother in their house. I will introduce him to you when he gets used to this atmosphere.” I just nodded my head.

“Now, is your anger gone?” he asked.

“Yes, it is gone! But hereafter don’t go away for days together like this without telling me!” I cautioned him. He nodded his head obediently.

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Fifteen days went by. The schedule was hectic and kept me very busy. We went door to door, talked to the parents to persuade them into sending the children to school; it was especially tough in the gudem, the colony of the underprivileged. They were not willing to educate their children beyond class five. They preferred putting them in some income generating job or the other.

We tried to tell them that it is criminal and against law to send children to work and they may might even go to jail for this offence. They will all have a trouble free life if they educate them. They would listen with hands cupping their cheeks in wonderment and send them for a day or two; but send them back to work again. We had to go after them repeatedly to achieve results and it was very tiresome.

With all this I did not get time to visit grandmother for a number of days. I went at ten in the morning one day to see her. All of them were busy making plans on various papers in the hall. There was one new member amongst them. I almost stepped back in hesitation, but suddenly stopped to look at the person. Broad shoulders and the side profile of the cheeks, with thick hair he was ... he was... I could not believe my eyes and stood stock still.

Grandfather noticed me first. "Come inside! Sandeep must have told you. He is the new computer professional." Introducing me, he told him, "She is the one who established our school here." That introduction told us our limits. I wished him formally with folded hands, a namaste.

Avinash's face paled when he saw me. He quietly lowered his head. I could not believe this. Is Avinash planning to leave his lucrative job and luxurious life to come to these villages and serve these people? Can anyone expect a babul tree to flower? I was somehow angry for no reason. I felt insulted and also could feel the net being cast to trap me and an attempt was being made to take away my freedom.

I sat as if sitting on thorns for a while. Avinash was not looking at me. He was explaining something to grandfather in a low voice. I looked at Sandeep in anger. He was trying to avoid my eyes with utmost concentration.

Both grandfather and grandmother were looking normal and casual.

"I will make a move," I stood up suddenly. Avinash looked up once and went back to his work bending his head down. "Why don't you eat and go?" grandmother said.

"No, Sarojini and I finished cooking at our own home." I stressed our own a bit as if to give a signal. Avinash's face darkened and I felt gratified.

I walked ahead. Sandeep was not even looking at me. I said loudly, "Sandeep, come and drop me at home."

Sandeep got up and walked with me apprehensively. I did not say anything on the way. I asked him as soon as we entered the house, "What is this drama?"

"What drama, vadina?" He asked innocently.

"Don't pretend, I don't like it!" I said angrily.

"Okay ma! I understand your apprehensions. Avinash came here purely as a computer professional to liaison between our villages to achieve all-round growth through the medium of computers. He came here with the same intentions with which Ramya had come a few months ago."

"Should I believe all this? You are all trying to trap me into going with him" I unwittingly used the same language that Sandeep used against me at one time. Both of us thought of that day at the same time.

Sandeep recovered faster at this allegation, "You are saying something just like that. Where would we send you and with whom? You may be thinking that, but the person you are thinking of, does not have any plans to take you away. He came to know of your presence here only a short while ago. So don't entertain any such hopes." He concluded.

"Hope?" I said in total contempt.

“If you don’t have any hopes on him, what makes you so angry? We get angry with someone only when we love the person, and then where there is love there is this right to get angry.”

When Sandeep was giving all these definitions I tried in a hundred ways not to show my anger.

“That’s good ma... don’t ever think of our computer professional again.” I tried to look at him angrily then I remembered his words and tried not to get angry. Again when I realised he was teasing me, I thought I should get angry. And I finally ended up feeling sad.

“I have a lot of work, Vadina, I will make a move. Be careful! Anyone can trap you! You must be strong!” I closed the door on his face, but his laughter reverberated in my ears for a long time.

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I stopped going to grandmother’s house, afraid that I would have to face him if I go there. Avinash’s coming here was in itself such a surprise, that I began to suspect his intentions. Would he stay just for a few days or be here for good? I was scared to ask Sandeep as I was afraid of his response.

Sarojini said in the middle of some conversation, “That babu also left a good job like you to come here to help this village.” From her words it was obvious that no one knew about our relationship. Nobody ever mentioned his name, even indirectly, in front of me. It was better that no one knows about it, that way I could breathe free.

I also stopped sending my daughter to grandmother’s house. They would come to my house once in a while to meet us. They also never mentioned Avinash to me. Then I understood, if I don’t like it no one would raise the issue.

After I recovered from my initial unhappiness, I started wondering about a number of things. How did this change occur in his nature, whether it was true or some drama? how did my in-laws agree to his coming here and so many other questions. I was afraid to ask anyone as I was apprehensive of their reactions.

One day in our school some software was to be loaded in the systems. I came out of my room into the lab to do the job. Immediately the computer lab in charge came and stopped me saying, “Madam, there is someone who is assigned this task. He will come and do it.”

“Who is that?”

“Avinash Babu!”

“No need for that I can do it much better than him” I said

“It is not that, madam! We have a norm here. People should do only the tasks assigned to them. If you do his job he will feel bad about it. Even Sandeep babu would not keep quiet. Please madam, do not create a situation where they will end up scolding me”

I was irritated, “Do as you like! If it doesn’t turn out like I expected then I will take you to task.” I went back to my room. I saw Avinash coming in after about an hour, along with a number of other young men. Oh, now he had acquired a good fan-following too, I thought sarcastically. He went into the computer lab directly. How could he enter without my permission, I was angry. After half an hour the assistant came to ask me, “He wants to know when the software should be loaded.” I told him.

He came back within half an hour and said, “It seems there is a virus in some systems and also problems with the hardware.”

“But you called him to rectify all those things,” I said. He went back scratching his head in confusion. Avinash came after a while. “That system is totally dead. It is not a normal virus. So it may not work at all.”

“Let’s go and see” and we went into the lab.

“Does it mean you cannot repair the system?” I asked to test him. He looked at me in anger while standing before me all the while. I had created the virus and the anti-virus, hence I cleared the whole system in five minutes. Nobody else knew about this rivalry of ours. They did not even know such things can be done in computers. They only saw that Avinash could not fix a problem even after struggling for one hour and I could do it in five minutes. Then I said to the in-charge “Is it okay Mr. In-charge, your rules that people should only do the work allotted to them, I had to intervene as he could not do it. What would Sandeep say now, I don’t know!” They turned so pale that I am sure there would not be a drop of blood even if their faces were sliced with a sword. Avinash walked out in anger and my heart experienced a strange comfort. I had never so far raised my voice nor did I ever behave rudely with anyone. My behaviour must have appeared strange to them all. But my sense of judiciousness was overpowered by this senseless anger. Even after I reached home that day, this incident and myself doubt about my behaviour haunted me. How fair was it to behave like that just to humiliate Avinash.

Sandeep came for dinner that night. I felt guilty. Did Avinash tell him about this incident? Sandeep would not dare to question me now. He told me not to bother already.

“Uncle, why are you not taking me to tatayya’s house these days?” Keerthi asked him. “Ask your mummy!” Sandeep promptly replied.

“Why, the play here is not enough?” I asked her in slight anger.

I also felt bad that her movements had to be restricted because of Avinash. I was constantly telling her to go here and not go there. That was the impact of my problems on her life. I did not know how to avoid this. I kept looking at her in distress. Sandeep noticed it too. He sent me a signal and said, "I will take her there for play when he is not around." I simply nodded my head in response. After she went there once or twice, I would observe her as soon as she was back. I constantly expected her to tell me that she met her father. But nothing of that sort happened. How long can we hide it from her? One day we would have to allow her to meet him. Then how would we answer her questions?

Sandeep knew all these problems would crop up, still he brought Avinash here. Grandfather must have known this. Why did they stay so long in Hyderabad and bring him to the village? Something must have happened, otherwise Avinash was not the kind of person who would take this step on his own. I was so tense with all these questions that I sent for Sandeep. "I must know the truth, Sandeep," I asked as soon as he entered the room.

"Truth about what?"

"About Avinash coming here! It is not in his nature. He values money and career. How can I believe he came here without any other intention?"

“Why, ma? Don’t you think that people change with circumstances? How do you know it was not my annayya’s nature? He must have got all that because of the values that were imposed on him since his childhood.” He said clearly.

I did not know how to react to his answer. “Look, all these days for almost a month I avoided your questions by turning them into tamasha, a joke. I know I must answer you one day. I must tell you many things. For I must make sure you can listen patiently to all that I have to say and bear it patiently. After hearing it all, you should not start developing hatred again. You must promise me that. Also think of your daughter. It is the right of the child to get the love of both the parents. We must not torture people with words when they make mistakes, but try to understand them.” He paused and I nodded my head.

“When you refused to go with annayya and stayed back in your mother’s house, it seems annayya was very disturbed. He totally stopped coming home and started spending all his time with friends in bars and pubs. Once, he tried a new cocktail which reacted violently on his stomach and he suffered due to it. Since he was not addicted to drinking yet, that actually helped him develop an aversion to drinking. That gave him extra troubles. Earlier he used to forget himself in drinks now he was surrounded by a sense of loneliness.

“On one hand personal problems, on the other hand insults in professional life, and lack of emotional support from anyone around him made him lose his balance. He also had problems with my parents.”

“With them?...” I asked in surprise.

“Since he was not paying the bank loans my father cancelled all the fixed deposits. Annayya got angry as he was not consulted before. My father also spoke to him contemptuously as he was demoted in his job. Annayya spoke very harshly to him and mom started crying... Dad started shouting! Every day there was some fight or the other. His professional life deteriorated further. He was given memos two-three times and then they asked him to look for another job.”

“And he stayed there in that company till he was humiliated to that extent?” I was further surprised.

Still I did not feel any sympathy for him. All these troubles were caused because of his ego and his bad thinking.

“Yes, many people in other good and big companies knew about annayya. He was considered as an ‘intelligent fool’ in those circles. As his applications to other companies got rejected he tried hard to stay there. That actually gave the company a chance to ill-treat him further. They sent a show-cause notice asking him to say why he should not be terminated from his job as he had lost all his sense of self confidence. He quit his job then and tried for other smaller companies. Within one week, staying at home drove him mad.

He joined a small company. He had some difference of opinion with his new boss and then a quarrel followed. The boss insulted him citing his personal failures. Annayya got so angry that he roughly collared him. There were many witnesses in the office to this fight. When the police complaint was given, he was held guilty, taken to the police station, and kept in lock-up for two days.”

“My God!” I was shocked.

“We went to Hyderabad because we came to know of it. As it was not a major crime grandfather talked to his boss and made him agree to a compromise. This was a major shock for annayya and he could not stand it. As soon as he saw my grandfather he totally broke down. Pointing to himself with his finger he told him, ‘this fellow who was an IIT ranker, who was an intelligent person, is now a useless fellow! Nobody wants him!’ he started shedding tears.”

“Grandfather counselled him as best as he could. At last he told grandfather ‘now I will do whatever you tell me to do.’ Actually annayya is going through a depression. We have to give him strength and courage.” said Sandeep looking at me meaningfully.

“Why should I do all that now? Did he show any concern for me when I was facing my own depression?” I said emotionlessly.

“You know there will be no imposition of any kind here. Annayya keeps asking about you, but is scared to come and talk to you.” said Sandeep.

“Yes, he made a mistake after all. Let him completely realise that. He should change so much that his old nature should not visit him again. Let him change! Life is quite long! It is a chain of events where no one knows what happens next!” I said in a detached way.

Sandeep looked at me strangely, “This philosophy is not good! You be normal like always. Annayya is also an individual like you, who is trying to work for the good of this village. Just look at him like that! Then you will not feel sad. Nothing will happen against your will. Only don’t say anything negative about annayya to your daughter. That tender heart should not be subjected to any fear and insecurity!”

I nodded in agreement.

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On that day volleyball competitions were on in Naidupalem. All district level players were coming for this competition. It was not an official event but, everyone was excited about them. It was a three-day event. There was a festive spirit in the village.

“Sandeep annayya’s team will win. I got the puja done in the temple for this,” Sarojini said confidently. For three days all other work came to a standstill. Even food was prepared and served in the ground for all. I liked this spirit and that everyone

was participating with a unity of spirit and eating at one place without any discrimination. It was a great stress reliever for people always steeped in work. Even the youngsters who came from outside mingled freely.

When we were all in grandfather's house I said to Sandeep, "This is not fair... male domination...are all the games and competitions for you only? Not a single game for girls? Should they remain in the house like prisoners?" I intended my taunt at one person specifically.

Sandeep immediately agreed, "That is true! Next time we will have some events for girls too!"

Avinash was sitting there and talking to grandmother, "Um... first write the name of the person who is suggesting this! The games should be long jump, dice game kothi kommochchi\*..." As he looked at me sideways there was a smile on every face there.

I said in irritation, "In fact I can play that! Try and see if there are any events for people who sit in a chair in front of the system twenty four hours, like the avatars of Buddha can play." I walked out of the room with that! Why should he try to talk to me? I was so angry that I walked to the ground alone on my own.

Matches were being played in keen competitions. Some of the teams were very strong. In the Naidupalem team Sandeep and another fellow were playing well. Two people had to retire hurt in Sandeep's team. I felt bad to see the tension in

Sandeep's face. He should win somehow... what to do now? Who will replace the retired players? Amidst the tension there was a sudden outpouring of claps.

I looked keenly to see Avinash entering into Sandeep's team. I stared, my mouth agape. He showed me a thumbs-up sign and smiled. I averted my face. He tied his shoelace and wore the T shirt. "How can anyone think that they can play simply because they are tall?" I said to the lady by my side. "I don't know! Only, I want our village honour to be upheld." she said indifferently.

"And he was standing in the centre, forget about our winning!" I said again.

The game started. Avinash took to serving. He identified the weak place in the opposite team. In a split second the ball zoomed past him. The player on the opposite team could not face it and fell flat on the ground. Naidupalem team got its point. After three consecutive volleys the service broke. There was wide applause all around.

It was my turn to be surprised again. Meanwhile Avinash could not pick up the ball from the other team. His face turned red in anger. 'See, he still cannot control his ego and anger' I thought to myself. Then I heard Avinash shouting to the player "Good shot!" Wow! Avinash praising others! I stared in wonder! He was all over the field, playing with great gusto and contributed immensely to the victory of his team.

He was sweating a lot and was terribly tired. I am sure he had not physically strained so much in the recent past. Both the grandparents went to him and served him with a cheerfully. Yet, he looked around, his eyes searching for someone. I quietly left the place.

I went to grandfather's place to discuss the accounts of the school with him. Grandmother was in the kitchen. It looked like Sandeep had gone out somewhere. I was about to enter grandfather's room when I heard my name from inside and stopped in my tracks. I knew it is not polite to hear other people's conversations. Some kind of curiosity...I could hear Avinash's voice. Tatayya was talking to him about me. What was that? I heard grandfather's voice "Do you want me to talk to Ramya?"

"No, tatayya! I want to be free now!" Avinash's voice was full of anxiety. But I felt insulted by what he was saying. He doesn't know that I was also craving for freedom, more so for that matter! I turned away to go back, and then stopped again.

"Tatayya! Though I am now thirty-one years old, I must go back sixteen or seventeen years. I must begin at the point where I lost my life! I will live freely according to my tastes again! No one will force me to do this and that, no?" he was asking in fear.

"No, nothing of that sort will be there now. You live in whatever manner you like! Live your life in freedom." grandfather was saying.

“Then, can I be naughty?” Avinash asked.

“What type of naughtiness?” tatayya asked again controlling his laughter.

“Like teasing girls!” said Avinash. How shameless!

“Why? Haven’t you ever done it before?” tatayya’s voice again

“No! Never! When I was in intermediate, one girl used to give me good competition in studies. I used to feel like pulling her duppatta. All my friends encouraged me. But I thought I should not entertain such thoughts, instead I should think about studies. So I never had the chance again!”

“Okay, now whose pallu do you want to pull?” he asked

Silence for a while!

“I want to fall in love, tatayya!”

“With whom?” again grandfather asked.

“You know!” Avinash was laughing.

“I want to get closer to her by falling in love afresh. First I must chase her, tease her, and say ‘I love you’ to her. I want to hear her say it too! Fights, and then getting

together again... I want to be a teenager again! I don't want to miss anything this time!"

Oho, now he wants to become a show boy at this age! Who is this girl that both of them know. I went back to grandmother in anger and frustration.

"When did you come?" she asked.

"Just now." I said taking over the work in her hand.

"Then why are you looking like that?" She asked again.

"I am fine. Don't you want to marry off your grandson?" I asked her all of a sudden.

"He is not of the age now. He is just twenty four. We can do that after three-four years." She replied.

"Not that one!"

"Then, who else?"

"The older one!" I said in anger.

She burst out laughing, “Why don’t you go and ask him? He will give you the correct answer!” she said.

“Why should I bother about people who have nothing to do with me!” I said

Avinash, in the meantime, came and stood by the kitchen door. I wanted to leave but was scared that he would not allow me to go.

I felt a strange hesitation in looking into his face. “Ammamma, What are you saying about asking someone something? Who is it about?” he asked her.

‘Should I tell him?’ grandmother looked at me. “Ammamma, I will make a move now!” I said turning towards the wall.

“If she is ammamma to me she cannot be the same to you! Why do you also call her ammamma?” Avinash asked me this time.

“That is my wish. She is ammamma to the entire village. Ammamma, please tell him that he has no right to address me in singular<sup>11</sup>.”

“Okay, what to do, nannamma? I will change my address to you! Also tell her I will address her plural in hereafter!”

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<sup>1111</sup> The intimacy which allows addressing the spouse in singular terms like ‘nvvu’ for ‘meeru’

I stood there. Avinash did not move. I felt suffocated there.

“Nannamma, what are you making today?” He came and stood by my side talking to her.

“Ramya is doing the cooking today. So ask her!” grandmother told him.

“Okay! We are finished then! I will go and eat somewhere outside today!” he acted as if he was running away.

“It is so easy to find fault! If one cooks, one knows how difficult it is to cook.” I said.

“Well! Amamma, sorry nannamma! Give me that gourd.” He took the knife too from her and looked at the gourd cruelly. Sarojini and Sandeep too arrived there by that time. All the people who help amamma stood by Avinash to support him. He was all over the kitchen making lunch for all of us with great excitement, throwing the kitchen in complete disarray. I stood by and watched the whole show seething with anger.

“Annayya, Your pulusu is superb. I never tasted anything so tasty before!” Sandeep complimented him. Avinash’s face was bursting with joy. He looked at me proudly. I came out of the kitchen impatiently. They are all one family. Even Sandeep cannot be on my side. Naturally, he would be on his brother’s side only, I thought.

I sat in the outside veranda. I was feeling restless. It was Avinash who made all the mistakes but no one seemed to be thinking about it. Now he acted as if he has changed and everybody believed him enjoying his company. I felt left out.

'If he comes here leaving his career and pretends that he had changed what would he gain? How would it help him?' I asked myself this question repeatedly. 'He wants to love someone now! Who would he fall in love with now?' In some corner of my heart, jealousy started raising its ugly head. I was surprised at myself.

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*Mana badi*, our School started functioning successfully now. Ninety five percent of the children were coming to the school regularly. I was trying to make it hundred per cent. The children were also responding positively to my concept of universal education. Our approach in adopting the syllabus and implementing it was to not create any undue pressure on them, as a result they were all coming to school with enthusiasm. Even when they were afflicted with minor ailments like cough and cold they were coming to school as they were worried they would miss some fun. They did not care for our suggestion of staying at home and taking rest. Sandeep and I used to teach them. Grandfather would come now and then and take practical lessons on modern methods of agriculture and creating curiosity in them.

We wanted a computer teacher for higher classes and advertised in the newspaper. The ad specified all the necessary conditions for working in our school, so limited

applications had come. Avinash's was one of them. I showed the application to grandfather. "You just conduct the interview setting aside all your personal reservations about candidates. Let the best person get the job. We don't have to bother about their past." he advised.

I was scared at the thought of conducting an interview for Avinash. Six people, including Avinash, attended the interview that day. I felt exhausted as I interviewed them all one after the other. Three of them came as they did not get a job anywhere. One girl showed an attitude-after all a village like this... what interview could we take of her ability. However, her knowledge was sound. One of them set pre-conditions for me to employ him.

Avinash came at the end dressed very neatly. I thought he would taunt me there also and was worried how to tackle it if he did so. But he dispelled all my fears by wishing me politely as soon as he entered. I looked for signs of contempt and found none. As he continued to stand I was surprised and requested him to be seated. He thanked me before taking his chair. I felt awkward to ask his name and qualifications. I asked him to tell us what kind of syllabus should be included at class 8<sup>th</sup> level without creating any pressure on their abilities. He explained in fluent English his idea and I could understand he was taking stock of his answer periodically while talking to us.

I requested him to explain one topic on the black board. He again rose to the occasion and in a beautiful hand he wrote his idea. While he was speaking in English I reminded him that he had to keep in mind the constraints of the Telugu medium

students. He then started explaining in Telugu. His Telugu was okay too, but faltered when he had to translate technical words. I thought to myself that even I would have faced the same difficulty, which brought a smile to my face. The interview went for almost half an hour. As the head of the school I felt that we need people like him. He was so refined in his behaviour too.

That evening there was a phone call from grandfather to enquire about the result, "Tatayya, are you trying to recommend?" I asked in mild anger.

"No, it's just that he is very keen to teach for two-three hours every day. He might get his old liveliness back if he spends some time with children." He tried to explain to me.

'Even now grandfather and grandson talk of girls, what more liveliness he wants now?' I thought to myself. "No other alternative tatayya, others are nowhere near him! We have to offer the position to him only."

He responded proudly, "I know how intelligent my grandson is!" I lost my voice for a minute. "You are happy they are with you, paving the way for their future, no?" I asked him.

"Yes, I am very lucky! Can anyone else feel the same, tell me?"

“Yes, but what about my in-laws, their parents?” I could not help asking, though I felt I should not spoil his happiness. He could not answer me.

“Please forgive me!” I apologised for asking the question.

“It is okay! You are not wrong in asking this question! The younger one went there after many years. They did not express any happiness; neither did they show any affection. They just spoke a few dry words as a matter of courtesy. Avinash too did not say anything as he was neck deep in troubles. Now-a-days I see Sandeep feels lonely all the time. He asked the other day, ‘do you think mummy dislikes me?’ He is able to solve many problems in life but, he is dying for his mother’s attention and affection. My daughter and son-in-law think that Sandeep ruined his life. Now added to this, Avinash is also here! You are here! And this is contributing to their further animosity. They think we are spoiling your lives. But we want you all to rebuild your lives in the way you like. You are witness to it. There was never any force here. We only encourage your efforts. They will decide where they want to stay after retirement. You people also can think. The issue is not where you stayed and for how long. It is what you gained in life by staying here.” grandfather explained.

“One day they will understand tatayya! How long can they live in that concrete jungle. They will surely come in search of their children when their life becomes unbearably lonely for them!” I said consoling him.

“That is my hope too! I want to live to see your entire family living together happily.”

I kept silent.

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That night all of us were having dinner at grandmother’s place. She called us as it had been a long time since we all ate together. There were about twenty-five people in all. Sarojini went early to help her. Keerthi was playing in the garden and I was sitting in the veranda watching her. I saw Avinash coming towards our house from a distance. My eyes opened wide in surprise. He entered the house by opening the gate and went straight to Keerthi in the garden. He was shaking with a lot emotion. I was not looking at him, I was looking at my daughter.

She was suddenly taken aback on seeing him. Avinash opened his arms wide. She came running to me. She started shaking me vigorously uttering ‘Amma! Nanna..., nanna, amma...!’ I looked at her in wonder. As I did not respond she went back and ran into his arms. He hugged her close to his heart. She hugged him holding him like a lizard.

Is he trying to take my daughter away from me? I suddenly got very possessive and shouted at him, “This is my house. You can’t enter it without my permission and pick her up. Just get away from her.”

He suddenly came into his senses from his deep absorption and looked at me in confusion.

“Put her down” I told him again. He turned red with anger. Keerthi was looking at us alternatively, in fear. I had tried very hard all these days that she should not meet him. I saw to it she would never have occasion to go to places where there is the remotest chance of his being there. He destroyed all that with one gesture. He put her down and told her to go inside in a soft voice. She went in looking at us both.

“She is my daughter! I have as much right to her as you have. Don’t ever think of hiding her from me. I patiently bore all this till now. I am not bothered about you. But you can’t stop her from coming to me.” He left the house after that.

I sat there feeling extremely helpless. Sarojini came within half an hour. “Avinash babu sent me to bring the baby.” They do not know the actual details, though they now have an idea that something went wrong between us and we were staying separate. They never exhibited any curiosity. Sarojini simply gave Keerthi a bath and took her along with her. I did not know what to do, so I sat there silently.

“It is six o’clock! You also come quickly.” she told me before leaving. I felt lonely and sad. I sat there in the darkness without even turning on the light. The moon seemed to be sympathising with me as there was plenty of moonlight that night.

It was seven thirty in the night and I still sat there in the same position. I saw Sandeep coming towards the house. I remember tatayya telling me about Sandeep's loneliness. Both of us had the same loneliness- lack of affection. He wasn't getting it from his parents. I was not getting it from my husband. That was the only difference. "Why are you sitting here alone, when everybody is enjoying themselves there, ma?" he asked.

Whenever I see this friend of mine I feel very happy. Without showing any signs of it, I said, "Then, why did you come leaving all that enjoyment?"

I thought he would cut some joke and try to change my mood. He simply smiled at me and leaned back on his elbows sadly and started searching the sky for something.

This Sandeep was totally new. Old Sandeep always appeared to be bursting with energy caused by some excitement, some joy or even anger if it was the old Sandeep. Now he looked different more sober. "What happened?" I asked with concern.

"Nothing" he nodded his head in denial.

"Any problems?" I asked again.

"When were they not there?" he replied.

“What then!”

“I feel something is missing in life!”

“What do you lack? You have everything in life and everyone cares for you!” As I said that I understood his grief. Everyone feels the need for parental affection. If there is any deficiency there, the children feel the brunt of it. Still he got the affection of his grandparents and his own individual strength that helped him to bear this loss. Now when he thinks of his parents he feels the loss, no doubt.

“Are you remembering attayya and mamayya?”

He smiled weakly. He shrugged away his thoughts by turning his face away. There was silence for a while.

Is money more important for them than me and my happiness?” So much agony in his voice! I felt very heavy in my heart. How can they leave such an affectionate and caring son? How silly of my in-laws?

“They have seen the world around them and thought that it is a great aim in life! If one sells off all the property and invests it on children one can get the abundant returns. Your brother proved it right. You chose the path you liked. Money is dictating the natural bonds of affection. You need to have a lot of understanding of

life in order to conquer this attraction for money. Luckily you have that understanding.”

“One thing is definite. No one can be happy having these anxieties, running after money, and competing with others for long. We have to decide for ourselves, what kind of challenges satisfy us, and what struggles give us contentment in life. Once that wisdom dawns, no one would stay for long in that quagmire. They come out of it.” I said with confidence.

“Like my brother?” he asked in anticipation. I felt disappointed at that. I couldn’t think of anything that is a sweet memory as far as Avinash was concerned. I felt like I had been introduced to a stranger. I did not feel as if I had met my long-lost love whom I would want to embrace once again. I smiled at Sandeep and his anxiety for my welfare. His face shone in the light of the moon. “You will have all the affection you are craving for in life.” He nodded as if in affirmation of an absolute faith in my words.

“You have chosen a path, and you are working hard for your development, and for that of those around you. What else do you want? Tell me about yourself. Are you happy with what you have in life today?”

“Hundred per cent!” he said with pride and his face shone bright.

“It is important that we should like what we are doing. Then you must love the companion you choose in life. As you are not married yet, do not compromise on anything! Choose someone you love as your partner. The vacuum you feel now will get filled up then. By that time even attayya might change. Then there will be more happiness in your life. So start hunting for a partner in life. You can get married in two years time.”

He was smiling to himself as I said these words. “Is there someone already?” I asked curiously.

“Without your knowledge..? Anyway falling in love is, in itself, an art. All of us may not be equipped with it.”

I laughed aloud at that. “The way you have moulded yourself, having an understanding about the problems of life, having sensitivity to other’s feelings, to choose the way of life that satisfies you, what art can be greater than this? You know the art of living! Isn’t that enough?” I complimented him. He bowed his head in modesty.

By the time we reached there, Grandfather’s house was very noisy. The arrangements for dinner were being made in the ground outside. Many people were absorbed in conversation, standing all over the veranda. Grandmother was moving around busily.

“Why are you so late?” She asked as soon as she saw me. I did not know what to say.

Okay, do whatever you like. Don't feel any reservations. Spend time happily!” she told me before moving away.

Sandeep told me to sit and disappeared from there. I looked around. I felt someone's piercing glance on me and turned around to find Avinash on the steps of the portico, with Keerthi swinging on his back. He had a naughty look on his face. I had never had this kind of experience before, even in the early days of our marriage, as all bonding between us was only mechanical. My heart skipped a beat as if I had stepped on to the threshold of my youth once again.

I put on the mask of anger on my face and stood a little distance from them. He was sending messages to me from there. He said he wanted to fall in love with someone, tease her, and chase her! Was it me by any chance?

I started sweating at the very thought. To fall in love – what a nice thought it was! I looked at him sideways. He smiled at me pushing back the hair from his forehead. I got up and took the Sambar bucket from Sarojini's hand and occupied myself in serving food. After a while I noticed a shadow behind me. There he was, like a clock tower, tall and imposing!

“You must do it fast! How can you be so slow?” he said. I put the bucket back on the table and sat in the place I occupied earlier. Everyone was happy and experiencing

the joy of the moment. I sat there with a heart that was still and silent. I could not understand whether it was happiness, fear, sorrow or pain that was causing this strange silence and heaviness in my heart. My heart urged me to look for him but my eyes were waiting for permission from my mind. They were giving signals that they would go ahead and search for him even if I didn't give the permission. I located him he was talking to someone but his eyes were searching for someone else. I looked keenly at him. Avinash seemed to have changed. He had learned to talk to people with a smiling countenance. Now he probably knew how important it is to be polite – What courses in communication skills taught him this now? What one should learn from life is packed in the course content that one teaches in the class rooms. People learn to use them only in practical classes! Ayyo! How painful it is not to be able to smile spontaneously? I was surrounded by thoughts of my yester years again.

“Amma...” my daughter came to me now with a new found happiness which seemed to be overwhelming her. She was jumping with joy, like a fish in water and her chubby cheeks were full with her smile. “What is it, dear?” I asked her hugging her close to my heart.

“Are you not going to have your meal?” she asked in all sweetness.

“I will, but after a while!” I replied.

“Not after some time! Come now, please. Nanna is also calling you! We have not eaten so far waiting for you. Do you know that?” she pulled my hand. She would not let go. I got up because I could not refuse her.

As soon as I sat Avinash came and sat next to me. Keerthi occupied the seat on one side and now Avinash this side. I could not get up from there. The chairs were so close that our shoulders kept brushing each other's while eating. It was a new experience. My willing heart was expressing its unwillingness outwardly. His elbow close to my hand after such a long gap... we were close after a considerably long time... no, in fact it was the first time. Now he was a total stranger to me. He was talking to someone on the other side and his voice drifted towards me in soft and deep tones.

I must say all this change in him was new to me. How did he manage to get out of the net of his narrow-minded attitude and illusionary world? All along I had a better understanding of life all these days. I had always tried to look at the positive side of his world view, which I did not at all like. For his sake I had tried though I was against it all the time. But for Avinash, his parents, and his circle of friends, there was only one dream; it was of the same luxurious wealthy world. His education gave him that wealth, name, fame and status. But it failed to equip him not only with ethical values, but also did not give him any sensitivity towards human relationships and an awareness of their value in life. He never learned these things either in life or through education.

That is why, he who rose to the heights like a huge wave, also broke like one! He seemed to be making an effort to collect himself now. Whether he would succeed or not time will tell.

“I feel I can sit with you here like this as long as you want it, but you know all others have gone and I think we should get up and wash now” said Avinash softly bringing me out of my reverie.

I came back to the reality around me. My daughter was clapping her hands and was laughing at us. That is how childhood should be! Like a waterfall! She missed many things so far due to this friction between us. I got up to wash my hand.

As I saw her buoyant mood, my worry that he would snatch her away from me reduced considerably. People were sitting close to their friends and acquaintances and chatting. Sandeep and Avinash were with their grandmother. Sandeep called me there. My daughter of course would not leave me. So I went and sat with them

“You have reduced quite a bit. Is it due to work pressure?” ammamma asked me. Avinash suddenly looked up and sized me up keenly. Where was this attention all these days, I wondered to myself? Then Avinash burst out singing an old film song - the pretty girl looks beautiful even after slimming down - chakkanamma chikkina andame – not to the tune but was singing to the tune he had invented. I got irritated and sat turning my face away from them all.

“Ammamma, look for a nice marriageable girl!”

“Amma, he wants a nice girl, look for one!” Keerthi asked climbing on me. “That is the only thing lacking now. You go and play.” I said in irritation.

“For whom?” ammamma queried.

“Not for me! There is a long process involved in my selection of a girl. So if anyone is worried it is for me, I say there is no need to worry.” He was showing as if he was ignoring me but the comment was so obviously directed at me.

‘Am I worried? I am least bothered! I don’t even want to look at his face.’ I firmly sat without looking in his direction.

“Should you not consider getting Sandeep married?” He asked. I looked at Sandeep with a smile.

“Annayya, please don’t make me the sacrificial goat! I can look for a girl for myself. No one should take that responsibility!” he said running away from there. Grandmother too had gone as grandfather was calling her. We remained there confronting each other.

I tried to get up. But his eyes made me immobile. There was moonshine drenching us. I thought he would say something, apologise for his past behaviour, or how long are we to live separately; so that I can wash away my anger which was bottled up inside - eating into me. But he did not show any such inclination. He simply stood looking at me like an infatuated teenager. He went back a few years.

Avinash was clearly starting at the point where I lost him. Suddenly there was a realisation in me that he was reliving the days of his early youth. As if in reflex my mind went to back to my early youth. The experiences thus far unexpressed started creating waves in my mind.

I could see his sense of wonder at his new experience and I was lost in his absorption. I could imagine how I would appear to him in my total absorption in the observation of his new sensitivities. He did not utter a single word. I could not move an inch from there.

“I must go now.” I said reluctantly. He smiled at me in joy. He leaned back on his elbows and started looking at the stars.

“Can you go now?” he asked. I could hear the hidden meaning in that question.

“How do you think I went all these days?” I couldn’t help saying it. It was as if I had dropped a dot of poison in his pitcher of nectar. His eyes closed as if he was trying to shut off those aspects of life which he did not want to remember. He was so happy all this while. Did I spoil his mood? I began to worry in my mind. He opened his eyes. And he smiled again as if he brushed aside this bitterness. He won in his challenge that he would win me over. I was happy in my defeat.

The clock struck 11 p.m; I started home with my daughter. I did not look back into those eyes that were embracing me with great love. I was afraid I would really not be able to go.

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After Avinash came into the village there was an increase in the use of computers. Things were now easier with this facility. We were not using computers either for games, entertainment or passing time. We were using it for self-advancement. We were able to save time too.

On that day Sarojini was sick. I took her to the health centre in the village. The entire compound was green and clean; it appeared as if the surroundings in themselves would cure half of the human ailment. The health assistant examined her and said it was nothing but some viral fever and there was no need to worry.

We met Avinash as were returning from there. He was looking slightly weak. But there was fresh life, joy and naughtiness on his face as soon as he saw me. "Avinash babu is also suffering from fever," Sarojini told me in a low tone. My walk slowed down automatically. Sarojini noticed it "you talk to him and come! I will go ahead," she whispered in my ear and had gone. He also slowed down. He looked a bit tired but otherwise active. He came and stood before me taking one step after another, slowly. "It is ten days, twelve hours and twenty-five minutes!" he said looking into my eyes.

I looked at him in confusion. He smiled, "I had seen you ten days, twelve hours and twenty-five minute ago," he recited again in a soft tone.

There was a fresh onset of spring in my heart. He was actually counting hours and minutes to see me. I liked the very idea but hid my feeling by turning around to look at the greenery around. He looked at me for a while and started to go with a sigh.

“Avinash!” I called out to him quickly. He looked back at me in joy. “Are you having fever? Did you take any medicine?” I asked like a child reciting a lesson.

“Yes, thank you!” his voice reflected his joy. Again there was silence as if time had drawn a curtain between us. He was hesitating to talk to me. But I wanted the first move to come from him.

“I have to actually review my life once! Will you help me please.” he requested. “Please!” he said again as if he was scared I would refuse. I nodded my head in affirmation.

“Let us go into the garden!” he suggested.

“Okay, first go and get your check up done. We can sit and talk then,” I replied.

He went into the health centre and I sat on a bench outside, thinking of my past and the changes that had come into my life. I had my life in my hands and the freedom to make my own decisions now, and that was a comfortable feeling. The decisions I had taken lately had come out of the wisdom I had acquired from my experiences. That gave me greater confidence in myself. Now what was he going to tell me? What

confession will he unfold before me? They must have definitely come from his own past related to his behavioural patterns in later life. I sat thinking while I waited for him.

Avinash came within fifteen minutes and said “Shall we go?” We moved into the park. As we were walking on the road side by side, the elders who saw us together nodded their approval. We looked at each other and smiled to ourselves. As we crossed the milk booth we saw Sandeep. He opened his mouth in surprise when he saw us together. It is difficult to put in words the happiness that reflected on his face. He showed me a thumb up sign. We reached the garden with new feelings like new flowers brightening our path. It was very pleasant, cool and the air was full of fragrance.

“Shall we sit here?” he pointed a green area. I nodded my agreement and sat on the lawn and he also sat a few paces away from me.

We sat admiring the surroundings for ten minutes. Engaged in our own thoughts, we sat silently.

“I feel I have realised what peace of mind is after a long time” Avinash said in a strange voice.

“How have you been doing?” he asked me suddenly.

“Here life is so quiet and peaceful.” I told him honestly.

“Don’t you have any dissatisfaction with life?” he asked anxiously.

I began to review myself for an answer. “My life used to be like a colourful rainbow till the day I got married. I used to revel in the dreams of a prospective husband. I did not ask anything extra from life. I just hoped for a life where one can live a life full of love and understanding; and respecting each other’s freedom. I never got that from my life after marriage.”

“When I actually resigned myself to a life of vacuum and was in that nothingness, Sandeep, though much younger to me in life, appeared with a maturity and helped me. I would not have rebuilt myself without his help and cooperation. Now I am happy again.”

“If it comes to a question of dissatisfaction – it is there somewhere, in some corner pricking my heart. But the atmosphere here and the aims of people have made my personal pain irrelevant and meaningless.” I told him frankly, all that was going through my mind.

Throughout the time I was speaking I kept watching the changing colours on his face. He appeared sad, “All these sorrows are due to me only, no?” he said in a heavy tone. I did not say anything as both of us knew the answer to that.

“Yes, after coming here I am also surprised at the changes that are occurring in me. I have never experienced such satisfaction in life before. Money, status, recognition, and comforts have not given me this happiness. The priorities change depending on the perspective of the individual. Now you are so valuable to me in life, but in those days you were just a machine that could earn money.”

“It is not just me. Many people around me looked at things like that in those days. They were all hunting for beautiful girls with an Engineering or M.Sc degree. Such a person can earn thousands along with us. I also married you for the same reason. But my temperament was not like that from the beginning. Not only me all of us are made to be like that but were not like that by nature.”

“During the crucial period of my life, at the time of character formation you do not know the pressures I was subjected to. If you have to understand me, you should know my experiences and feelings... everything! You should hear it all! Would you be able to understand?” he asked in a helpless voice.

Avinash was then talking, the fact that he was keen on sharing his inner thoughts honestly with me, surprised me no end. In fact, it made me happy, but I did not show my feelings.

“I will try to understand” I assured him.

“I used to be a good student from the beginning. Maths and Science were my favourite subjects. I also used to like sports very much. I used to allot more time to play than to my studies. We used to live in a village in those days. My mother used to be a teacher in my school. My father used to go to work in the nearby town on his scooter every day. There was a lot of age difference between Sandeep and me so we used to live in two different worlds.”

“After returning from school every day, disregarding my mother’s calls I used to run out to play to a nearby ground and keep playing till late in the night even after nightfall. Nobody used to bother about my long hours of play or the amount of running around I used to do as I was always ahead of everyone in studies.”

“As soon as vacations were declared, I used to play all the time and come home only for eating and sleeping. With all my friends I used to swim in the village pond and play in the fields and the whole night was ours to enjoy. We never used to have any jealousies or hatred towards anyone. I used to be helpful to others. Even during the exams if I knew the answer I would generously give it to all the people sitting before me and behind me. All our friends used to be in one group and we shared our joys and disappointments with each other all the time. There used to be a healthy give and take between us, all the time.”

“Time should have stopped there. But it never happens that way.” He said, his eyes sparkling with memories of his childhood.

I was truly surprised to know that Avinash used to be very naughty in his childhood. Was Avinash so naughty in his early childhood? Then who had snuffed out this joy? Who had stolen his childhood's joy from him? I looked at him curiously.

"I still remember that day- the day the first seed for a change of values was sown in my life; the day the weight of expectation was placed on my tender shoulders; the day my freedom was effectively buried and sealed in a tomb. We were all playing in the ground after the ninth class results were declared. My father sent someone to call me home. I was so engrossed in playing I ignored it the first time. There was a second call. I went home reluctantly.

When I went home I saw my parents sitting in the chairs in the veranda along with two other guests. My mother introduced me to them proudly, 'my elder son Avinash!'

They looked at me keenly and smiled.

I did not know who they were and why they were there. They asked a number of questions on my studies. As I replied promptly to all of them I sensed my parent's pride in me. I felt happy that I could give them that pleasure.

They tested me in all subjects and satisfied themselves. They told my parents, "We will give free coaching, accommodation, books. Not only that, if he successfully gets state rank for us we will give you the amount we promised earlier."

“I did not understand what he said at the end but I realised that they were happy with my performance and in recognition of that were promising me free education. I felt proud of myself. I felt great that they chose me amongst so many other students in our class.”

“They told me so many things about my future that my parents were carried to the seventh heaven. Those were the moments that made me the foundation for their golden dreams. They told me to join in one week and the training would start in the summer vacations. The next seven days passed like seven minutes. Wherever I went I got appreciation from every one. They used to show me to their children and tell them they should be studious like me. Even my friends started looking at me with new respect. My playing was automatically reduced and I kept talking about this all the time. But when the time to join the hostel came I was scared. I did not want to leave my village and my friends. ‘I will join after the holidays, nanna!’ I pleaded. He felt I said something unforgivable and scolded me to not say it again. I took leave of everyone and joined the hostel.”

“Initially I was very homesick as I had never stayed away from my parents. I was afraid to stay with so many hundreds of students who were strangers to me.”

“Most of them were like me reticent, reserved, and diffident of each other. I had four roommates. I tried to be friendly, but they did not mix as freely. I did not have close friends, I did not play any games and there was no laughter at all.

Classes too were conducted in a serious atmosphere. The teachers if they cut jokes while teaching immediately used to become very serious as if they had committed a mistake. We used to study for twelve hours in a day with classes and study hours put together. I used to study hard as I was angry with everyone. I got first rank in the first unit test. I stood first even in IIT coaching class.”

“Tenth exam results were declared. I secured fourth rank in the state. I was very happy. There was a festive atmosphere in school and at home. My photo was flashed in all newspapers and TV channels. I got drenched in the rain of congratulatory messages, with special recognition accorded wherever I went.”

“Then amma and nanna did not delay any further. Amma quit her job; nanna got himself transferred to Hyderabad. Many colleges tried to enlist me because of my rank. We shifted to Hyderabad. We took a house close to college. Because I got a rank for our school I was given Rs 50,000 as gift. They were all happy that I started earning from my fifteenth year onwards. What I did not realise at that time was that I had turned into a commodity and there was a business flourishing at my cost.”

“A corporate Junior College offered to give free coaching in intermediate for IIT and in addition to that a sum of 50,000 for joining their college. Now my parents’ total focus was on me. I began to be overwhelmed by the sudden name I acquired and overburdened by the new goal and the responsibility it entailed.”

“The lecturers and tutors in the college used to treat students very inhumanly. There were more state rankers in our college in addition to me. There were others who were bright, but they did not get any ranks. There used to be keen competition in studies and great pressure that I found difficult to cope with.

Sometimes I would feel like running away from all this. Then I would think of the hopes my parents had on me, also I used to be scared of losing my rank.”

“We used to have class rooms with hierarchies like J1, J2, J3 and so on, depending on the standard and calibre of the student. There was always demand for J1 class and a keen competition to enrol in that class. Had you just relaxed for one day someone else would grab your place. So everyone used to be very alert.”

“Every other intelligent boy in your class is your enemy. In my class all my classmates were unfortunately my enemies.

“Now when I think of the way we were brainwashed by our counsellors, my blood boils even today. One can be called and considered human being only if they go in for engineering or medicine. Your life is a waste if you cannot get a seat in these courses. Other courses were practically useless. These things were drilled into our minds constantly. We heard these sermons at a time we were supposed to acquire a character, learn real values. After a while we started believing in all this. For me my sole aim was to get a seat in IIT. The very thought of not getting a seat in IIT used to make me sweat profusely.”

“But I used to fall sick frequently. I was unable to relish food, and get frequent headaches. I developed poor eyesight, and started wearing thick glasses. Also, I would often forget what I studied. I could not remember anything during exam time. My maths became weaker. As a result my rank fell to seventh in quarterly exams and my percentage declined.”

“I can never forget that one day in my life. I was already depressed that I got low marks. I went for lunch along with others. I sat in front of my plate and ate two fistfuls when our teacher in charge came there. His eyes turned red as soon as he saw me there. He did not even think that I was having my lunch, he dragged me into the centre of the hall and started beating and kicking me.”

“With what face can you eat food after getting such poor marks in the quarterly? Did you not feel any sense of shame that you could come and have lunch normally with others? One should have a sense of self esteem if one has any conscience! We should always have a goal and a desire to achieve that goal. If you study like this, the day is not far off when you will be on the streets.” His words were like thunderbolts.”

“I was never punished like that so far in my life! I felt humiliated. Then I understood that we should give the appearance of sorrow and act as if we are ashamed in order to escape punishments. Then they will themselves call us for food or send it to our rooms. With my experience, all the others became alert and started studying hard.”

“My parents used to come and counsel me during the break time. That actually never gave me any reassurance but scared me even more. Now if I think, I feel I was treated like a buffalo that turns the wheel to extract oil. The college invested its money on me so I should beget a rank for the college at any cost. Since my parents had given birth to me and spent so much on my education I should study and earn money for them in return to make them happy. No one thought of my happiness and what I wanted to have in life.”

“During this period of conflict one girl in J2 section hung herself to death in our college. We were all terribly scared. The college blamed the parents for her suicide and got the case closed claiming that some family disputes were the reason behind her death. Many of us knew that she was unable to cope with the pressure of study there.”

“I started getting depressed; the thought that occurred to me constantly was that I too would die like her one day. I must not die, I must face life boldly, I told myself! In order to live boldly the only option for me is to get the rank. That became my sole aim. Honestly, I studied in order to be able to live.”

“In this process I became hard-hearted and ruthless. I forgot all finer sentiments and sensibilities. There was a new drive to crush everyone else. Everyone was happy with this change in me. I began to get first rank in all exams and not only that I was even getting cent per cent marks in all subjects. I was the front runner in the IIT batch too.

Everyone started feeling confident that I would definitely get a rank in IIT examination.”

“Intermediate examinations were over. I did quite well. Amma got special pujas performed at home on the day of the IIT examination. Even today I remember the conversation between me and my mother.”

“Answer all questions carefully without any tension,” she said a hundredth time. I just nodded my head for everything she said. I did not have any other tension but one question was bugging me and I did not know how to ask it. “What is it?” my mother asked me looking at my faltering words. I thought if I clear that doubt I could write the exam with a free mindset. “Amma! If I don’t get the seat...?” I asked in great trepidation.”

“My mother was shocked. There were tears in her eyes immediately. Her face turned red. She could not stand and suddenly sat in her chair. Nanna scolded me for raising the topic at that time. They did not understand that it was a question of life and death for me. I was going through a compelling anger on someone I did not understand. My mother came to me with tears in her eyes and said, ‘All my hopes are on you. Please do not crush my dreams.’ I was almost on the verge of crying, but controlled myself. Nanna scolded both of us. As expected, I did well in the entrance exam and secured ninth rank at all India level and second at the state level.”

“All my conflicts vanished afterwards. I proved to myself how great and intelligent I was by this success. I got this recognition due to my study only. My school, my college, my parents were all thus far the subjects of my hatred but from then onwards I started worshipping them.”

“Even my education at IIT was full of pressure. There was pressure in professional life too. Though I got a good career I never dreamed of going abroad. I was sure I could earn money by staying within the country. Again I wanted to take the decision after marriage after taking into consideration my future partner’s area of interest.”

“You know the rest of the story. I did not understand the value of marriage in life and married you so thoughtlessly, lived with you so mechanically! My intelligence, my education and my abilities – none could give me an understanding of life in real terms.” He wiped his moist eyes with a kerchief.

His face was extremely heavy with all those memories and the weight of the recall. I can now say I understood him to a large extent. We lived together for a long time. But he never opened his heart to me like this earlier. The clouds that blinded my vision have cleared too, with this opening up. I felt light in heart and melted at the thought of all the conflicts he had gone through. He was looking at me waiting for my reaction. He looked like a student who anxiously awaits his exam result.

I can visualize our happy time together like a golden future. He should re-live all his lost youth before we get together again. Like him many software engineers too must

have lost so much of their childhood, the play, the affections and the attention; and must be spending mechanical and unromantic lives with their partners. The sweetest thing between couples is this sweet romance which they can cherish all their lives, but is money overpowering this very natural attraction?

Fortunately we woke up while we are still young. We have learnt how to live for ourselves and how to think for others. There may be conflicts and differences in this kind of life too. But we will fight these together and that is the satisfaction we have now.

|I got up patting Avinash on his hand lightly. He thanked me with his eyes as if he understood my response. Now we do not need words to understand each other.

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One week has gone by. I came to grandmother's house. Everyone was there. Sandeep and Avinash were sitting in front of the computer making some plans. As soon as he saw me Avinash's eyes widened as if he had seen something wonderful. His look felt so good to me and I am enjoying his love and attention in full. He gave the job over to Sandeep and started following me around commenting on all and sundry.

I escaped to the terrace. Jasmine buds were shining on the creeper that was leaning over the parapet wall of the terrace. I slowly plucked a few buds, when I felt someone pulling my sari from behind. I turned to see Avinash.

I recalled his conversation with grandfather when he told him of his desire. I smiled to myself. He hesitated for a while and said, "I have to tell you something."

"Tell me," I asked curiously.

"You should not mind my saying it!" he pleaded.

"No!" I nodded my agreement.

"If you do not like what I am going to say, you should not get angry." He said as if making a deal with me.

"Okay!" I said again, laughing to myself.

"I love you" he quickly said that and looked at me in great tension. I burst out laughing then. He looked at me feeling shy of me, as I laughed at him with an open heart.

"Please answer me!" he said anxiously.

"Do you want a response from me? You said you want to chase, tease and love me to get closer. Go on, try all that! I wish you all the best!" I said teasing him. Then Avinash's face glowed with anger, like that of the Sun setting into the Western Ghats.

