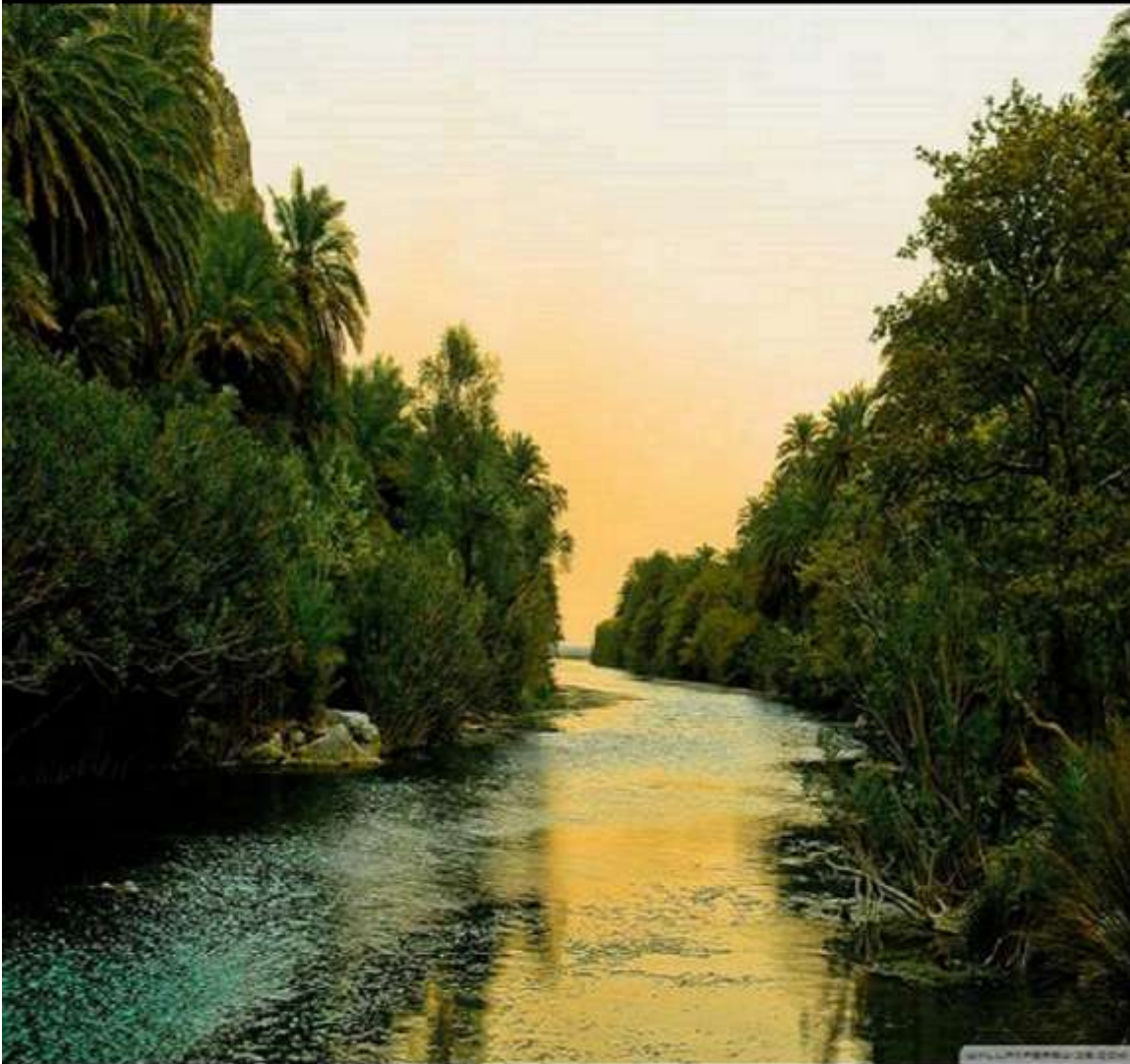


Soul of Music
and other music stories from
South India



Anant Acharya

Soul of Music and
other music stories from South India

By Anant Acharya

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Smashwords Edition

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About the Collection

Conservative Chennai, South India's cultural capital is a crucible for prosperity, and tradition at crossroads. An image of Madras conjures up mathematicians and musicians, curd-rice eaters and coconut-oil users, mustachioed men and Mylapore maamis.

Set amidst its exclusive Carnatic community known for its fondness for cricket, classical/Carnatic music and determinedly staid ways, Soul of Music comprises modern music stories that meander through friction between generations and perceived hierarchy of professions. Written in the literary fiction genre, the motley group of stories are a fictitious collection of music tales. Soul of Music is a debut collection of ten short stories set in the relaxed South Indian atmosphere. Here.....

an improvised life—mirroring elements of music and writing—exposes the secret of a music connoisseur (Skewed Fantasia);

an editor with a multi-disciplinary background manipulates a junior colleague (The Music Book);

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Anant Acharya

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Skewed Fantasia

The red countdown timer started at the traffic junction when Venkat mocked the driver for mixing up the roads leading to his favorite betel-nut shop. By the time the green light flashed, he had yielded to the driver who pointed out recent changes on roads: blocks (especially at peak hours) and modifications to one-ways and back—all with clockwork precision by the city traffic police that displayed exceptional clarity and efficient execution when it came to creating chaos. As he clicked open the front door, Chitra noticed Venkat's nervous face in the side view mirror. In an instant, he popped out of the slender white Ford and banged the door shut. The driver steered it slowly across the road to the dusty side and waited.

Venkat, Priya and their daughter Maya, had set out to attend a Carnatic music concert at the Music Academy—their first one. In the cool, misty Friday evening in December that was much consolation to many Tamil hearts scorched down by the ten-month heat, strong jasmine fragrance filled the Chennai roads—a rich and heady aroma that wafted upwards from the garlands: flower girls sold, women wore, and roadside deities donned. Getting fainter as it spread through the vegetarian eateries, mingling with the smells of hot *Idlis* and *Sambar*, the smells spread down the road, blending with the stink rising from the dirty Buckingham canal (sole supplier of mosquitoes to all parts of Chennai). Normally Chitra didn't attend music concerts, but Chandru had promised his friend Venkat earlier that week that his wife would accompany them.

When Chitra saw the Venkat family entering her house, it seemed funny to see the Venkat couple complementing each other on their skin color; Venkat's dark brown skin would nearly be invisible in the pitch night; Priya's fair skin was peachy with a tint of pink porcelain. They had south Indian looks: round faces with no hint of cheekbones, full lips and swollen cheeks. When Priya greeted her in heavily accented English and held out her hand, Chitra grabbed it and shook vigorously. Being unfamiliar with foreigners or Non-Resident Indians (NRI), or even those snobbish Indians who flaunted their faltering English, she associated Priya with the only English-speaking girl she knew—a sweet Anglo-Indian hostel mate who taught her how to remove a bra without having to remove her blouse/top, among other things.

For his part, Venkat stretched his lips and shrugged, saying, “The concert is Priya’s idea; she has lately taken into ‘instilling-culture-into-kid’ kind of stuff.” Chitra understood but simply nodded her head.

At the noisy roadside where they were waiting, Priya suddenly heard gurgling sounds and looked in the direction of a rusted loudspeaker blare into a rhythmic song. She stepped out into the hardened mud and closed the door. A tall woman with graying hair, she looked, in Chitra’s view, more like a grandmother to Maya—but, a smooth-skinned, nimble and active grandmother. She dressed in a plain, cream-colored Salwar Kameez with no designs or embroidery and wore leather trekking sandals. A sleek MP3 recorder hung around her neck; which was the only gadget jostling for space with other accoutrements: a platinum chain with a decorative “V” symbol locket and gold *Thaali*, the wedding chain that showed itself out in parts and complemented her sandal-colored shawl. Maya stepped out and stood beside her mother, watching her tilt the recorder, check the sound levels and press the record button.

“Mom, do you want to record this ear-shattering noise for your home studio?” she asked with a scowling face.

“Don’t judge any sound as good or bad. They are just waves: short, long, narrow and wide frequencies,” she replied, turning to straighten Maya’s hair. Farther away, Venkat blew smoke rings into the air; Priya’s face fell into a frown.

As they stood there, Maya watched a bunch of giggling girls in school uniforms cross the road; they waved at her. Chitra emerged from the car waving at the girls.

“Cute girls,” Priya remarked.

“My music students...these girls.” Chitra said, smiling and waving continued in her broken, halting English, laden with heavy Tamil accent, “Very intelligent.” A sudden glow rose on Chitra’s face.

“How many years you are there in America?” Chitra asked when Priya stepped back into the car after settling Maya into the seat.

“Well, Venkat and I went to the US for studies and stayed put in New York for the last eighteen years,” Priya said.

In her mid-thirties, Chitra still wore her long hair as braids with a middle parting, not knotted into a traditional bun (as her mother-in-law would have preferred), or a ponytail (daughter's preference). Its reddish brown tint and the henna-dyed strands of hair stood in stark contrast to her oily dark brown face. She dressed in an old violet-colored silk saree that had crimson red borders with gold embroidered designs. When Chitra waved at the giggling girls, Priya heard the clunking of her thick gold bangles. It reminded her of her childhood times when her mother used to dress up like Chitra.

“Which is your native?” Chitra asked, in the way Chennaites asked, feeling elated about using the complicated word, 'native'.

“Venkat was from Mumbai. But his parents shifted to their native village near Tirunelveli after retirement, and I belong to Chennai. We come to India once every two years to visit our parents.”

Chitra turned to see Venkat exchanging a few words with a grinning, dark-skinned woman holding a coconut stick broom. Through the back glass, she observed him. Dressed in NYC tee shirt and jeans, Venkat carried a leather waist pouch. Though the dark purple-colored tee shirt merged with his complexion, the Wranglers Jeans highlighted his tall and athletic body. His handsome features struck out in spite of a dark skin. A pair of sleek glasses that made him look like an intellect also hid his thick, bushy eyebrows. His fingers were pointed and smooth and looked artistic. Like Priya, he too had many grey hairs that he did not care to dye.

Venkat threw the left-over butt down, stubbed it out with his foot and reached the car. “Do you charge for waiting also?” He asked, settling into the front seat. As he closed the door, a few dirty hands thrust into the rear window.

“Hey, what is all this? Roll up the windows.” Venkat barked, “Go.” He rushed the driver. The car sped.

“These beggars!” Chitra responded, twisting her face with a sudden unease, as if they were a blotch on the culture she was trying to show off.

“But, you never told me about the waiting charges,” Venkat demanded when the car waited at the next junction. The driver frowned but did not reply.

When Venkat persisted, he said, annoyed, “But, sir, when you booked, we offered the cheap Indica, as well. After going through the rate card meticulously for two days, you booked the

higher priced Ford.” Venkat did not retort. In the side view mirror, Chitra noticed his face looking stern and dour.

“Dad, can I come and sit in the front seat with you?” Maya asked.

In the next instant, Venkat beamed, “Come here, my baby doll.”

He turned back, stretched his arms and looked adoringly at her. Chitra wondered whether her daughter would call Chandru, a casual “Dad”. There was no similar word in Tamil. The generic word, “Appa” in Tamil would translate as “Father”, and not a casual “Daddy”, or “Dad”. Venkat hugged Maya, held her close to his face and kissed her. It was a quick retaliation, “Dad, you smell of cigarettes!” As quickly as he grabbed her, Venkat hurled her down into the place between Priya and Chitra—Priya’s face twisted into an ugly grimace. She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of drones she had recorded last week. *Wait till Chitra leaves.*

Moving on newly-laid smooth roads, the car twisted, turned and wound its way through crammed roads, halting briefly at traffic signals and racing with hyperactive two-wheeler riders who’d accelerate before the green signal flashed. When she took out a bar of chocolate to console Maya, Chitra noted that she had her father’s handsome features and mother’s fair complexion.

“When will we reach?” Venkat asked the driver.

“In an hour’s time.”

“You never told us that you were working.” Priya turned to Chitra with a smile to distract and lighten up the atmosphere.

“Not job. Just voluntary work. Teaching music at orphan school. Once a week.”

“Sounds interesting.” Venkat’s eyes lit up. “What do you teach?”

“Basic melody and rhythm. Seven notes: *Sa Ri Ga Ma Pa Da Ni*. Different Talams, rhythm patterns, etc.” Venkat felt puzzled and shrugged off.

“I heard that the aspect that sets Carnatic music apart from other music is the concept of improvisation. Is that true?” Priya asked, turning again to Chitra.

“What is improvisation?” Maya interrupted.

“It means to do something spontaneously like creating or reacting to an environment or inner feelings; it is an art.” Priya replied.

“So, nobody tells you to do things – you are free to do what you want?” Maya asked.

Priya was silent. Reacting to Priya’s earlier question, Chitra said, “Yes, yes; three types: Alapana, Niraval and Swaras. Alapana – fully free; Niraval – improvise under rhythm, so strict; Swaras – free and strict.”

“Interesting. Completely free, fully constrained and in-between.” Priya summed up looking at Maya.

Venkat turned with sudden interest. “What is this ‘fully free’ improvisation?”

“Oh, Alapana? Yes, freely improvise. But has ascending structure. Starts with a catchy raga phrase, improvise based on important notes, build parallel and contrasting phrases, move to upper registers, climax with fast phrases. Important points: weave phrases tight, smooth flow and quality start and end. Test is audience should not be bored.”

“That doesn’t sound like complete freedom.” Venkat spoke in a sarcastic tone followed by a penetrating look.

Chitra looked into his eyes for the first time; it shone with an angry brilliance. She replied, “Freedom doesn’t mean doing things anyway you like. However freely you do things, natural laws bring you back to the center. When you are improvising to audience, they should relate and find some meaning.”

There was a stunning silence. “Sensible and... profound.” Venkat spoke with a rich tone that seemed to spring from the depth of his heart.

After a pause, “It is like writing a story,” he reflected in a quieter tone. “A catchy start; weaving incidents, thoughts and emotions; developing characters through actions and dialogue; building to a crisis and finishing with a resolution.”

Chitra asked, “You are a writer?”

“I have just started attending writing classes and would want to be a writer someday after I am done with managing mutual funds for my investment banker.” Venkat replied with a sudden air of confidence. He turned and looked into her eyes: large, beautiful but lively and insecure.

Nobody had praised her for her sensibility. All of a sudden she felt all those feelings she’d felt as an infatuated teenager.

They reached the Music Academy. “Wow!” Maya shrieked, fascinated by men and women in glittering silks moving everywhere like a scattered army of ants: car park, corridors and mini-

halls; a few spilled outside the gate too. Inside the corridor, Maya's wide eyes darted over the framed black and white photos of famous musicians lined over the long walls. Counter boys handed out tickets and colorful stalls sold music CDs. Her eyes finally rested on yellow colored *Masala Bondas*, fried gram flour batter with potato fillings, sold along with other mouth-watering snacks at the canteen. But, by then, her parents had already entered the hall, Chitra in tow. She rushed to their side and found her seat.

Music stalwarts, scholars and sponsoring corporate honchos filled up the first few rows. There was stiff competition among musicians and music lovers to be seen in the first row. For corporate patrons, it was a matter of prestige, and for musicians, it was an evidence of their fame. Priya was amused to find a few men wearing bright colored LA/NYC tee shirts paired with white Dhotis. In the adjacent row, were a few people seated with notebooks and pencils speculating over what songs the musician would sing that day. Chitra heard her name being called from behind her. She waved at the group of giggling girls on the balcony who shrieked and waved excitedly. Chitra beamed with pride. Sitting next to the exit, she saw the door getting closed.

Curtains rose. Flanked by two drones, Lalitha Swaminathan, a top vocalist sat in a bedazzling peacock-blue-colored silk saree. She was forty-something. Her blouse sleeves like the ones young and unmarried women wore were short revealing bulging arms underneath. She looked over to the drummer who was tapping the head of his drum, *Mridangam*, with a smooth stone; leaning over to listen sharply and tap again till its sound aligned with the basic tone strummed on the drone. Satisfied with the tuning, he nodded his head; the lady musician sat upright and started with a harmonious hum.

“The first song is an invocation to Lord Ganesha, a prayer to remove any obstacle that may prevail in the performance. It is set to the raga, melodic mode, called Nattai.” Chitra whispered to Priya, speaking with a mix of Tamil and English words. Priya translated to Maya, who in turn repeated it to Venkat who in turn gave a nod.

“You must be attending an awful lot of concerts living here in Chennai, wouldn't you?” Priya asked, clicking off her recording device. An old lady turned back, noticed Chitra and waved at her. Chitra pressed her hands together in greeting.

“How do you know her?” asked Venkat looking at Chitra.

“She knows my father, a violin player. She asked me if I would like to teach at that orphan school.”

Ruminating on her work, Chitra found her thoughts wandering on the similarities in music and writing and life, in general. After all, stories reflected life in so many ways. She pondered at her own life where she was slated to be the next M.S. (short for M. S. Subbalakshmi whose claim to fame was singing at the United Nations concert) and how she had ended up teaching and that too, voluntary work that was dull and non-motivating.

Chitra had to come to terms with her incapability at networking. She hardly had any friends. From her childhood, the only aim in her life was to be a globe-trotting Carnatic singer. Her father had devoted many precious morning hours to teaching her, the nuances of ragas and rhythmic patterns. Every time she won music competitions, she dreamt of performing to an expert audience in reputed concert halls. She would accompany her father to concerts and gradually got to move with many famous musicians. Now, she was hardly able to identify ragas and most raga names skipped her mind.

She took up teaching at the orphanage after her daughter was born. It was not marriage or her daughter that stopped her from actively pursuing her musical career; it was her father's death. Their house that brimmed with musicians wore a desolate look. A part of her began to fade away, and that part was her music. The musicians, who greeted and appreciated her music when her father was alive, did not bother to support her after he died. On her mother's insistence, she gave up pursuing concert opportunities and got married. At that time, the only consolation was that she got married into a music family. It renewed her belief in life to think that she got a whole music family in return for her father. She looked forward to many days of musical interactions and possible concert opportunities. Her husband worked with a stock broking firm. It suited her well that he was a salaried professional and musically oriented. He tried to support her in the initial days. A friend of his asked him if his wife would be willing to sing in a festival series. He came home that evening and announced it with joy to his family. But, before she could fix the

concert date, her in-laws managed to replace her concert with their daughter's. By the time, she discovered, she had also become pregnant and so, could not complain.

Instead of musical interactions, her in-laws were more interested in comparisons. They would pit her against their daughter. When her music took a backseat, they reveled in making critical comments about her cooking abilities. "My son has become so thin now. How healthy and fat he was," would be their favorite punch line. In the end, she dished out more recipes than ragas.

Chandru showed some romantic interest in her till their daughter was born. After that, if he ever spoke to her, it would only be about market volatility, margin short-falls and impending recession. For her part, she was between smelly napkins and feeding bottles. Knowing fully well that she could not afford music, she kept her daughter out of it. Her in-laws found it convenient not to intervene in this decision. After a decade, just when her music memory began fading away, the old lady musician called up and offered this opportunity. Until now it had remained just an opportunity. She could not use it as a stepping stone to further her musical career.

Chandru gave up trying to support her in music.

As the sound of clapping rose, Chitra felt mildly curious about the word, 'Profound'. Venkat's sudden interest in music evoked a silent infatuation. The next two hours passed with Chitra explaining the meaning of the songs, the Ragas they were set to, the composers who wrote them, and improvisation, the musician chose to embellish the songs with. Priya listened with awe. At the end of every song, Venkat would exclaim, "Awesome!" the way Americans appreciated everything. She felt the infatuation grow whenever he looked into her eyes.

"Chitra, would you be interested in teaching Maya? Do you have a Skype id?" Venkat asked.

Priya looked on.

"Yes, yes."

"Can you please write it down?" Priya was searching for a piece of paper in her tiny hand bag, while Venkat handed it to her. It was an old paper with an address written on one side of it.

Chitra wrote her id making clear that she spelt all the alphabets properly in the lowercase and added the numbers right. She drew a line in the middle of the slant in the number 7 so that it would not be misconstrued as 1. She inserted the paper into a heavy, old and worn-out book

titled, “Beginners’ Exercises in Carnatic Music,” and handed it to Maya. “I started my music with this book; let it bring you all the luck in the world,” she said with a broad smile.

After the magnum opus, the musician sang a slow composition called *Padam*. The *Padam* dealt with the theme of separation from God and subsequent yearning. As the slow-moving song rambled on, Chitra felt the audience sway to the melody. She too felt a mild and pleasant change. The musician sang, “It has been a long time since we met. Do you ever think of me?” Chitra’s mind raced. By that time when she started her online music session with Maya in January, she would have read a few English stories. Amidst her teaching sessions, she could compare the ragas and stories theoretically. Maya would pass it on to Venkat who may take part in further sessions where she would narrate the structure of other improvisational types in music. For her part, she could take up a library membership, read English books and speak and compare better. At some point, she would slowly reveal that her musical career was not taking wings despite being married into a music family. He may recommend her name to some concert organizer in US.

She adjusted her sagging blouse and tightened the top end of her saree. When the climax line of the *Padam*, “Do you love me?” came on, her imagination soared. Maybe this was the start of glowing years ahead. She would go on an American concert tour, meet him there, share her music knowledge... and maybe her bed.

Priya and Maya went to the canteen. Venkat refused to go. Chitra did not eat outside. The next song began. “Which raga is this?” Chitra was surprised to hear a male voice. She turned to see Venkat bending forward in his seat to catch her eye.

“Behag.” Chitra raised her voice to let it travel through the two empty seats beside her.

“Sounds dreamy and tender.” He murmured.

Venkat looked at her and said, “Great.” Chitra turned to the other side with a blush. It seemed a vague but favorable response. She felt a sudden urge to rush towards Venkat and allow herself to be embraced by his strong arms. But, when she turned, Venkat was already waving at Priya.

The musician climaxed a roaring finale to the last song in *Madhyamavathi* raga, and the audience thundered with claps that lasted more than ten minutes. Venkat checked his watch - it was half past nine. "Shall we go backstage and congratulate the musicians?" Priya asked.

"Trust me, Priya; you don't really want to go backstage. That place will be swarming with a huge crowd. You would find it difficult to wade your way through." Venkat dissuaded.

"Let me go." Priya retorted and dragged Maya with her. Chitra stood up and gestured to the girls on the balcony, asking how the concert was. They gestured back with a thumbs-up.

"I will go with Priya." Chitra looked at Venkat tentatively.

"No. Please wait here." Venkat said. He got up and slipped in beside Chitra. They watched Priya and Maya disappear on to the steps leading to the backstage.

"Can I relate a story I wrote?" Venkat asked.

"Yes, yes."

"It is about an Indian couple living in the US. They fall in love while doing masters with the same university. They marry with the consent of both sides of parents. It is a happy marriage. The couple spends a lot of time traveling to Europe on backpacks and trekking. They don't plan on having kids for a long time. But, then when they decide to have, the lady is not able to get pregnant. She feels so guilty that she even gets ready to rent a womb.

Once it so happens that the protagonist comes to India alone on a family emergency and stays at his parents' bungalow in a village. He offers foreign chocolates to an old and loyal maid who had been with them all their lives. Her daughter has just attained puberty, and she touches his feet for blessings. He feels an instant shock that he has not felt for a long time. One morning when he sees the girl mopping the house, he is not able to contain his lusty feelings. Perhaps, his wife's repeated words of womb-renting hinting a silent permission acted on his mind. His parents had gone to the nearby town to attend a wedding. He brings her into his room, and they have it. The girl enjoys it. It gives him a deep sense of relief and exhilaration. A year later, his mother casually mentions that the maid's daughter has given birth to a girl child, in one of her emails. He feels excited and rushes to the college where his wife is teaching. She is not there. A research assistant tells him that she had suddenly swooned that morning, and they took her to a nearby hospital. When he arrives there, the lady doctor tells him that his wife is pregnant and that he is

going to be a father. Suddenly all the happiness he had reserved for that day vanishes. His wife leaves her job to care of the kid.”

“When he wanted a baby, he never had it. Now, when he gives up, he gets two babies and a conflict. He does not know what to do.”

Whenever they visit India, Venkat continued, he never goes to his village. Instead, he arranges to meet his parents in Chennai. In a recent turn of events, he learns that the baby girl’s mother has died.

“Are you shocked?” Venkat asked.

“I don’t know.” Chitra was bemused.

“So now, music-lady, can you tell me how to resolve the climax?” He asked.

“I am not good at stories.” She sounded tentative and looked sheepish.

“I am asking you because you understand how to create; how to imagine; and how to improvise within natural laws. You may have an idea of the center of the conflict and provide a solution.”

Chitra felt a mild disgust. She groaned wondering how one could dissect a misdeed with dry intellect. “He should not keep secrets from his wife. He should tell about that daughter and should take her to America with him.” She spat out her words.

Venkat took a deep breath and said, “*Maya has a half-sister.*”

After a stunning silence, like the pregnant pause in a symphony that is followed by a more provocative finale, she felt like running away. The air was suffocating. How she longed for some water! She made a desperate search but spotting Venkat’s water bottle gave up, closed her eyes and kept mum.

“Do you want some water?” Venkat asked, lifting the water bottle he had kept on the side of his chair. “No, no.” She gestured violently with both her hands as if he were offering poison.

He continued, “My other daughter is at an orphanage in Chennai. Last week, I went there, met her for the first time and told her that I was her father. She is as pretty as her mother was.” He fell into a reverie. Then, suddenly finding that Chitra was quiet, he asked her, “Do you think I am wrong? You didn’t tell me your opinion.”

Chitra felt lost. “No, no. I don’t know.” Venkat gave a piercing stare, but her head was bowed down.

In an instant, he sprang up with the air of a person who had made up his mind. The group of giggling girls came rushing to greet Chitra. A little girl, who had distinct thick eyebrows and looked Maya’s age, elbowed herself to the front and asked Chitra in Tamil, “Madam, why don’t you come every day and teach? We miss you.”

Priya and Maya appeared dejected near the door. “Venkat, you are right. I wish I had listened to you.”

When the little girl looked at the direction of Priya and noticed the tall guy in a tee-shirt, she was amazed and yelled, “*Appa!*”

A puzzled Priya asked, “What is this?”

Venkat cowered down. “Let me explain.” He said, trying hard to put on a masked calmness. He took Priya to the corridor. Maya placed the book containing the paper with Chitra’s id on an empty seat. Priya kept turning and looking at the little girl.

Chitra decided to leave; it was best for the family that she left them alone. When Chitra walked towards the gate, a smiling Chandru greeted her at the car park. She smiled at him wholeheartedly. Both of them sat in the car, and Chandru turned on the ignition.

“Has Venkat left?” Chandru inquired.

“No.”

“Let me say hello to him.”

“No, no.”

“Why?”

“I will tell you later. Let us leave now. It is raining.”

He turned the steering and from her seat, Chitra watched the faraway corridor where Venkat was gesturing madly in front of a sobbing Priya. Maya stood near Priya; her hands did not hold the book. It suddenly began to drizzle, and within minutes, heavy droplets fell. Chitra inhaled the

fresh air as the rare December rain began to lash heavily and blotted out the Venkat couple. She snuggled towards Chandru and lay on his firm arms cozily.



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The Music Book

The hundred teething problems of the newcomer I had borne to the hilt, but when she contested with me and also bulldozed, I swore vengeance. You know me—my nature; and you know I am not threatening. I know I would finally retaliate—but the risk made me ruminate. I must avenge but without the backlash. And, it must be complete, in that the wrongdoer must know—at least have an idea who her avenger was.

It was important that my demeanor didn't betray the intention: I continued with the greeting, the smiling, and the helping; and the newcomer did not doubt my goodwill nor perceive that my friendliness was now at the cost of her ruin.

She had a weakness—this newcomer—although otherwise she was a woman well-respected and even well-liked. She prided herself on her accolades in music, especially her All India Radio grade (the much-sought-after gold seal for professional musicians). Few musicians were educated, let alone employed. Most of the time, their virtuoso was limited to performing concerts and practicing the art of performing and fawning upon concert hall secretaries. In advanced English like that of writing and editing, the newcomer, like the communication-crippled engineers, was a quack. But, with singing, she was true. Being a multi-disciplinary myself, I was not much different from her—except for the grade; I was singing very well myself, and sang wherever I could—in small gatherings or locally known concert halls.

One cool afternoon in the winter months of *Margazhi*, when the music festival was on a dizzying high, I met her. She greeted me with effusive gestures, for she had been praised excessively after her concert. The newcomer wore shining silk: bright parrot green-colored saree with a blue and gold embroidered border matched to a pink blouse; and her made-up face with jarring jewels housed ill-fitting dark glasses. I was never so pleased to meet her than that day.

So, I told her, “You sang so very well, dear, and you are in luck. I recently received lengthy manuscripts on music, and I am in doubt.”

“How?” asked she. “Impossible! And during the festival time itself.”

“Just today,” I replied; “and I am not sure how to edit. Though I have worked in editing for many years, and edited many management and professional textbooks, this is the first time I am attempting a book on music. As you were busy with the concert, I accepted them without consulting you.”

“Music book!”

“I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Music book!”

“And I need a plan.”

“Music book!”

“As you are busy now, I am going to Shweta. She is a music scholar. She will provide...”

“Shweta cannot tell a *Todi* raga from a *Bhairavi* raga.”

“Yet people say that she sings as well as you.”

“Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To the office.”

“My dear, no; let me not impose this extra work on you. I see that your fans are starting to flock you. Shweta...”

“They are not fans; just little kids wandering everywhere and old buggers twiddling thumbs — come.”

“My dear, no; it is not the fans, but the severe straining your eye will be exposed to. The manuscripts are very lengthy and badly written.”

“Let’s go. Straining my eye—is nothing—is just part of the work. I have become used to it. As for Shweta, she can’t tell the difference between *Todi* and *Bhairavi*,” saying she picked her handbag; and clutching my arm, she hurried me to our office.

There was nobody at the editorial section in the office—a leading book publisher; my juniors had left to have fun at a book fair in the city. I had told them I will be out on official business the whole day, and had given them strict orders not to venture out, especially to the book fair. And, the moment my back turned, I knew, they would disappear; and I insured it.

At the door, the newcomer pressed her index finger on the ID machine, opened the door, pushed me in, and rushed to my computer. “After the two hour concert, you look really tired; why don’t you take a sip of this energy drink?” I handed my bottle.

Her golden bangles jingled as she raised the bottle and poured it into her mouth, taking care not to spill on her motley saree.

“The manuscript,” she said.

“Sure, let me login,” said I; “but look at the rolling-meadows wallpaper on my desktop.”

She turned to the computer, and looked into the picture with her dreamy eyes grazing the meadows.

The December cold had seeped into the large air conditioned room making even a temperature of twenty-five degrees celsius freezing cold. The newcomer rubbed her hands and arms for warmth.

“Hach! hach!, hach!, hach!, hach!, hach!”

“Feeling cold, eh?” I asked.

Further series of sneezes followed. She took a few minutes to reply. “It is nothing.”

“Let’s leave.” I said looking serious. “We’ll go; you are catching a cold. You’re a fine singer, respected, admired; you’re accomplished and sought-after unlike me. Nobody will miss me. You will become ill and I don’t want to be held responsible. Besides, there is Shweta—“

“It’s ok,” she said; “a mere sneeze; nothing to worry about. My work will not stop because of the cold.”

“Yes—yes,” I agreed; “I don’t want to make you nervous unnecessarily though you have to be cautious. Have more water; it will bring down the cold.”

I again opened my bottle which I picked from the side table on my left.

“Drink,” I said, raising it to her.

She poured it into her mouth without touching the rim with her lips, paused, and smiled to me, while flashy, covering-gold earrings jingled on the motley blouse.

“Thanks,” she said, “to a friend.”

“You are welcome.”

She sat next to me, and we started.

“These manuscripts,” she said, “are very rare.”

“It deals with,” I replied, “the search for the origins of Carnatic music.”

She rolled her chair close to mine, adjusted my mouse pad, and took hold of the mouse.

“It has 800 pages,” she said; “and that will take a long time to edit.”

“Well... with you and me working, it should not take more than three weeks.”

“Make it two; and let me take the first five hundred pages right away.”

“OK. Let me copy it and send to your email.”

“Great. Thanks.” She said.

Her eyes sparkled as she read the author’s name. Scrolling down the file, she noted the title, chapter headings, and read through the abstract. My own manner melted watching her interest. We went through chapters dividing them between us; and pondered on the plan to divide the huge reference section and indexing.

“The cold!” I said; “see, it is chill. It is as chill as Antarctica. We are in Chennai where it is supposed to only be hot. But, this December is freezing. Come; let’s switch off the air conditioner before you really get worse. You’re cold...”

“Don’t worry. Let’s complete dividing the sections. Why don’t you give me another sip of that drink of yours?”

I handed the bottle and she emptied it in one go. Her eyes went wide. She pressed her stomach and adjusted herself on her chair.

“So, I heard you are also into music. Do you sing concerts?” She asked in a patronizing tone.

“Well, I perform too.”

“How many concerts are you singing this festival season?”

“Well, not many. There is this concert in a concert hall in Pammal.”

“Oh, Ok. Lesser-known concert halls...”

“But, I host music shows and interviews. I arrange music programs on the television. Singing to me, is just a hobby. Moreover, with this job, I hardly find time to practice singing, let alone sing concerts.” I replied.

“You multi-task!” she said with a sneer. “But, let us start. Have you sent a copy of the manuscript to my email?” She asked.

“Yes. You can check it in your computer.”

The newcomer rose to go to her cubicle on the other side of the corridor. I too went to her cubicle and sat down on a nearby chair. Switching it on, she logged into it; (and the corner of my eye made a mental note of her password), opened her email, and saw the manuscript sent to her through mine. Satisfied, she said, “Got it, thanks,” she said; “I had always wanted to edit a music book. You know for me, music is life. I had wanted to pursue full time performing when I worked as an analyst but couldn’t juggle the two professions. But, with an easier and effortless job like that of an editor’s, it is a dream come true.”

“I doubt if an editor’s job is easy.” I said.

“For people with less than two years of work experience in editing, it is not so.” Hinting at me, she retorted, but followed it with a squeal, “Aah!” Bending in and clutching at her stomach, she said, “Sorry, I have to go to the toilet.” There was an embarrassment on her face. I watched her kick her chair back, press the standard ctrl+alt+del, get up hurriedly, and rush all the while with the swish of her silk outfit and the jingle of her jarring jewelry.

The energy drink (strong laxative mixed with water) was taking its effect.

As soon as the door closed, I logged into her computer. This was the moment I was planning for, the last two months. I took my pen drive—carefully loaded with an important project’s pricing information; inserted into her computer swiftly; and copied them into her hard drive. Then, I opened her email, clicked, ‘compose message’, typed in all email ids of the senior management of my publisher’s competitors—about thirty; attached the sensitive file, and clicked ‘send’. I quietly removed the pen drive, slipped it into my handbag, deleted the sent mail, logged off, and awaited her arrival.

She came back; her saree all wrinkled. Wiping her hands on a small and worn-out handkerchief, she sat.

“On second thoughts, why don’t you take up the music book project completely?” I said. Her eyes sparkled, though watery from head cold.

“That will be great.” She said. “I feel so much better. Honestly, I was not happy with the junior position our company offered me. My work as an analyst also involved editing. But, they had no clue of the skills of my prior work and thought that I was a beginner. But, with this project, I will

probably be able to show that I deserve better. Thanks for letting me do this.” There was warmth in her watery eyes.

“By the way, I met the security outside; and he said that he is going to lock the door as nobody is around. So, I guess we better leave.” She said.

After lunch the next day, when I was settling comfortably into my cubicle, I saw her rushing towards me. In a hushed tone, she said, “I heard the IT guys speaking in the cafeteria. One of them spoke of a sensitive file sent from my computer. The senior management is probing the issue, it seems...” Her face was all flushed red. “But I swear I didn’t do it.” She assured me nervously.

“But, how come you had access to the file?” I probed.

“I don’t know. I have no idea.”

“When did you send it?”

“I did not send it. But they said it was yesterday. I was so tired and confused.”

“But, in all the confusion, you still locked your computer before rushing to the toilet, didn’t you?”

“That’s true.”

“Did you check your sent mail folder?”

“I did; and no such mail was there.”

“I am confused now!” I replied, throwing my hands into the air.

There was a pause. Resuming, I said, “Hmm... you had better come up with a credible response when they probe you; otherwise they may file a case against you.”

“I don’t know what to say. I really cannot think!”

“It is possible that they may call the police.”

She held her breath. She felt dizzy. She put her hands on her head. She started sweating. She rubbed her face—already red—hard. She looked up and let out a prayer. She sighed. She shook her face—already contorted and red—more vigorously. She took sharp breaths.

In the evening when I left, I saw her slumped in her chair devoid of any movement.

I was early the next morning. And, when I opened my email, an automatic smile lit my face. I was copied on an email sent from the newcomer to the managing editor. The subject was written in capital and bold, “RESIGNATION”.



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Broken Melody

“Please, don’t worry, I’ll take care of all the marriage expenses.” He said over the phone. Choosing to drive rather than take a train or flight, he got his sports car ready. He had bought this car ten years ago and it worked fine from day one. It was far from Chennai to Kochi, but he knew the route very well.

A long life that had unfolded from timid child in khaki half-pants taking the bus out of Mattancherry to slow, old wimp in this unwound year, Mani had stamped open thoughts of the place where he had belonged, a Sangeetha Illam, the music house at the east corner of the Bhagavathar Street. He’d left in 1970, joined a stock broker in Trivandrum, the Kerala State capital, married once, divorced once, married again, shifted to Chennai, worked with a management school, traveled widely, visited US, made money, retired and settled down with his second wife and daughter from first marriage, but never returned to see his old father or brother, Vara, short for Varadukutty, a struggling artist and debt-ridden, because he was sure they were so, still.

It was the music house, and had been so until one fine day, the father declared his decision to change his music career to a medical representative profession. Concerts were dwindling, students could not be maintained, when they didn’t come on time, or missed a class or two, never informed about absence beforehand; and took classes the whole month and disappeared when it came to paying the fees. The father obtained the job selling medicines, but looked dejected at having to ingratiate people, a low down he had never had to stoop all his life.

Mani and Vara didn’t like their father running away from the music house; and making them teach students instead, and practice hours together for the sparse concert chances in the temples in and around Ernakulam city. Hardly seven students came now, and the monthly fee was n’t more than five rupees, but they kept furiously practicing, teaching students, urging them to attend their concerts, however little, attending concerts of other musicians at the city *sabha*, ingratiating with the secretary, recommending chances for their friends and in return getting to sing in temples in remote locations—all— in the hope the father leaves the house on some

official work and they put the house back together to its glorious days. That never happened, and Mani ended up forty-five years later as a sexagenarian widower taking his morning walks at the Boat Club Road near his penthouse at R.A. Puram, Chennai.

It was one of those unseasonal rains one Tuesday morning when the grating voice of a woman introducing herself as Mangala called up and invited him for the wedding. He didn't know who she was until she said she was Vara's wife. Yes, she said, Vara still lived at the music house or at least a portion of it after father died and planned to pledge it. They were married twenty-two years back and their only child, a daughter was getting married in August.

Pledge the music house? Was that what she said?

Yes, she said. Had he heard of the Royal Music House? Of course, not, she said.

He had not. That's what Sangeetha Illam is called now, she said. Vara'd sold the music house to a timber merchant whose wife died on the house-warming ceremony day, and he sold out to a *Marwadi* pawnshop owner who hoarded his illegal gold and jewelry in it for a few years until thieves stole them one day and then downloaded it onto a rich Dubai-based NRI who started the Royal Music House. His manager retired and he'd hired Vara to look after the museum and put him up in one wing of the house itself. That was in 2000. The house did a good job. But, they are on leave till the rainy season is over as there are no tourists then.

So, how can Vara pledge the house? He'd asked.

Vara had bought the eastern wing of the house when the NRI needed money. We moved to a small, rented place near the music house and also profited from the tourist collections. Now, for the daughter's marriage, he plans to pledge the portion.

She'd called up from some landline. Her daughter had playfully googled his name and got his phone number. Vara had wanted to keep in touch but didn't summon enough courage to let Mani see him as he was, saying she reminisced. Good times did come but by the time he made up his mind, things would turn sour. Actually now, he doesn't know I've called you up, she said.

What will be your daughter's marriage expenses? He'd asked.

Seven-to-eight lakh rupees, she said.

I'll give you ten. Tell Vara not to pledge the house. He said. She broke into tears over the phone and thanked him again and again and needless to say, pleaded with him to come for the wedding.

Maybe, he thought, bad times would never get over. Irritated suddenly at the thought, he replied to her in the affirmative. No need to wait for me at the station or airport, I'll drive down. He was lucky to escape unhurt in a train accident earlier once. His acrophobia made him avoid flights. He always drove everywhere in his sports car. And he knew the route to Kochi, down south to Salem and then over Coimbatore and Palakkad and then to the coastal Kochi town. He felt proud to hear the wonder in her voice, knew she was half-expecting him to speak in a shaky voice and dodder around with walking sticks and lean on a helper to arrange his trips. But she knew that he was five years elder to Vara who was fifty-eight. For a professor and with a family, nobody expected him to indulge in a sports car. But, his stock broking experience had taught him the value of speed. After his daughter was married off, he indulged in it. He didn't sell it when his wife died although he was sad for some time.

He threw his mind back to the days when his musician father's prime disciple—he forgot her name now—taught him and his brother songs, Vara staring at her soft lips open and close with the sung syllables, shapely nails on shapelier fingers beating the rhythm on her thighs, straight back and thin neck, filling the room with her music, her eyes shut in sincere devotion to the music and to her guru. The father was turning bald, Mani was twenty, and Vara fifteen; and they liked and adored her. If you liked a deer, you'd admire her with her small waist and big, expressive eyes that made you want to pity her all the time. The morning air breezed around the house, spreading the fragrance of jasmine flowers on her hair through the practice room, and all the three of them were immensely charged with elaborating ragas in improvisation. She'd balance the *Tambura* on her right lap, open her eyes to look anxiously and alternately at Mani and Vara to check if both had got the difficult phrases right, strum the *Tambura* strings and tilt her right ear to the wooden frame immersing herself into the tones.

The father was away early morning to play tennis at the local club with the idle rich. Like a serious sportsman, he'd wear a white t-shirt, shorts revealing his thigh hair in a place where even young men covered their legs wearing white *mundus* and athletic shoes. You could spot him at the end of the street. There was a certain spring in his steps. He wore the sportsman attire every morning, wearing an elastic tri-colored band on his head, holding the racket in one hand, his middle-aged face beaming, and thinning grey hair adding wisdom to the face; wide nose, small

eyes, thick lips and a stout neck stuck onto a disproportionate mammoth body. Now, he was dead twenty years or more—a heart-attack at a rare concert.

The disciple started teaching. Yes, she was teaching the song she'd sung at the radio audition the day before. The father taught her and she'd pass it on to Mani and Vara. The father was reluctant at first to take her as his student; in fact, he was reluctant even to teach. He felt his voice would go croaking if he taught students, and so he would try to protect his precious voice for concert singing. But, one day when his own father urged him to teach this girl with the golden voice, he took her under his wings. She grasped the lessons fast and the father didn't have to exert his voice much. So, he'd ask her to teach his sons, who needed to have every line repeated at least thrice to get some idea of the twists and turns of the notes. Yes, she'd sung the audition well. The accompanying artists had praised her renditions very well saying she could even get a straight 'A' grade for her improvisation. They were worth their value in gold, said a violinist—staff artist.

Mani had completed his B Com, and dreamt of becoming a stock broker, for money or glory, he didn't know. His father's friend had offered to take him in as an accountant. But, he would have nothing to do with his father's circle of friends, however wealthy they were. He knew the lot. It could go on and on—the same house, same neighbors, same street, and same company; and retire there and burn in the same crematorium. At the Boat Club Road, walking the posh street, only he knew that had he not left, sooner or later he'd have had to become a puppet in their hands—else his father's.

What he'd have wanted to know now, wheels smoothly turning and twisting on the potholed roads, was if the disciple was singing any concerts at Chennai, and if not, whether she was singing at all.

The traffic on the GST highway was at an unprecedented high. His sleek car was sandwiched between two airbuses on both the sides. There was an auto rickshaw standing in front of him and two motorbikes rearing to slime into the gaps. The traffic red light was on. And, when it turned green, the vehicles raced past the junction. A car trying to turn right on the opposite lane hit a biker who slid and scratched Mani's car. The mustached policeman sensing a great opportunity

came running, whistling loud and swinging both his hands to stop all the three vehicles. The car sped away. The biker adjusted his bike and took it to the side of the road. Mani had to drive to the side too. He insisted on Mani's license and insurance book. Marriage, he said, going to my niece's marriage.

Not to yours anyway, grandpa, the policeman said. If you don't drive carefully, you'd end up in your own funeral, he said. There was a pause. What are you doing in a flashy sports car like this anyway? He asked, his moustache vibrating under his booming voice. When he said that he was not at fault and the biker fell on him, the policeman simply ignored him. Mani tried to argue saying his car got a scratch and who'd pay for it. But all his talk fell on deaf ears. You can reason it out in the police station, was all the policeman would say. On second thoughts, Mani took out his wallet and handed him a hundred rupees. The policeman didn't even take one look at the currency note. Mani doubled it. Still no. Only when he paid him a five hundred, did the policeman's lips widen into an ingratiating grin. You rich people should know better, he said. Even if it's a fast car, please drive slowly, advised the policeman. Mani got into his car and started the engine. The policeman handed back his license and insurance documents.

There was always something going wrong between the father and the disciple. After his concert ended, people would not stop with praising his singing; they would also rope in his disciple's name and say that she was singing very well too. Initially it didn't bother him. But, when constant praises of his disciple started pouring in, his face wore a sullen look. Opportunities to sing concerts began pouring for her. All the local temples reserved concerts for her in their annual celebrations. She'd come every morning to learn her lessons from him. When she greeted him, he would turn his face and not respond. He'd scold her for singing ragas wrong when she actually would be singing them right. And then, he'd scold her for no reason. Only when her eyes filled with tears would he be contended.

Mani's interest in stock broking had begun when his father told him to go to Chennai, called Madras then, to his musician-friend's house to learn advanced lessons during his college vacation. Mani was eighteen or nineteen but no older. It was the first time Mani was going out of Kochi, and the first time he was visiting Chennai. They took the Madras Mail that started from

the Island station. Mani had not seen such crowd at any station as the Madras Central station till then. Everything about Chennai was a wonder to him. The broad roads, frequent buses, rare power cuts, smart people, bustle of a city, fast pace and dynamic energy, thick and tasty curd (milk gets curdled badly in the south-western monsoon), quality raw rice and a sense of anonymity filled him with an inexplicable love for the place.

On top of it, came the trip to the Madras Stock Exchange. Music particularly Carnatic music and stock market were poles apart. But, it so happened that the son of his father's friend with whom Mani was staying was a stock broker. Family money helped the father's friend set up his son as a stock broker.

That stock broker took him through the dingy alleys of Parry's corner to the gigantic Madras Stock Exchange building. Once inside, Mani had to sit in the visitor's gallery while the stock broker joined the crowd on the floor. He had a pile of certificates—share certificates of India Cements Company, he had told him. A substantial subscription was raised for the company in the 1950s itself. Before leaving, the stock broker had let Mani hold the share certificates. Thick papers, blue-colored large letters of the company name and ornamented writing highlighting the stock broker's name made Mani feel privileged to just hold them. Caressing the paper, he wished his name would also show in the certificate.

On the floor, the stock broker distanced himself slightly from the crowd and shouted out an offer. The previously confused crowd now gathered around him and bid prices. This went on and on till the stock broker's outcry was matched. There was a great relief and smile on his face. Mani watched him from the gallery receiving fat packets of currency notes. It was the first time Mani got to see a bunch of 100-rupee notes—the sight of which got deeply embedded in his mind. He stood transfixed staring at the stock broker and knew exactly at that moment what he wanted to be when he grew up.

How come you received so much money, he'd asked the stock broker. Well, this is the season of expansions, he'd replied. India Cements was expanding its plants. Although it had been expanding from the year it was incorporated, and I spread a rumor now, he said. Mani looked

surprised. Don't worry, he'd said, it was not wrong information, just a rumor, based on facts. I told my friends that it was expanding and will consequently reach higher share price. I created a demand for people to buy so that I could download their shares that have not been moving up at all the last few weeks. That's the secret, he'd said. It's not an open manipulation, he swore. But, Mani was interested. It felt wonderful to him to be clever.

After the slight brush with the biker on Wednesday morning, Mani realized he was getting stressed, and for no apparent reason. He decided to turn on the CD player. Mozart's symphonies took precedence over Carnatic CDs. He felt a sudden calm. Curving into the traffic, he saw luxury buses and big cars whiz past. Old tractors carrying hay would dodder on the extreme left side. Some old lorries carrying sand would speed up seeing his swanky car race past. It was time for lunch and Mani stopped his car at a highway vegetarian hotel and tucked into full meals.

The Tamil Adi month—marriages wouldn't be solemnized during the period— was over by August fifteenth. Light drizzles and occasional showers trickled into Chennai through the escaped rain-bearing-winds of the south-west monsoon. When Mani was washing his hands after the meal, there was a sudden gust of wind pushing up the sand on the ground. Small gravels hit his face. He looked up at the sky. Dark clouds were darting across from the horizon. Rumbling thunder noises traveled back and forth.

He had to be there at Coimbatore by dusk. There were days when he never halted anywhere for the night. Even if it was about driving to Mumbai, he'd drive day and night and reach. But, now things were different. He didn't want to drive at night. Traffic on the highways was sparse but dangerous. It was not uncommon to get hit by a drunken driver at night and lie dying with no one to care.

It was unusual to have heavy downpours in August. The south-west monsoon in Kerala would start in May and go on till September. But, at Chennai, it was the north-east monsoon that brought heavy showers and would start only in October, if ever. But, recent spells of climactic change has rains coming in Chennai every week getting the met department confused as ever.

He drove faster than racing cars. It was tea time; and he had reached Salem. The sun was scorching hot, and it had been so for the last two hours. His face broke into sweat even with the air conditioning. Reaching Coimbatore for dinner, he checked into a hotel. Lying on the smooth, sponge bed, he saw his car flashing blue under the hotel name, RESIDENCY. After stuffing himself at lunch, he didn't feel hungry. He'd swallowed a glass of vodka and crawled into the silky bed.

He dreamed that he was in the music house but all the instruments were removed and in their places, were traders bidding and offering shares. Cash and share certificates were strewn all over the place. Traders jostled with one another and elbowed him into a corner. The outcry rose to a din and singing, if there was any, drowned into it. Students were shocked initially but seeing the cash bunches changed themselves into traders and began shouting instead of singing.

Thursday morning dawned and he rose up thinking of the two hundred and fifty kilometers he has to drive. He made a dash at the free breakfast buffet spread: *idlis*, *dosas*, *appams* and stew, *vadas*, omelets, toasts and corn flakes. He gorged on them, taking one of each. It filled up his tummy and he knew that he didn't have to stop anywhere for lunch. Usually he breakfasted on oatmeal, an American trend fast catching up in Chennai, but he knew that he needed to tuck in the heavy breakfast for energy to drive. He also bought some chocolates for instant energy. The sky had lit up momentarily. Amidst washed-clean-but-still-wet roads and overflowing gutters, the glowing, warm sun made yellow, caressing streaks on the back of his car.

He crossed the inter-state border and hit Palakkad—second time in the last forty-five years, the first time being his father's funeral. Further down, he crossed the bustling Thrissur city, a temple town getting ready to celebrate the Onam festival. The last time, he had stayed at a hotel where the lobby area streamed Carnatic music of Mandolin Srinivasan; it soothed his nerves. And then, came the song, "*Vinata*" played faster than usual, shocking him with its pace. He now saw the shock in a comical way—a song taught wrong.

At a phone booth in Thrissur, he made a call to Mangala. He had a mobile phone but it would be too expensive to make the call—roaming charges were very high. Although he could afford that

and much more, he prided on his disciplined spending. He was carrying a check book to make out ten lakh rupees to his brother for the marriage expenses. It was a joint account with his dead wife. He had not removed her name yet. She was extremely upset when he had made out his will leaving her all the money and assets. It sent her into a tizzy thinking how he could even think of death at that young age of fifty-five. People don't write wills and even if they did, they'd write them at eighty or so, was her idea. Now, two years later, he had to change the will completely and leave it all in his daughter's name. He had not informed her of this trip of his yet. He thought he'd call her up at Mumbai where she stays with her husband in a fancy apartment later.

"Hello," Managala's thick voice came on the phone.

"I'll be there in about two hours," he said.

"I thought you were not coming as we didn't hear from you after I'd called," she said.

"I'm in Thrissur now and will be there by noon," he said.

"It has begun to rain very heavily here. The wind is high too. Please be careful," she said.

"I'll manage," he said. This was not the first time he was driving in heavy rains.

In the next few minutes, he took to the highways. A lot had changed about the place. Earlier, roads were narrow, even highway roads were so. As far as the eye could see, one saw only hamlets. The whole state, if you'd driven from north to south, say Calicut to Trivandrum, was just an extension of the coastline. There was no major inland area like in Tamilnadu or other states, for that matter. But now, these thatched house-inhabited hamlets have turned out to be luxurious bungalow-infested towns. Malayalis who made their millions in the Middle East invested in palatial homes that housed an old parent or two. Roads were well-laid. Every town boasted of some tourist attraction or the other. There'd be as many white faces as brown or black especially during peak tourist seasons.

Rain poured heavily on his car. Twenty-five kilometers out of Thrissur, he saw the first board, Sangeetha Illam with the picture of boys and girls with two braids singing to the saint-composer Tyagaraja's image, classes starting Vijayadashami.

Ok, she said, today I'll teach you the song, "*Vinata Suta*" in the raga, *Jayanthasena* set to *Adi tala*. Before I start the song, let me describe the raga a little bit. This raga is a *Vinta* or *Vichitra* raga—meaning odd. It is strange because it has five notes in ascending and six in descending pattern—a combination of *audava* and *shadava* pattern. When Mani rose to fetch water for her in a tumbler, Vara raised his eyes and stared at her. She was singing the phrases of the raga for them to listen. When she sang, she shut her eyes. Vara was of that age when everything interested him in a sexual way. He would curb his instincts when others were around, which happened most of the time.

After she taught them some movements of the raga, she started teaching the song. She dictated the first two lines of the song and they wrote it down in their music notebooks. Can you also tell the meaning of these lines, they'd asked. O, Lord! The one flying on Garuda, Goddess Lakshmi's beloved, I worship you with all my heart; she translated. The beginning is generally a salutation, she added. So, how come you sang this odd raga for the radio audition, Vara had asked. I sang it for ten minutes, with the *Alapana* making up for five minutes. It depicts a sort of mastery on the part of the singer to be able to improvise on such ragas, she'd said. She sang both the lines one after another and they repeated. She sang every *sangathi* twice and they repeated. She asked them finally to sing the first two lines on their own and corrected any mistakes they made.

Onto the next two lines—the *anupallavi*, she said.

Once or twice he thought of stopping the car and taking shelter by the shops on the roadside. But, at the speed his car drove, he escaped the heavy rains and headed through the slightly clearer terrain. It was the fury of the *Edava Mazha* he'd escaped. Rain was slowing. The fast pitter-patter turned into a slower rhythm. Heavy droplets that hit the car now turned into lighter ones, though sharper. Visibility was better. Mani didn't have to force his weak eyes to check the road for vehicles and potholes. The rains brought some chill but Mani could stand it without wearing sweaters. The chills of the rainy season were soothing to the body scorched by excessive heat waves of the summer. At the worst, Mani would sneeze, but beyond that, there was no question of wearing warm clothing. Only hill stations needed that. Mani could have driven through the Munnar hills but the cold there would have been unbearable.

What made him leave the music house? Mani pondered over it. For years he couldn't lay his hand on the real reason. He always felt he had no specific reason to leave. He'd learnt that song from the disciple that day and felt the urge to leave. It was a strong instinct. The vacation at Chennai happened. When he came back to Kochi, it was only to collect his clothes and the degree certificate and he'd gone to Chennai. Obviously, there were reasons. He had to find his own profession (and it was not music). He had to find something that made money. There was a lot of it out there. He'd seen it. How many times had he made money on shares for himself and for others? He had to escape the rut of the everyday grind and the impending trap of his father or his wealthy friends. All these seemed reasons. But he still couldn't lay his hand on the real reason. After the wedding, Mani thought, he'd bring the music house back into shape. It will regain its former glory.

With the piercing strikes of the sharp rain drops, the shape of the music house began to gather in his mind; he could recall the boxes he'd made for the *Tamburas*, wooden cases with glass tops, bought violins and *Mridangams* for the instrument room, wiped the dust off them all on Sundays—patiently wiping the curves, pegs and holes, tuning the instruments, changing the strings, repairing the *Mridangam* cords—and learning to play the violin on his own. Vara and he would decorate the Saraswati deity on the day before Vijayadashami and place books and musical instruments before Her as offering to the knowledge and learning She provides. During the next day, Vijayadashami, celebrated as the day of new lessons, students would come to learn music and bring fruits and flowers to offer to their Guru.

Traveling against the dark skies, he checked the mile stones. It was the last forty kilometers. He was racing at eighty kilometers per hour. The roads were given a clean wash. It wouldn't hurt him to listen to the Carnatic CD he had. When the disciple had taught the song to him and Vara, he'd taped it. And, when he'd come to his father's funeral, he'd transferred the music recorded in cassettes to CDs, taking some of them to Chennai. Yes, it was her voice, alright. The song created the nostalgic mood he indulged in, these days, and was the perfect setting for this last mile journey. He'd recorded it when she had begun by teaching the nuances of the raga that day. Only one hour. The song was half-taught but the improvising, raga nuances and the first half of

the song were worth listening. It was eleven and the sun shone bright. Probably, the rains had taken leave on that day in these parts, he thought. He saw the board: 10 km to Sangeetha Illam.

He climbed the Thevara Bridge and had to stand in line. It had not changed. The bridge fifty years before could not take the weight of vehicles running both sides. So, when vehicles move on one side, the other side waits. Why couldn't they just pull this down and build another sturdy one, he thought. There was always an underlying stagnancy over fleeting and ephemeral changes here. People brought changes, built swanky houses and bought ultra-luxury cars but the governments have been doddering and squeezing and using worn-out things to the last drop. There was another bridge waiting to be crossed only after which he'd be able to reach the music house. While waiting for the slow moving old red-colored buses and tiny multi-colored cars, Mani heard very loud thunder claps. Dark clouds rumbled on from the Arabian Sea. Sunlight suddenly vanished. Gradual darkness enveloped the place. There was grey light all-around. Drizzling started. Wind was blowing heavily. It carried the raindrops everywhere. The direction of the beating rain kept changing. The rain beat faster. The downpour had started again.

Opening her eyes, the disciple dictated the next two lines of the song. Mani and Vara wrote the lines down. Ok, now the meaning, she said. What's the use of surviving in this world if it is not meant to be with You always, O' Rama? But, the word, 'Rama' isn't there, Vara'd said. I just added it for you to understand as to whom the question was addressed, she'd said. And, what is the use of this life lived by cheating and tormenting people? The next line says, she'd said. Vara asked what cheating was. She said, cheating meant making people believe what it was not. Oh, Vara said. What oh? Don't talk so much, learn your lessons first, she'd scolded him. No, it's not that. I'd heard father speaking over phone to someone yesterday. He was listing the three ragas you sang and recorded for the audition and emphasizing this one. So, what about that? She asked. In the end, he said that since the judges would not know the singers by name; they can recognize only by the songs sung, father asked him to disqualify your recording. Is that cheating, he'd asked. The disciple was stunned. Did you hear it wrong, she asked. No, I swear, he'd said. Mani too was shocked.

The voiceless music Mani saw in the standing tears of her eyes made him hang his head in shame. The tears didn't flow. She simply lowered the *Tambura*, placed it back in the stand and came back to her seat. Mani looked at Vara and Vara in turn looked at Mani.

He drove on the bridge and entered the small island which connected the city to Kochi. It was simply called island. In those twenty minutes of waiting to cross the bridge, the heavy rain that lashed disappeared as suddenly as it came. On his right was the Kochi airport and the road was winding towards a railway crossing that he had to cross. He was reminded of his school days when he had to take a bus to the school at the island. At least once in two-three months, there would be the bus strike and he would cycle to the school all the way from the music house—a distance of ten kilometers. Cyclists never waited at the crossing for the train to pass unlike other motorists. There was a gap between the railings and the gates and they'd lift their cycles and walk across. Of course, if they see the train, they'd not dare lift it and walk or even run. It was too risky. They'd wait for the last coach to pass by and then do the act. The railway guard would not make an issue of this, not that he didn't know. It was too trivial for him to notice; and then who followed rules anyway? Mani would also do the same thing when he got stuck at the crossing. One Monday, it was the bus strike and Mani rode his cycle to the school. At the crossing, the gates were closed. He lifted his cycle and began walking. He didn't watch out for the train nor did he notice any racing in that direction at that time. He heard somebody shout. It was so loud that it made him look back. And what he saw unnerved him so much. The gigantic train was just a few yards away from him. He ran to the other side and put the cycle on the ground with a thud. The train whizzed past him. He felt the train so close and almost fainted at its power. He knew better than to mess with trains or heavy vehicles. Had the man not shouted, had he not looked back, had he not run for his life, he would have been crushed to death. He would not have lived to see this day.

There was a loud noise and a sudden jerk. His car stopped. He attempted to turn on the engine but it didn't start. What a place to breakdown! On his left was the long line of thatched huts where the Tamil laborers lived. Small and congested houses on narrow and filthy roads, this slum housed many laborer families. It was rumored that these laborers were paid menial fee than the local ones. Well, slum or no slum, Mani had to walk towards the hutments to get some water

for the overheated carburetor. With the rains, the slum was filthier. Puddles of dirty water stood on the grounds. It was a daunting task to set foot on cleaner ground dodging all the stagnant waterholes. Mani knew better than asking for the can of water. He bought expensive things at a tea shop and asked him to keep the change. At the end, he requested the man for a can of water. The man willingly obliged and took the dirtiest can filled with water and went along with Mani. Pouring water into the opening of the carburetor, the man said something in Tamil. Mani merely thanked him and closed the bonnet. The man lingered around in the hope of an extra buck or two. But, Mani clearly waved him off and thanked him louder so that he couldn't hear the man say anything. After knowing that it was futile to wait for a tip, the man left in a huff. Mani sat inside and started the car. He saw the railway crossing gates lower down to close. A train would be passing through. He had to wait again near the gates. The queue wasn't long. He was third in line but a two-wheeler came from nowhere and adjusted itself between him and the car before him.

More than Vara's message, what astounded Mani was the tears in the disciple's eyes. It had not dropped down nor had she wiped it. She had sat back again not knowing what to do. Mani had asked Vara if he was sure he'd heard what he'd heard. Maybe father was giving the details so that she got through easier without too much of scrutiny, he'd suggested. Vara swore—father took special care and repeated it so many times he'd even had it by heart. Father had told him that he would have done it himself; just that he was not invited to be the judge that year. He also told him that it was too early for the disciple to get a gradation; and that she had not matured in her singing.

The disciple's face grew angry. She shouted a curse: *You have destroyed my music; musician this music house will be destroyed henceforth!* The tears didn't flow. Her eyelids held it. She got up, went out into the verandah, wore her slippers, and looked at Mani. The tears were still there. She left without saying goodbye.

In the next few months, the results were out and she was found unsuitable by the All India Radio for grading. Her father got transferred and she left the place. She didn't come to say goodbye. Father lost his concert chances, Vara who had high hopes on his music couldn't even get started, Mani left the place, and the music house wore a deserted look.

He knew that it was this CD; he felt it. The train was nowhere to be seen. Probably it would take another five minutes before it would show up. Then, it would take the railway guard ten more minutes to unfasten the thick jute rope and open the gate. He would then walk across and open the next gate with vehicles pushing behind him. After she left, the glory faded away. Vara's wife mentioned that it was doing well—probably, a face-saving attempt. Even if it did well, it may have been a one-off. Why would she feel so grateful when he told her he would pay for the marriage expenses? Mani turned on the CD player. Mani increased the volume knob, “Ok, she said, today I'll teach you the song, “*Vinata Suta*” in the raga, *Jayanthasena* set to *Adi tala*.” That day, the session happened to be only for fifteen minutes. Mani found a certain consolation in nostalgia and after retirement, he reveled in it almost all the time. When he had exhausted remembering the recent past, he'd go deeper and remember older things. He'd analyze what the raised eyebrow had meant that he had not captured then. His mind would go on and on and rationalize and give shape to the unconscious questions he'd have had that came to the surface now and then.

She'd finished teaching the first two lines. Mani wondered how sweet her voice was. What clarity and sharpness her raga phrases carried, like a beautifully done pencil sketch! How she corrected their mistakes; how gently she pointed out; and how she'd make them sing till they got it right without them feeling the boredom of practice. Even if she were not destined to perform, she would have been a great teacher.

A loud whistle made him turn and look at the train that roared through the crossing. She was teaching the next two lines, ‘*Ninu saaraku judani bradukela*’. He started the car. Everybody started their vehicles. People were always rushing. The gates opened. He crossed it and raced to the second and last bridge—the Thoppumbady Bridge. A stop there again. He was first in line.

Vara revealed the father's misdeed. There was a stifled cry. Then, the curse—loud and clear—for everybody to hear. Mani wondered. Had he escaped? Well, he had lived well. It seemed to affect people holed up in the music house. Something had told him to run away and that something was right. He felt good that he'd believed in himself. He'd believed his intuition. He'd done good to follow it without unnecessary questions or self-doubt.

The last of the vehicles went by in the opposite lane. A sudden downpour started. Mani started his car. The sports car didn't just start and roll over. It flew. It was designed that way. It grew dark suddenly. Before Mani knew, he heard a loud crash.

Mangala waited and waited. She had not heard the local news on Asianet TV—a sports bike crashed into a sports car and both fell into the backwaters below. The police had fished out both the bodies. Only after a few days did Vara and Mangala learn the news and manage to inform Mani's daughter. The wedding was called off. The music house lay in shambles.



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Far from the maddening Imedaka

The clang of cymbals that set the peacocks dancing sparked the December festival of *Margazhi* at the Oregalym area, centered on the large temple tank. Temple gates were adorned with green banana stems and colorful electric lights hanging on slim wires. In the *Mada Veethis* between houses with tiled roofs and modern apartments sharing walls, between make-shift, trinket-selling stores and well-built, brightly-lit shops, past supermarkets and buildings, Bhajana groups moved. Some carried a *Tambura*; and some, a manual srutibox. But, everybody wore silk: bald, old men with naked chests wearing gold-bordered white *veshtis*, workmen carrying *petromax* lamps, women rustling up in silk sarees, and little girls wearing anklets that rang in sync with the song rhythms as they walked. In smaller streets, the clanging was faster, a striking of gongs and small, resonant drums, and the people walked faster and with springs in their steps; and some groups broke into dances. Little boys and girls looking cute in traditional attire shrieked in sheer joy darting in and out with happy yells that rose like the swell of peacock's feathers. All the groups came together towards the north side of Rasamad at the city's most prestigious concert hall—the Rasamad Cisum Imedaka—where the group leaders stood with reverence holding bronze plates full of jasmine flowers to a picture frame of the music saints at a corner of the Imedaka stage and worshipped the music goddess idol. The cows were brought to Imedaka were arranged to stand on its verandah. Their horns were capped in golden trinkets and a bell hung tight to their necks. They shook their heads setting off the bells; the crowd excited them, the cows being the only animal considered holy and a messenger of prosperity to communities. Far to her east, the Bay of Bengal lashed half encircling Imedaka and a series of fine dining restaurants; and to her south, the most posh road in all of South India made its private sway over her. The cool morning air was so misty that the flyover crowning the building vanished from view and in its place gathered a snowy-white film of mist across the miles of haze, under the still-dawning sky. Winds had taken leave in that season. In the clamor of the continued Bhajan singing, the sparse traffic could hear the Doppler effect of the music, which under a mild but active and cheerful mist alternated between peaking resounding din and blissful meditative and sonorous clanging.

Blissful! How can one be blissful? Are the musicians of Imedaka full of cheer and bliss?

They were a happy lot but that didn't mean they were simple. It wasn't about simplicity and contentment that led them to that state. Their happiness was wholesome; and during chants, blissful. If not contentment and simplicity, what does one look for? Were their talents being nurtured? Sure, the musicians had no qualms there. All of them traveled to every place on the globe and sang soulful concerts. That cheered them. Prosperity engulfed them. It cheered them. Their faces glowed and eyes shined. Their smile had cheer. But complete happiness is more than cheer. Did they expect to be in power? Did they need to lobby or value for their say in the society? They did not need a representative. They were not ambitious. They did not vie for a seat in the elections. The musical society must have had few rules, I suspect. As they did without ambition, so also they did away with greed—went on with concerts without sponsorships, promotions, gossip and backbiting. Yet they were not simple musicians—not blind believers, irrational or overly sentimental people. They were as logical and balanced as normal people. Happiness is never understood by intellects and scholars. They dismiss it as stupid. Only problems are interesting; only troubles are challenging. Pain and suffering have more depth, they say. Artists resort to melancholy to feel depth. They remain aloof; and in the snobbishness of solitude, they derive their seen-it-all attitude. By appreciating despair, the self-proclaimed superior beings deride happiness; by holding pain, they lose everything. Under the grip of problems, pain and suffering, how can the intelligent mind even comprehend happiness? How can I describe these musicians of Imedaka? They were not innocent or ignorant. Their happiness was not borne out of any of the two. They were a bunch of smart, broad-minded and intense people who never felt miserable about anything. How I wish I knew better ways of describing them! How shall I convince you? In short, if you can imagine a utopian music world, it would be Imedaka. It would be best that way; and best to leave you to that imagination as I cannot answer all the questions. If someone were to ask, what about their levels of technological sophistication? Using devices will sure lead to conflicts. So, were they not using them at all—like the Amish people? Didn't they have needs? Did necessity—the mother of troubles—scare them? Did it not even exist there? What about convenience—less intense than necessity? Didn't they live in comfort? Did they have any luxury at all?—they could probably have had all kinds of devices suiting their needs: dish washers, cars, ipads, luxury phones; but they never flaunted them. The sort-of garish extravaganza prevalent in other parts of the country didn't even attempt setting

foot here. These people had conservative habits and tastes that forbid them to indulge with pomposity. It doesn't really matter as well.

People from all parts of India—Bangalore, Visakhapatnam, Kochi, Trivandrum, Hyderabad, Mysore, Mumbai—all towns west, south and north have been routinely coming for the *Margazhi* festival to Rasmad and particularly Imedaka by trains, buses and own cars. The latest attraction has been the comings and goings of culturally-oversensitive Indians from US, UK, and South East Asia, flooding the Rasmad airport, which is getting redesigned into an ultra-modern one and where you see building materials lying scattered all over the place and laying of extra polished floors that slip during the December season rains. So, you thought the musicians of Imedaka were a happy lot in a spiritual way? You thought they were modern, prosperous and pure? Actually, it is that they are happy in a wholesome way—to put it crudely, and in a materialistic way. Purity, as one would see it, in the mind didn't exist in them. They were disciplined, followed routines, practiced well and kept to rituals. A big Yes to religion, routines, and rituals. And, another big yes to bodily cravings: culinary and copulating arts. With refined taste buds, the musicians and their fans could never have enough of exquisite and classic dishes. A simple *vathakuzhambu* or tamarind based sauce would be equally or more enjoyed as a complicated or rare *akkaravadisal*. Caterers would vie with each other to cook for the hundreds of concert halls that come alive during the season. Newspapers will be full of reviews of catering more than concerts—some of them publishing menu of the day at popular joints beforehand. Caterers would also join the Bhajana groups. Let the cymbals clang above culinary desires and the glory of the gong be heard above bodily passions. Whether these musicians had fear or anxiety, which they had, they had no guilt. Secretive passion flowed not only in the music they made but also in the love they made. Women students may offer themselves to the hungry needs of the male gurus; musicians' musician-wives may change their minds and leave one for the other; male musicians may change wives for girlfriends; and musicians may adhere to sexual discipline at home but wander freely for the rapture of the flesh abroad. Nobody tried to notice or ask questions. Passion was a secret only to be enjoyed and not talked about. Wives, girlfriends, husbands, and boyfriends join the Bhajana groups. A magnanimous victory, a limitless, transcending, and gracious feeling of contentment not targeted towards some common enemy but generally flowing in the community with the classiest and chivalrous spirit of the musicians of

the world and the misty, cool season: that is what made the musicians (male) bare their chest (even in the chilly weather); and they celebrated the triumph of music in their lives. The meditative trances were not because of drugs or booze. These people had no such habits and did not move in such circles to inculcate them. Music was their drug. Music was their booze.

More Bhajana groups started pouring into the Imedaka by now. A wonderful smell of hot *venpongal* attacked the misty air through the backside of the large hall where the caterers had put up their multi-colored tents. Everybody's heads turned that side with expectation as the saying went: *Margazhi thingal Madi neraya Pongal* (month of *Margazhi*; lap full of *pongal*---a popular breakfast dish). Women and children dipped the little plastic spoons into the ghee-dripping *pongal* served in leafy cups attempting to simply eat and not hog (though they would have had a go at it if men weren't around); men simply did away with the cups putting the hot Pongal on their hands and gulped it all in one go, bits of rice sticking on the edge of their lips. A few traditionally attired women brought a bronze plate full of vermillion water and began doing *aarathi* for the lined-up cows; a few cows trying to put out their tongues to lick the *aarathi* water—*pongal* smell having tickled off their taste buds. A little girl standing amidst the thin crowd at the edge breaks out into an *aarathi* song; her eyes closed and rapt in the music. People fall silent and listen to her sweet voice and enjoy the bliss. When she completes and opens her eyes, the *Tavil* player begins his rhythmic drumming and everyone suddenly become attentive. *Nadaswara* players begin their music with its trumpeting and piercing but pleasing sound after blowing it once or twice to tune into the right pitch. The cows wag their tails to ward off flies; some of them lift it to relieve themselves. The crowd begins to walk slowly towards the entrance of the concert hall; leading it is the *Nadaswara* group announcing the beginning of the festival. Yes, the festival of music, the December *Margazhi* season of music has started at Imedaka.

You'd be wondering if such a festival exists. Yes, it does; I can say for sure. Then, you'd wonder if such a happy festival is celebrated by ever-happy musicians. Is it possible for these musicians to be so happy and all the time? You'd ask. Going further, you'd wonder if a community can be so happy or even just one person happy and happy all the time. Sounds impossible, doesn't it. Do you accept the ever-joyous music festival? Not possible, you'd say. In which case, let me unravel something: a secret, a dark secret.

Almost every evening, a cripple would be sent to fetch a little girl of twelve or thirteen who lives in a guarded two-room dirty house in a narrow by-lane near the Imedaka. Wooden bars cross-fixed on the windows of the house make it impossible to open. The old, dilapidated, tiled house is dark except for the gaudy make-up on an old-looking face and flashy saree of a malnourished girl. The house is all of ten by ten, divided into two rooms. When the cripple opens the lock, the grey light blinds the girl's eyes. She doesn't rub her eyes for fear of smudging *kohl* her eyes are lined with. The cripple hands her a packet of *biryani*; and she snatches it, squats in the doorway, grabs a handful and shoves it into her mouth unmindful now of the bright red lipstick. This happens every day---except that the girl cannot make out night from day---everybody's night is her day; and their days, her nights. Her only idea of day light is the streak of dusk light that enters when the door is opened; the first morsel of food going in only in the evening. When she is ready, the cripple locks her in a van and takes her to a bedroom in a mansion where she meets an old man. The men change every day; but they are always old. She is returned to the house in the morning and locked up. Sometimes the girl would scratch herself to sleep in the day; sometimes the scratching would keep her awake.

The musicians know about this. They had seen her. Some had just heard about it; some have inside information; some understand why and some are clueless as to the real reason. But they all know one thing: their prosperity and happiness, their vast musical opportunities, their widely-acknowledged talent, their continuous popularity and lucky growth amidst continuous ridicule from other communities, the broadmindedness of their community, the good health, the maturity of their minds, the healthy and tasty food and good rains—all depend completely on this little girl's wretched ruin.

All musicians who gain their first entry to performing at Imedaka are taken to see the girl. They are given the explanation. Whether they understand or not, they see her; and most of them who see her are youngsters. After the explanation is given, they invariably feel shocked. Some feel pity, some disgust, and some anger. They are seized with the idea of helping her out. But when it is said that the moment the girl is provided a comfortable life, the moment she sees daylight, the moment she gets to spend her nights sleeping, that moment, all the happiness, wealth, and health

of the Imedaka musicians would be destroyed. That is the mandate. Any small change in the girl's life would be at the cost of the happiness of the millions in the community: that would open up the Pandora's Box of guilt.

Don't change the girl's life. Period. The mandate is final. Period. A secret and powerful clique at the Imedaka, much like the influence wielded by the Stonecutter's club over the Queen of England—decided on that fateful day when a much-touted 'spiritual' guru laid the mandate on his death bed. Was it due to the crow sitting on the palm tree that led to fall of the ripe palm fruit or was it a premeditated move—nobody knew; and none were willing to risk the contrary. But when the *devadasi's* daughter was locked up and used to pleasure the men of the clique, or visiting dignitaries, or sometimes, power heads; the glory of the music community began spreading. The daughter was followed by her daughter and so on.

Often the young musicians who witness such misery feel depressed for a while, weeks or months. But then, with the passage of time, they reason out that the girl would best be that way. She was born and had grown into it. A normal life may be abnormal to her now. She may become more miserable if something were changed in her routine. Firstly, how can one make her sleep nights and study or play during the day? It would take months or even years to change the fundamental routine. Whether she liked it or not, she had seen things early in life and moved and talked like a grown woman—a mature face on a child body that was starting to curve on the hips. She may not like to change. She may not enjoy going to school. She may not have the aptitude to study. It would prove very difficult now. They also reason out that they too, like her, are not free. Her state brings out noble feelings in them, spews out feelings of depth in their music, makes their music unparalleled in the whole world. If she were not there, the girl singing *aarathi* song could not sing joyfully, and the music festival would not start on the first cool day of the misty *Margazhi*.

Do you accept that? If so, there is something nobler; much more incredible.

A few youngsters, who had seen her, turn and go away—not necessarily to their homes. Some shock themselves into an angry silence after going home but leave in a day or two. They go out

into the road alone. They continue walking, walking down the *Mada Veethis*, straight to the Imedaka and exit through its large, well-adorned gates. They walk across the busy roads near Imedaka. Each carries their instrument and goes alone; man or woman. They get into their cars. It gets dark. They leave, going through the wide highways between modern glass buildings looking like huge glass bulbs and classy shopping malls into the dark marsh lands. They go south, west, or north but go alone. They go on and on. They leave Imedaka. For music's sake. They go into the night. Whatever they do, wherever they go, one thing is sure: they do not come back. Where they sing or play music may not be as happy as Imedaka, where they settle may not be as prosperous as Imedaka, for all you know, they may just get into the habit of wandering too. But they know that they were going to make music faraway. Far, far, away, and away from Imedaka, they would make music and still worship music and not Imedaka. They knew it.



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Soul of Music

Children start their Carnatic music lessons learning the seven swaras—*sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, da, ni*. Some children would be musical while some would initially be unmusical and constant practice changing them. Sometimes their singing would turn out to be more of recitation than musical singing. No disrespect meant. Even when people recite *shlokas* as a community, they rush through them rather than recite it with rhythm.

I remember *shlokas* being tuned to Carnatic ragas, like the *Soundarya Lahari* or *Abirami Andadi*. The seventy-fifth verse—when the Abirami deity appears to the seer— is set to the Bhairavi raga. Even a lay listener will be roused and feel the presence of the goddess when he listens to it. What a great boon it will be if spirituality gets embedded in young minds through soulful tunes as these, I wondered.

While sorting out ragas and their emotional effects on listeners, I got confused. I needed a solution and so turned back to the Carnatic-tuned *shlokas* I had sung as a kid. But despite singing all the hundred verses again and again, I was not able to pinpoint the effect. It varied according to the mood my mind was in. Was there a one voice to all the tunes, to the ragas, and to the music? In other words, a complete vocal message to the listeners...

In other words, the voice of the Carnatic community...the soul of the music itself...?

An individual voice can easily be understood. A poem has a meaning. Individual expressions—the cuckoo song, the beggar's begging, the bus conductor's whistle, the carving on temple stones, the writing on the palm leaves, singsong yelling of the vegetable vendors, and the sound of music practice too have meaning. Some people can listen meditatively to the lingering sound of gongs played in temples and get into trance. The one voice Carnatic music wants to convey is tightly packed in its kernel—the Carnatic kernel. But can anyone comprehend it? Can anyone know the kernel—the soul of music?

I decided to find out.

I asked my husband first. He wore fine jeans and a casual cotton shirt, and tuft of hair knotted into a punk style swinging back and forth as he shook his head.

“Hubby dear,” I asked in a deferent voice. “What does Carnatic music say? It must mean something, must have a purpose. Does it say something to you? Is there a meaning and if so, how do you interpret it?”

“You mean, the songs in it?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “I believe every type of music has a voice, it is trying to say something beyond the music to the people who can hear it. Does it say something to you?”

“What voice? What saying? All music is the same. They trigger your feelings, be it happiness or sadness,” said hubby in a dismissal and magnanimous tone.

I sighed. Well, he was not a musician. What would he know? He was an ordinary sort of man and had never known music, forget Carnatic music. A common man, who tried to match an extraordinary and gifted musician that I was; so, to put him in place, I said, “There are lakhs of people singing Carnatic music; and more than twenty-five lakhs descend on the city for the music festival in December,” said I in a scholarly tone. About 2500 artists perform in the month long festival in concert halls all around Chennai,” continued I, “It goes well to say that it is a community—the Carnatic community—and has an identity, a homogenous identity that finds a common expression through a common voice. It is a consensus arrived at by crystallizing the meaning based on the purpose of the music that reveals itself as the voice of Carnatic. That voice has a crux—a kernel which you understand and you just know what Carnatic music is, just like that, in a whiff—the Carnatic kernel—the soul of music. Now that I have explained, can you keep that in mind and respond?”

Hubby became guarded. The dismissal look changed into thoughtfulness. He sat himself on the cane chair in the narrow balcony. The dull December morning light illuminated his face as he took a sip of that hot coffee in a large, modern stainless steel cup. But I was stubborn.

“Now is the right time. I need to go to the concerts and find out. What is the soul of Carnatic music? Other music has voices: folk music has various work-related and everyday-related songs and the meaning and direction is quite clear. Jazz stands for improvisation. Rock-n-roll stands for freedom. Pop music stands for tickets. Western classical stands for austerity. Now, Carnatic music —”

Hubby sipped more coffee. Then, he closed his eyes and fell silent.

“Fine,” I said. “I need to then go out and only then can I find out.”

I went to my usual joint—Orepylam Fine Arts with one of the finest caterers in the city.

Backstage waited the famous singer, Chitra Vaidyanathan, who was also a friend.

“Chitra, you’ve been singing for more than twenty years. You also belong to a family of musicians. Music has been there in your family for generations. From the moment you wake up until the time you go to bed, you are soaked into it. You may be singing in your dreams too, I think. Chennai has given you a name and great fame. What do you think of Carnatic music? Do you think the music says something to you? Does it have any-” I asked.

“One minute,” Chitra said. “Let me tune the *Tambura* and let the accompanists tune their instruments too.” She started tuning the already-tuned *Tambura* and signaled to the accompanists to tune their violins and *Mridangams* again. Then, they discussed the concert songs and the main raga she was going to sing.

The previous concert was over and the stage was vacated. Chitra stood up and lifted the *Tambura*. “So, what did you ask?” she said.

I took a deep breath and said, “No problem, I will wait till your concert is over and then explain.”

Her eyes widened with mild fear. Then, she said, “Well, Carnatic music is performing, it is singing and that is music.”

“Well, that is not the point,” I said. “What does it mean?”

She drew blank and then said, “songs, ragas...”

“Well, those are the elements,” I said.

“Ok I understand what you mean. All I can say is it is singing and not thinking.” She said triumphantly.

I made a mental note of it. What she probably meant was Carnatic music, according to her, was an activity—a physical activity—like yoga or exercise, that exhausts the performer and entreats the listener, thereby being part of the everyday cycle of input and output. It was an output or rather an expressive and emotional output—sounded worldly.

I listened to her till the *thaniavarthanam* and left. I took an auto and went to my teacher's house for my music lessons. A teacher imparts knowledge. So I decided to put the question to her. My lesson was for an hour, although the teacher would stop teaching after the fiftieth minute. A few years back, only failed performers would venture into teaching. But now, performers see more money in teaching—especially teaching Indian kids living abroad and earning in dollars—all online through skype. Teachers have never had better time as now. My teacher, who had taught me at a music school, now teaches me privately, charging two hundred rupees per session, that is, one hour. Familiarity had not brought any concession to the rate or closeness in bonding. But, her music was worth its weight in gold and I respected her for that.

After the lesson, when she was restlessly watching the clock, I put the question to her.

“Madam, you’ve been teaching all your life. You are in the sacred profession of educating students in Carnatic music—imparting the knowledge treasure—which otherwise would have been tough for them to know. Many of your students—now disciples—are front line performers. Teaching them advanced lessons of improvisation in ragas that are handed down from great masters to you, is a respected task, a notch above mere singing. I ask you humbly a question on what the soul of the music is.” I said.

The teacher became thoughtful. She said, after a while, “Carnatic music is devotional in nature.”

“The lyrics are devotional but the music has its own unique points—improvisation, ragas, talas...” I explained.

“That’s true.” She said and fell silent.

To clarify, I asked the question in another way, “How do you teach, madam?”

“I sing and they repeat,” she said.

“But, if the ear cannot catch all the subtleties?”

“I sing again and they repeat till they get it right,” she said.

“So you mean repetition is the watchword in teaching.” I responded.

“Yes. That’s the only way and if you cannot catch it even after trying many times, then, you just leave it,” she said.

Probably, like a mantra that gets power by repetition, Carnatic music has the voice and the power of repetition. Singing a song many times embeds it in the mind, to be specific, in the memory. So, it's a memory game, I thought.

“See, I cannot articulate it well. I know a scholar who is just the right person for your questions. In fact, he is the teacher of teachers. He will surely provide the right answer.” She said.

I crossed the road and headed to the auto stand. The driver dropped me off at T Nagar, a very busy marketplace and the centre of all markets in Chennai.

I rang the bell and an attendant opened the door. She ushered me into the living room. The eighty year old man, Mr Ranganathan was very energetic and active for his age. Probably music gave him the zeal to live a full life, I thought.

“Your teacher called me and said you had a question,” he said in a strong and ringing voice. I greeted him and sat on the floor at his feet.

“Sorry, I'm taking your time and just came over without prior appointment,” I said.

“No problem, I'm free. In fact, I'm always free. You can barge in anytime.” He said.

I felt relieved at meeting a man who was easily accessible. Gone are the days when one could just walk into a neighbor's house or a friend's without any prior intimation. After half the Chennaites settled in the US, they taught the rest half all the formal and rule-bound lifestyle of the Americans.

It felt nice to be in the company of the old man, an experienced and wise old man who could shoulder one's spiritual angst—not that I had spiritual doubts here to resolve. But in general, when one meets a wise old man, one feels daughterly or grand-daughterly towards him and that feeling itself rests whatever hidden burden you had been carrying till then.

“Sir, I am trying to find the meaning of Carnatic music. What does it stand for? A detailed and analytical response from various angles of the music will be helpful. You can't say, Carnatic music is the swaras as the North Indian classical music too has the same. The talas or the ragas too are similar although not ditto. The concept of improvisation that sets it apart from other music in the world also cannot make it unique as Jazz has it. Westerners, although we don't like

it, equate our music with Jazz—which is all they can comprehend. So, what makes our music unique? What is that kernel that makes it unique? What is the soul of music?” I said.

“It is a profound question.” He said. Raising his head as if to catch the answer in the air, he closed his eyes and focused.

“Our music comes from the Vedas. It has a historical background and context,” he replied.

That was not what I was looking for. These learned scholars would never talk about the present. They had to connect it to some historical text and make it sound very mystical, holy and reverent. Sensing my immediate displeasure at a long and boring lecture, the clever old man changed his point.

“Carnatic music is like concentrated acid that can be diluted and used for any music, say devotional, light or film music. It is the music of all music; and it is with that mindset that one should approach it.” He said. He was making some sense there.

“Can you explain it further?” I asked.

“You see, raga nuances and tonal modulation while rendering them in various speeds are unique to the music. While the closest that comes to it is the North Indian classical music, it, however, is made up of well-defined speeds in nuances, if any, and more of plain notes and tones. Music by nature is not well-defined and does not have a clear structure say like a square or rectangle that human minds can comprehend. It is the flow of nature, the flow of life with all its intricate patterns and is seemingly complicated but founded on simplicity.” He said.

“Ok, that gives shape to the question,” I said and thanked him for the enlightened response.

What he meant was that the music was complicated and simple at the same time, just like life. Carnatic music reflects life.

I tried to sum up the angles of all the three. The singer said the soul of Carnatic music lay in its everyday activity, my teacher said it was a mantra, the wise man said, it was life. But, the question remained, “What about death? What about negativity, sadness, emptiness or despair? They are also part of life—the worldly life.

I remembered the December month in the West where I had studied for some time. Although there were Christmas celebrations and snow fell, the winter season would be such a desolate one. Nobody liked it. They would rather switch their winter with ours. In the Scandinavian countries, people committed suicide during these times. The eastern part of the globe, particularly India was hot and active. There was no desolation, despair, or loneliness. There was always chatter, cheer and sometimes noise but full of life. But movement and sound is not life. If that were the case, why was death there? If nobody died, would we all be happy? So, death also is part of happiness and part of life, isn't it?

My constantly questioning mind began chattering analytically. At one point, I got sick of analysis. It was leading me nowhere. Wasn't the absence or opposite of movement (gamaka), plainness or emptiness? How does one resolve the opposites? My mind got more confused than when I ventured out to resolve my basic question. I needed some change. I needed to speak to somebody totally different than these practitioners. Who could they be?

After tucking in an evening snack and settling my stomach, my mind too got calmer. Why not try the organizers? They are on the other side of music—the creators of musicians, the patrons and more importantly, realistic people. They wouldn't make idle analysis, I thought.

I went to the city's most prestigious concert hall, the Gayatri Sabha. The secretary was a friend of my hubby's. He sat in the room on the first floor of the building and was on the phone. I sat opposite waiting for him to finish. If he found a few minutes in between calls and I prepared to ask, my question would be unfinished; and he was getting endless calls. At one point, he simply switched off the phone; and I was thankful for that.

“So, what's your question?”

“Well, you've been moving with musicians, decision-makers, and VIPs in the Carnatic community. You've been patronizing music for many decades. Can you tell me what it means to you? Can you tell me what the music means? What is the soul of music?” I asked.

“Well, there is no money in here,” he said impatiently. “It is charity work.”

“Yes, I do understand that. It’s not a practical approach that I am looking for. You are providing a platform for them and not survival, I know that. My question is why do you do it. You could be the secretary of a club. Why music?”

“My father did it. It runs in the family. More than that, at an individual level, I find satisfaction in it. Let the musicians grow well under our protection,” he said patronizingly.

The arrogance was difficult for me to take. So I struck at him, “Well, what about the allegations of biased decisions of offering chances to musicians whom you like? What about charges of swindling whatever little money that comes the hall’s way?” I said with a smiling face.

“Humbug,” he replied. I knew I could not continue sitting there and arguing when I had thrown poisoned darts. So, I hurriedly left. It was worse than asking the practitioners.

I was none the wiser after making all the rounds. It was growing dark. It grew dark fast—as soon as it struck five in the evening. The cool, *Margazhi* month was getting cold at that hour. Traffic was easing down. Normally, the congested roads would get overcrowded in the evening with no space left even for breathing. But, the cool, misty month has a calming effect on the city dwellers. In general, there is less rush, less running, less competitive spirit, less plotting, less violence and lesser stress. Unlike in May when the heat makes the mind go crazy, this month lets in certain pleasantness, sometimes to the point of going dull. When one had had enough of the moderate climate, one would seek energetic living that the changing seasons anyway bring about.

I rushed home and made dinner. We sat eating at the dinner table with the radio on. The All India Radio had music programme broadcasted at night. After dinner, we kept the radio in the balcony and sat on the cane chairs. The *Margazhi* moon shone on my hubby’s calm face.

After the music got over, I remained there and enjoyed the silence. Everyone was asleep by then. I took my hubby’s hands in mine and lay on his arms.

A few minutes passed. Silence continued. I didn’t feel like leaving the place. I didn’t feel sleepy, just silent. An engaging and rich silence. Hubby said with a smile, “Do you know you had not spoken in the last few minutes? And, you look peaceful?” He was not a musician or from a family of musicians.

“That, I realized suddenly, is the soul of Carnatic music. That is the kernel of Carnatic music.

Yes, silence is the soul of music. I looked at my hubby with grateful eyes. “Thanks for letting me deduce it by myself; and thanks for pointing it out.” I gave him a tight hug.



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The Song, Sang

I admit: dull—confused and dull I was and still am; but, that is no reason to say I am lackluster. On the contrary, the ailment has only honed my senses—especially my ears; and made it more sensitive—not blunted it. I could hear the unheard—thoughts in others’ heads—the *Anahata nada*—the uncreated sound—the sound of silence. How, then, can I be branded a, ‘depressed maniac’? Probably because I am a quiet person, not given to expressing my joy overtly, you think I am depressed. Don’t ever underestimate! I am just happy being sad. But watch, how joyfully—how clearly I can relate the story with all its intricate details.

The idea struck me after the singer came into my life; and after the successful cancer treatment. And, when it did, it possessed me every second of my existence. Was there any motive? No. Any other reason? No. I liked her a lot—this new Dopelin Fellow. She never disliked me. A pretty woman, she was always absorbed in her singing, that is, whenever she sang. For her love, I had no wish. There was one thing: carefree youth. I think it was that. Yes, it was that! All the flitting and fluttering resembled that of the duck—flapping wings but flying nowhere. Whenever it winged, my face fell; and so, gradually, the idea to deport her took shape in my head; and that will rid me of that disgusting youth of hers forever.

Now, I know what you are thinking: I am mad—the result of post-traumatic mental stress. Lunatics don’t know anything—but not me. You have not seen the caution, vision, and clarity with which I planned and the care with which I executed! I never displayed more adoration towards the singer than what I did during the whole week before I carried it out. And every evening, after classes, I crept downstairs and walked —so noiselessly—by the side of her closed door. And then, when I got close to it, I stuck my ear close, very close, so that I could hear even a pin drop in the room beyond the heavy iron doors. Oh, if only you saw how cleverly I caught any sound! I listened fast—very, very fast—before anybody could even notice me leaning on the door. It took me two seconds to catch the music—her singing practice inside the room. Now, you tell me, would a lunatic be so fast, so efficient? And, when I caught snatches of her singing swiftly—so swiftly (for I had to filter other noises)—I heard her singing an *alapana*—the introductory improvisation part—unfettered but flimsy. The tradition of improvising with a

fulcrum has gone waste on the youth. And this she did all the four evenings—every evening just after classes. She was there in her room; her young voice was there; and it was impossible to hide it. It was not she who irked me, but her carefree youth. And, every day I praised her singing, offered her a concert in this Apedust College where I was the music professor, and concerts all over the United States using my influence. I also inquired after her health, took care that she got Indian food and spoke gently to her. So, it would only take a very wicked mind to see through all my kind gestures and suspect that I check on her presence in her room every evening; and she is not that type.

On Friday evening, when I strode quietly near the door with my head bent and ready to take in the sounds, it suddenly opened. I was startled and took a step back. She came out, looked surprised, but smiled. “Hey, I just came to check if everything is alright.” I muttered with a sheepish grin.

“Sure, of course,” she said without feeling grateful that I myself had come down all the way to meet her. “I was coming over to meet you too.” She added throwing her hands and tilting her head with a smile. What audacity she had, looking at me as a friend, as her equal!

“Oh.” I reacted.

“This is a CD of my singing. Please listen to it and let me have your critical comments.”

“Sure, no problem; and I can already say that the singing will be very good. After all, who is singing...”

My fawning had its effect. She blushed. I knew she liked it. In fact, all performers like it when a music professor praises them. I observe how they feel superior and generous after an accolade! Phew! These nutty performers...

“So, where are you off to?”

“Hitting the gym.”

“Hmm... interesting. In all these years of my bringing in Carnatic musicians from South India, I have not seen even one of them exercise. But, then they were all old people. And, you are very young—in your twenties, eh?”

She blushed again. “I believe in keeping myself fit.”

“What humility!” I observed; and after a brief pause, said, “Go ahead. Let me not stop you from being healthy.”

She left; and that was my opportunity to strike. There was nobody in the corridor. I heard the click of the lock as I turned the master key (one of the many perks of being the Chair of the music department). Her room was tucked away in a corner closer to the rear entrance. It smelled of stagnant moisture, after all, it was a store room earlier and I gave it to her to use after some cleaning. There were no windows, and so no light or fresh air and better still, nobody snooping around. There was an old sofa on the left side and a computer on the right. There was a lot of junk facing the door; by junk I meant, old papers, music records, files, and the like. A corner of the old sofa near the wall was torn. I took out my gloves—new ones that had no marks of my hand or fingers; wore them; opened my bag, and picked the neatly packaged pouches of heroin. Pressing them into the tear of the sofa, I ensured that nothing was seen by the casual eye. Then, I switched the light off; opened the door cautiously—so cautiously that nobody heard a thing. After satisfying myself of the absence of souls, I quietly closed the door. Breathing a long sigh of relief, I drove home in my car smiling to myself while listening to the song (the *alapana* of which she was practicing the last four days; but not the song I loved) in the CD. She had a silvery voice—clear and light; and came from the heart, my ears sensed. The weekend saw me informing the FBI anonymously on their website about a drug dealer’s presence in the college.

It was snowing on Monday morning when I got the call. On rushing downstairs, I saw her in the midst of the FBI and local policemen. Like all suspects, she was shrieking, “I didn’t do anything!” to the deaf ears of the uniformed personnel. People gathered. Now you may think that I would act shocked and confused—but no. She was innocent of the dreadful deed and so I was acting supportive of her. I sprung to my feet and took the police aside, saying—“It may be a mistake.”

“We found this!” The policeman showed me, then, lifted his arm and showed the pouches to the gathering. She stood still—stone still with her eyes on the floor. No muscle of hers moved, not even her eyeballs. Her eyes were as dry as the Arizona desert.

I let out a groan—a groan that exposed a deep pain in my heart that I never knew of. My heart lightened, I looked at her. Her bent head made me pity her although I sniggered quietly. “Maybe it is not her.” My words rang with mirth. “Investigation comes later. First, the arrest on-spot!” The policeman declared.

“What do you propose to do? I asked.

“Deport her.”

“That is not fair. You can do that only after investigation and legal decision.”

“That is not your problem.”

“Would you do that to an American? It is because she is from another country, right?” I demanded, wanting to seem heroic in front of her.

But, she stood still—not a muscle moved.

They read her charges, handcuffed her and took her away. I screamed at the top of my lungs,

“Don’t worry; I am there. I will do everything in my power to free you!”

She never took her eyes away from the floor. She never moved her face—not even a muscle.

I rushed to my room to celebrate my liberation. For once, I was happy being happy; and I needed to be happy alone—going over the success again and again. You may have mistaken me for a depressed maniac but the fact is, my hyper-hearing sense has moved beyond the obvious—the heard—to the unheard. From afar, my ears picked up the voice, the female voice, the silvery voice; and I knew the *voice*. I heard her heart. I clenched my teeth. She had been gifting out her CD to all and sundry. My heart beat increased and I could hear it in my ears. It grew faster. It grew louder. I thought I will get a heart attack. My heart will burst and the blood will spew all over the place. What if somebody had seen me entering her room? What if they don’t find any direct link of her to the evidence? Should I do anything more to nail the coffin?

I rang the police.

“We sent her back in the first flight. By the way, we will need to interrogate everyone in the department starting with you.”

“Sure. That should not be a problem.”

She was deported. Yes, she was deported. I checked with him again. By now, she was halfway to India. At last, my efforts bore fruit. Her youth will not trouble me.

If you still thought I was a ‘freak’, you will be surprised to know how I safeguarded myself further after the call. The day progressed. I went to her room personally, changed the carpet (in case they looked out for fresh footprints) and cleared all the junk. I didn’t have to wipe anything as I had already ensured no fingerprints.

After classes in the evening, there was a sharp knock on my door. The policeman introduced himself. I had on, a gracious smile—the one that a clergyman wears. I told him how I had heard her singing in India, nominated her for the Fellowship, and brought her here on tenure. I showed him my letters to the College President and the Dopelin committee. I spoke to him as if I was still shocked and pained to hear the unexpected. My acting flowed. There was nothing to stop me. There was no dullness in my speech, no going blank, no feeling of being stuck. There was a clear sequence to my talk—no going back and forth. With confidence, I maintained my appreciation for her music; pausing only to show regret at the person behind the voice.

The policeman listened to my performance. He was in perfect harmony with my emotive symphony. His reactions matched my ebb and flow. At the end, he shook hands with me and empathized, “I feel sorry that you have been wronged.” He said. There would never have been a better audience than this one man, who meandered along with the flow of my speech. His pity-filled eyes gave me the ovation that no Oscar would give. Finally, a saturation I hadn’t ever known all these years enveloped and relieved my mind. In the next instant, I felt generous. “Why don’t I drop you?” I asked. He agreed.

He sat in the front with me. Making some small talk on the weather, I turned the ignition on. Simultaneously, her CD started playing: a beautiful stroke of an *alapana* in the raga I loved came forth in her silvery voice. The raga soothed and clutched at my heart. I looked helplessly at the policeman. It was melting my stony veneer. My face went pale, but my talk was clear. My voice started choking. This *alapana* went on slowly adding depth at every note. I breathed in quick successions, but the policeman didn’t hear it. I started speaking louder to drown the soft singing. But, it tugged at my heart in a way that only the soundless will do. My driving went jerky. I was getting reckless. But, the voice increased its smooth yet strong grasp at my heart. Still, the policeman chatted away, smiling now and then. Didn’t he hear the music? Didn’t he know this raga? He came—he saw—he knew; but he was deriding me. He knew I was a boring old man gifted with a cancerous prostate. He scorned at my loneliness and my depression. The *alapana* ended. And, she sang, “*Chalamela raa; Saketharama!*” (Lord Rama! Come out from below the

river!)—my most loved song, unexpectedly. My stony heart melted into water. The voice took complete control of my heart. I had to scream or I would die! It was now or never!

“Stop it!” I shrieked, “It was me! Here! I have the rest of the heroin pouches! Not her! Not this croaking voice! It is this gruesome song!”



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Golden Murmur

There was a teacher, who sang well, started her career as a singer, yet had no opportunities. She married into a musical family, and singing changed to teaching. She had talented children, yet she felt burdened with them, and she could not feel proud. They sang carelessly, as if her singing was inadequate. And immediately she felt she had to show off her talent. Yet what it was that she must express, she never knew. Nevertheless, when the children sang, her eyes turned green and her face, stony. This upset her, and she would feel more appreciative and encouraging towards them, as if she acknowledged their talents. Only she was the one who knew that at the center of her music was a place that nobody could touch—her heart—a lonely and selfish heart that didn't feel love for anyone—not even her children. Everyone said, “See, how she cares for her kids, teaching them music.” Only she knew how she taught—and her children also knew. They could listen to it in her voice, when she sang.

They were a boy and a girl—the boy in his teens and the girl, younger by a few years. They lived in a spacious apartment with balconies, and they had machines doing all the household chores in place of servants and kept a snobbish distance from the neighbours. Although they lived like celebrities, there was an ever-nagging worry in them. There were never enough concerts—never enough opportunities to perform, and definitely never any to even prove performing capabilities. The mother—the music teacher—taught a few students, and the father—a shipping clerk and singer—had no contacts either with organizers or other musicians, and definitely no time to build them. The mother went to local Bhajana gatherings during weekends. But, though she sang well, and everybody praised her singing and said that she had great future, the future never materialized. There was a constant yearning for chances to sing, to perform, and to gain fame alternating with a nagging sense of its shortage, though an air of high-nosed, celebrity-like manner and living was always kept up.

Despite that, the mother with a great belief in herself went saying, “I'll work at it till my last breath.” She started at local temples and *sabhas*, but didn't know how to approach. She tried requesting, putting in a word, personally handing over her bio-data to the temple offices or the *sabha* offices, meeting bloated secretaries pleased with themselves than any musician,

reminding, and more reminding until it was getting more unsuccessful by the day. Her sinking, deep-set eyes told stories of failure. She was ageing—her voice was losing strength. She must get famous, she must get famous, and soon. The handsome father, who always wore gold-bordered *veshti* like famous musicians, looked like he would never have any *ability* to do anything worthwhile. The mother, who thought too high of herself, too didn't do anything better, despite all her efforts.

And so, the stuffed air in the music room murmured an unspoken feeling: I want fame! I want fame! The children heard the murmur all the time, but they didn't talk about it. They heard it in her sigh when she taught other students; they heard it when she scolded them; they heard it when she cleaned the *Tambura* of dust before a rare concert. Behind the old srutibox, behind the silk-saree cupboard, the air hummed: I want fame! I want fame! And the children would rush out of the music room to the balcony, scared and stunned. The boy will look into the girl's eyes to see if she too heard it. And then, they knew that both of them did. I want fame! I want fame!

The wooden pegs on which the *Tambura* strings were tied, murmured; the Tyagaraja idol sitting on the wooden cupboard heard it, and it closed its eyes harder to sing harder. The image of Saraswati that was painted on a calendar, too, the smiling Saraswati looked nonchalant hearing the murmur all over the music room: I want fame!

No one spoke about it, though. The mother worried and worked harder, the father never bothered; the children just heard and absorbed it—the murmuring air spread out into the whole house. But nobody talked about it. It was there everywhere.

One day, the teenage boy, Ramkumar said, “Amma, why don't you sing a concert alone? Why do you always have to team up with aunt?”

“I get to sing concerts only with her,” said the mother.

“But why, Amma?”

“That's because your father has no contacts who can give me chances to sing or the time to build them,” she said bitterly. “Whereas your aunt, a violinist, has played for so many singers and she

can whip up contacts and even recommend singers like a magician brings rabbits out of empty hats.”

There was a pause.

“Is chance, fame?” he asked with the confused mind of a teenager.

“No Ram, not at all. But it gives you fame,” she said.

“Oh!” Ramkumar felt vague. He said, “Then, what’s a chance, Amma?”

“Chance for concert gives you fame. It is an opportunity. If you have chance, you get to sing more; you become known, and then, one day, famous. It’s better to have chances than fame. If you are born into a well-known family or marry into one, it is possible that you can still lose reputation. Having chances means being lucky; it’s better to get chances to sing and prove yourself than be famous automatically.”

“Father doesn’t get any chances to sing?” He asked.

“No. And, to hide it, he acts as if he doesn’t have the time to pursue,” she said and shrugged her shoulders.

“But, why does Appa not get any chances to sing?” he asked.

The mother sighed. “I am as clueless as you are,” she said ultimately.

“Doesn’t grandma know? Doesn’t grandpa know?”

“Nobody knows why somebody is blessed with concerts and somebody isn’t. And, the worst part is that nobody knows why somebody tries all their might and still doesn’t get successful.” She sighed again.

“But, Amma, you sing in places nearby,” he asked.

“Yeah, I manage something. But, before marriage, I used to sing in prestigious halls. I won the *Tambura* prize at Music Academy and sang a concert during the season too.”

“Then, you will definitely get chances,” he said.

“No, I’ve married your father, an unlucky person. I have to share his fate. That’s how it is also happening.” She said.

“But, by yourself you managed to sing in the Music Academy, and now sing in a few places at least, unlike Appa; so you must be lucky,” he said.

“I don’t know—can’t really say.” Ramkumar looked at her. She was feeling unsure and vague.

“Anyway,” he said, “I’ll get lots of chances to sing and become famous; I’ll be called a teenage prodigy.”

The mother laughed suddenly. “How do you say that,” she asked.

“My inner voice told me,” he said, suddenly speaking like an oracle.

“I wish!” She said and sighed more deeply.

“Of course, I will,” he asserted.

“Whatever,” she said, now regaining her senses.

Ramkumar didn't like his mother's reaction. He wished she had supported his strong feelings. Worse, she was not curious or did not engage with him in an encouraging way—she didn't even bother to pay any attention to him. He suppressed his rising anger and vowed to do something to induce her attention.

He left with a confused gait—vague first, and then absorbed—seeking inner answers to his curiosity. He sat in the corner of the music room and imagined himself singing concerts. He prayed to the Goddess and sat in silence meditating. When everyone slept at 4 a.m., he would get up and sit in silence in the music room meditating on music, concerts and chances. He wanted chances. He had to pioneer change in this luckless family. The only way to go on a quest, according to the little boy, was to make the winning quest to his inner space. He had learnt some meditation and Yoga in school. Now, was the right time to put it to use. He meditated hard. He closed his eyes hard and focused on his chest. He forced his eyebrows to narrow and imagined focusing. He kept his hands apart; each one on one knee. He went into frenzy and his eyes were glazed when he was done. Then, he went into staring fixedly at the image of the Goddess and the idol of Tyagaraja. His sister was afraid to greet him the routine good morning.

“Goddess, Oh! Goddess!” he ordered, “Give me contacts so that I can land concert chances.” Then, he would fold his hands and pray. He would plant a dot of Kumkum on his forehead, his aunt had given—the *prasadam* from a rare Saraswati temple. He knew he would get to sing more, if he prayed harder. He would shut his eyes tightly and pray, hoping to be famous. He knew he'd be famous.

“Don't keep praying so much. You'll have to complement it by studying too,” his father would say.

“He's always praying in the morning,” his sister would add.

But he just turned a deaf ear to them all. Anyway, his father was always in his own world like a narcissist; and his sister was too little for him to care. He stared her down with his big eyes and she would scuttle away like a rabbit.

After the long praying, he would practice singing—for an hour on weekdays and hours together on weekends.

One Sunday, his aunt and mother came into the music room, when he was furiously practicing. He closed his eyes as soon as he saw them, but continued singing.

“Practicing so devotedly, Ramkumar?” said his aunt.

“Don’t you have any homework to do? Why are you singing day in and day out, like some possessed singer?” His mother said irritated.

But Ramkumar continued singing. He shut his eyes harder and pretended not to have heard them. He raised his voice further and sang full-throated. The mother stared at him for a while; and let out a helpless groan.

After what seemed an eternity, he stopped and prostrated at the Goddess’ image.

“I feel so fresh and ready for another round of practice,” he said.

The mother looked at the aunt, who simply said, “Good, practice well and become an expert.”

“By the way, did the Goddess bless you?” she continued.

“Of course. She always blesses me whenever I pray to her.”

“Sure, she does,” the aunt said, sarcasm brimming in her voice, “So, whatever do you pray for?”

“The last time I prayed, she gave me a contact,” he said.

“Eh, who?”

“He talks about such things like as if he’s always got them forever,” the mother said.

Aunt Mala was pleased to discover her nephew getting familiar with the Carnatic music circle. Venkatesh—his classmate, who takes help from him for his maths—his father, was a senior executive in a bank that sponsored lots of music concerts. Venkatesh’s father would casually discuss with him, the names of concert halls and secretaries who come begging to him for money every year or every festive season for concerts. Ramkumar did Venkatesh’s homework and in return, received names and their contacts.

“Can you take me to this friend of yours—Venkatesh?” asked his aunt. Her eyes went bright and had a hint of greed.

“Sure,” he said.

“Ramkumar asked me for it,” Venkatesh said.

“Has he talked to any secretary about any concert for him?” asked the aunt.

“I really don’t know. Why don’t you ask him yourself?” He said, “Besides, he does my homework,” lowering his voice, “I cannot really give him away.”

Try as she might, Venkatesh wouldn’t say—an ideal banker’s son who wouldn’t part with money or information, thought Aunt Mala. So, she went back to her nephew and took him to her house for lunch.

And, after serving his favorite sweet, she asked him, “Ramkumar, did you contact any secretary for a chance?”

“Do you think I should not?” He asked.

“Not at all. I was just wondering if you could recommend my name for a concert too.”

Ramkumar was thoughtful. He ate the sweet, relishing every bit of it.

“I will. But, you have to recommend me too when you get a chance through your contacts,” he said.

“OK”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Well, then, the secretary of Hyagreeva Gana Sabha—Santhanam Sir.”

“Hyagreeva Gana Sabha? It’s too local a *sabha*, I’m not sure I want to be part of it. What about the ones in the city?”

“I don’t know them. I only know it’s a great place.”

“Santhanam, eh?”

Aunt Mala was thinking. Hyagreeva Gana Sabha was an unknown *sabha*.”

“Aunt!”

“What, dear?”

“Hope you will not spread it around, will you? I promised Venkatesh.”

“What, Venkatesh? How does it involve him?”

“We’re partners—in a sense. Mala Aunty, he made his father give me a chance to sing in the Ramanavami Bhajana, where well-known musicians participate. It was my first chance. But nothing came of it. From then on, we have been partners. I had promised him that I would not tell anyone about his father and their contacts. But, when you recommended my name for that Navarathri concert and accompanied me on the violin like you do with Amma, this secretary—Santhanam sir came congratulating me and offered a chance with his *sabha*. Venkatesh was reluctant at first thinking like you. But I said the chance is a good bet. Please, aunt, don’t tell anyone.”

Aunt Mala hesitated and stirred uncomfortably when Ramkumar looked at her with his big eyes pleading. Her sister—Ramkumar’s mother—had the same eyes and the pleading disarmed her always.

“Ok. Ramkumar. I’ll not discuss this with anyone. So, what is the main raga you’ve planned for the concert?”

“*KharaharaPriya*”

“Not a difficult-to-sing raga like *Bharavi*?” Aunt Mala joked.

“No, that’s for important concerts,” said the boy seriously. “But, please don’t tell anyone. Promise?”

Aunt Mala laughed. “Don’t worry about that, but, can you sing an elaborate *KharaharaPriya*?”

“Amma has taught me well. I have your recording too. Moreover, I practice with Venkatesh almost every day.”

“Does Venkatesh sing? That’s news to me.”

“Yes, he does.”

“Then, why is he sharing his contacts and chances with you?”

“Well, he doesn’t belong to a family of musicians; and therefore, no tradition. Amma and you have a strong musical lineage and hence, an established style of singing. He feels confident singing only with me.”

“Hmm... he has the chances and you have the talent—great combination,” she said positively. Ruminating on the younger generation’s abilities to cooperate and complement with an intelligence she had found so late herself, the aunt was silent. What will the little boy’s age be?

Seventeen? Eighteen? And they already inculcate the potential to succeed—a thing that had taken her thirty years or so to understand and still, not perfected well. She didn't speak but made up her mind to attend this concert of her nephew's.

"I'll probably recommend your name to the secretary of Vamana Gana Sabha, Mr. Subramanian, a close friend of mine. It's one of the best known *sabhas* in Chennai suburbs. They have a slot for youth singers. You two will fit in well." She said.

"No, thanks, aunt. I'm happy with Santhanam Sir."

"Fine, whatever suits you. I'll try to attend your concert." She said.

"Please do, aunt."

Ramkumar had never sung a complete concert before. He wore a silk *veshti* and *jibba* with gold borders. His spirits were soaring when he began the main song of the concert. Venkatesh understated in everything, including clothes, was supporting Ramkumar. And together, the pair gave a great concert that left the sparse audience there, spellbound.

After the concert got over, a tall man of about sixty with grey hair came towards Ramkumar. He praised him and said that he already had the music in him and if he made the right moves, he'd be a rising star early at that age itself. Ramkumar's aunt, who was packing his srutibox into a bag looked around and stood stunned. But, within seconds, she got herself together and greeted the old man. He was none other than the ex-director of a renowned TV station; who had a major say in arranging concerts in top *sabhas* in Chennai; who had nurtured top talents; and who still takes pride in spotting right talents. For starters, he offered Ramkumar, right then, a chance to sing at Rama Gana Sabha during Deepavali festival. Aunt Mala stood gaping at him and at Ramkumar. After he left, she asked, "Well, have you spoken to your accompaniments already about this concert?"

"I'll tell Venkatesh. He takes care of everything," said the boy. "I have six concerts for the music season this December; and one in January; and this one in November."

"Are you serious, son?" She said, taken aback.

"Yes, but, please don't tell anyone—especially Amma."

"Your mother doesn't know?"

"No."

“But, I need to talk to Venkatesh’s father,” she said.

“His father has gone on work assignment abroad.”

“When will he be back?”

“About two months.”

“Well, in that case, I need to talk to Venkatesh,” she said.

“We can all together form a group, if you like, aunt,” he said. “But, you should not let anyone else into this. It’s only after singing that Navarathri concert with you on the violin, when Amma was ill and I replaced her, that chances started to come...”

Aunt Mala brought both Ramkumar and Venkatesh to her house the next day for lunch. There, they talked.

“When I first complained to Ramkumar that a certain Taval player, also a secretary to a *sabha* (that didn’t actually take off), ingratiated himself to my dad and kept pushing him for a sponsor, he got interested and had me talking about all the secretaries who come during the season time for a bit here and a bit there. That was when the idea of us both teaming up and singing occurred first; we sang in some local gatherings but didn’t get further chances. Only after that Navrathri concert with you, where Santhanam sir offered this chance, that things started looking up.”

“We sing well when we’re sure of the next chance. Otherwise we don’t.”

“Oh but we still sing ok,” Venkatesh added immediately.

“But how do you know of the next chance for sure?” Aunt Mala asked.

“It’s in Ramkumar’s hands,” Venkatesh said. “I’ve noticed us getting chances after singing good concerts. He gets his charming, honeyed voice and a smooth flow in improvisation.” Venkatesh’s voice felt reverent. “Like the next concert; or like the concerts in December season,” he said.

“Does your voice also have that glazed effect?” Aunt Mala asked Venkatesh.

“Well, sometimes.”

“So, you have these six concerts just like that?” she asked.

“And one in Tiruvaiyaru, a day before the Aradhana—the sought-after day by top musicians.”

“That’s interesting.”

“If all goes well, we may even be invited to the Pepperland music festival in summer,” the boy said.

“Awesome!”

“So, do you want to be part of us?” asked Venkatesh.

“Well, let me first see the *sabhas*’ concert brochures with your names,” she said.

Aunt Mala drove to Venkatesh’s house taking along both her nephew and his friend. Once there, Venkatesh went to his room and fetched the *sabha* pamphlets—six of them. Highlighted in the second and third pages, there were names of them both as vocals and their violin and *mridangam* accompaniments.

“So, you see the names now? Are you sure about what we were talking?” Ramkumar asked his aunt.

“Hmm.”

“But all these chances happen only when I have an intense brainwave. And then, we go all out. Isn’t it, Venkatesh?”

“Yes, we do.”

Aunt Mala laughed. “And, when do you get this brainwave?” she asked petting his cheeks affectionately.

“Not all the time. Sometimes, I get it intensely; sometimes it comes and goes and I feel uncertain; and sometimes there is just a hint. Only when I have an intense one pursuing me doggedly, do we do it.” He replied.

“Oh and when do you get this intense brainwave?”

“I cannot really say. I just get it and I know when I get it.” He said.

“It’s like fame comes to him naturally...” Venkatesh added in a reverently secretive tone. “Hmm” Aunt Mala shrugged.

She didn’t know what to say nonetheless she decided to be part of them. When the Gayana Sabha chance came, Ramkumar got his intense brainwave, although it was again a *sabha* that was unheard of. He decided on singing *Kambhoji* as the main raga elaborating on the upper registers at length and mesmerizing the audience thoroughly. Venkatesh supported him well, and needless to say, Aunt Mala also matched him well. The All India Radio director who was present there bestowed upon him a top grade without any audition and repeated up-gradations.

“See, that was the result of the brainwave,” he said.

Even Aunt Mala got a chance to play for a top artist scheduled to sing at the radio during the next week. She was excited but also felt scared. “This feels too good to be true and it also makes me nervous,” she told Ramkumar.

“Don’t worry, aunt. I don’t always get such brainwaves. Be assured of that and grab your chances with both hands.” He smiled.

“Fine, so what do you plan to sing for your first radio concert?” she asked.

“Bhairavi.”

“Your mother will be very happy listening to it,” she said.

“Oh, no. She must not know. In fact I give Venkatesh’s address for the *sabhas* and plan to give the same for the radio letters too.”

“Why? She would be the happiest to listen to you sing in the radio—a dream she could never conquer.”

“She must not know.”

“Do you think she will get jealous?”

“No, nothing of that sort. On the contrary, I am only trying to get the contacts together so that I can recommend chances for her. In fact, I started everything only for her. She told me she never got chances to prove her worth or father’s. I thought if I got chances, the music room would bloom again and the dank air would stop murmuring.”

“What murmur?”

“The dark music room—the dusty *Tambura*—the *srutiboxes*, all of them murmuring that they never get to be played, that they don’t get their chances,” he said.

“Hmm. I know that feeling.” She said.

“Amma’s face is hung; Appa’s too; the house is gloomy—it’s always sad. So, I thought, if I got the chances and then, the contacts...”

“Music will bloom in your house,” she replied.

Ramkumar watched her with his big eyes. She noticed an uncanny spark in them. His firm lips didn’t utter another word.

“Then, how are we going to go about it?” She asked.

“Amma must not know nor Appa. She’ll only get scared. She’ll never understand and only stop my meditation and practicing.”

“Hmm. Ok, fine then. We’ll work our way around so that she doesn’t notice or get to know anything.” Aunt Mala said.

It was the month of May—a scorching hot Chennai summer when there is no soul on the streets. But, that was the month musicians would be busy—not singing or performing concerts—but applying to various *sabhas* and meeting their contacts to get chances to sing during the December music season. Aunt Mala, Ramkumar and Venkatesh did it too. They did it for themselves and for Ramkumar’s mother. Wherever the trio performed, they’d recommend Amma’s name. Ramkumar got her to record her singing on a CD. He passed it on to all his contacts and followed it up with phone calls. He even got her a smooth entry into the radio concerts. “So she’ll get chances to sing in the leaner summer months,” Aunt Mala remarked.

Ramkumar’s mother had about seven concerts coming in December. She had no idea. The pamphlets would start pouring in by late October. It would give her sufficient time to practice too. But, till then, the music room went on murmuring. All this, despite Ramkumar’s chances and concerts. But, he was all excited to watch his mother’s reactions when she would see her name in those *sabhas’* concert schedules in December.

Meanwhile, his mother was now going to students’ houses to teach. She had lately discovered that the children of Indians who lived abroad and who came ‘home’ on vacations were intent on learning music more than the ones who lived here. They’d camp in some relatives’ house (though they could well afford hotels or rented houses on their own) and demand music teachers to go over and teach them. That they paid well was the only incentive for the teachers to scramble after them. They would teach at least five children every day, not to mention the countless they teach through Skype. Ramkumar’s mother, however, could teach only two of them and didn’t make much. She would have loved to know how others got them but between her talent and energy, she couldn’t manage even the two. She didn’t succeed even in cornering well-paying students and getting chances to teach.

On the last day of October, Ramkumar brought in a few papers looking more like notices than respectable *sabha* schedule pamphlets. They were of different hues—light-colored ones in blue,

green, yellow and so on. “I found these inserted in the front grill,” he said. His mother snatched it from his hands and read them with disdain. As she went through the schedules, her face relaxed. Seeing her name, there was a glint of joy in her eyes. But, as sudden as the expressions were, so sudden they also went cold. Nonetheless a sigh escaped her. She looked at each one of them and bunched them carefully without saying a word and got up.

“Amma, anything interesting?” He asked.

“I need to read it in detail,” she said with a distant and vague voice.

She went to the music room and started practicing. Aunt Mala appeared in the evening. She told Ramkumar that Amma was ‘just about ok’ with the concerts but felt that she could have had the prestigious Music Academy chance for the December. After all, she had been singing for almost thirty years and had her debut concert at the academy. But, things have changed now. And, she acknowledges that. So, she thought she could get the golden chance to sing at the second-best Pepperland Sabha in US in April. She is planning to sing her best songs to impress at these concerts so that she will bag the chance.

“What shall I do?” Ramkumar asked.

“Well, you decide.” Aunt Mala said.

“I’ll try for the golden Pepperland chance for her, then,” he said.

“It’s not going to be easy,” she said.

“I’m sure to get at least one big chance, if not a few more.” He said.

Aunt Mala agreed. Ramkumar’s mother sung the concerts in December. All the time, there was a lot of excitement around the house. His mother called up all her students and made them attend her concerts. Accompanists came and practiced with her and also praised her singing. But, something else was also happening alongside. It didn’t go without notice. Suddenly, the murmuring music room went into a maddening and wild ruckus, like the finale of a *Taniavartanam*. Of course, her students’ parents came congratulating; neighbors started behaving respectfully; and she surprised her son by praising his talents. There was music in the house day in and day out. And yet, the wild air in the house, from behind the idols, from behind the music books, from behind the *Tambura* and silk sarees simply grew louder and louder in a climatic chorus: *I want more fame! Oh, I want more fame! Now—more than ever! More than all these days!*

Ramkumar felt increasingly scared. He spent a lot of time intensely praying and meditating—more than ever. Of his six December concerts, two had come and gone; and there was no indication of chances. It was not working even for the next two concerts. Agony seized him. His wide eyes were getting wilder. “Don’t worry so much; just relax,” aunt Mala said. But Ramkumar wouldn’t listen.

“But the secretary of Pepperland Sabha has to attend some concert of mine,” he said, his eyes blazing with fire.

His mother, noticing his looking distraught said, “Why don’t you go to your grandmother’s house in the quiet suburbs and relax? Your exams are over and the fresh air will clear your mind.”

“Amma, I cannot go before my singing session at the January Tiruvaiyaru Tyagaraja Aradhana.” He said.

“Why? Are you singing there this time too?” His mother asked knowing that he sang only at that holy place every year. Of the other concerts, she was oblivious. “Even then, you can go there from your grandmother’s place, can’t you?”

“You seem to be getting too tensed here with all these concerts of mine,” she continued wondering if her son suddenly felt jealous of her concerts.

“I am not going, Amma, at least till the January session. Please don’t send me away,” he pleaded.

“What is this sudden love you seem to be having for this house?”

He simply gazed at her. There was a secret which Aunt Mala didn’t know nor Venkatesh. He loved his mother a lot. She stood there hesitating and finally said, “Fine, don’t go. But don’t get so nervous about singing, music or fame. Promise me.”

“Don’t worry Amma,” he said casually, “I won’t get anxious and tensed.”

“Please don’t get nervous, it’s not worth it,” she repeated, weary after all the argument.

“I’ll not, Amma. You don’t worry.” He insisted.

Ramkumar’s secret was the idol of Goddess Saraswati—the Goddess of music and learning—the intense meditation and prayer he does on her that strikes a chord in him before a concert, gets him into an elated state of mind, gives him high energy, makes him sing a powerfully

mesmerizing concert, and appoints an influential patron who paves way to a higher step. Of late, he had removed the idol to be kept in his room and bought a new one to replace it in the music room.

“Why don’t you keep the new idol in your room?” asked his mother. “The paint is new and it’ll have a longer life.”

“No, Amma. I’m contented with the old one. I feel holy about it.”

“Very well. If you are ok with it, I have no problem,” she said in a carefree tone.

So, the old idol rested on a wooden arched plank standing in the corner of two adjacent walls. He had placed an old newspaper sheet to fit on the plank and cover it so that the Goddess doesn’t touch the wood directly and thus, is shown respect by him. Every Friday, he would buy jasmine flowers and garland the idol.

After his last December concert was over, Ramkumar got anxious. He grew tense by the day. The Tyagaraja Aradhana day was drawing near, and panic attacks were seizing him. He was in a world of his own and got thinner by the day and eyes striking out wilder. His mother felt uneasy and watched helplessly when pangs of anxiety seized him at intense moments of praying and practicing.

Two days before he left for the Tiruvaiyaru town, Ramkumar’s mother was singing a concert. A lullaby song that she sang towards the end of her concert brought tears into her own eyes and rushes of anxiety about her boy filled her mind. She tried to ward off the feeling but try with all her might; she could not fight any longer. The feeling was simply too strong. She could hardly sing any song after that. She finished the concert with a *mangalam* and switched on her mobile. Ringing up the house, she asked her husband how Ramkumar was.

“No problem. He has gone to bed and is sleeping in his room,” he said. “Do you want to speak to him?” he asked.

“No, please don’t disturb him,” she said.

Aunt Mala who had played violin for her dropped her off. She went to the music room and placed the *Tambura* back in its stand with reverence. Then, she slipped off the silk saree and wore an old cotton saree.

The strange anxiety tugged at her heart. She went to Ramkumar's room noiselessly. Was there a low hum? Was it? She stood outside his room, her muscles tighter than ever, hesitating. Should she knock? There came a low hum, strange, quiet yet powerful—the repetitive OM chant. It seemed like the room was filled with the force of a whole universe. It went on and on.

Consumed with fear and confusion, she opened the door. A sudden gush of incense stick smoke hit her nose. The room was dark but she heard his voice chant in a base voice. She stood transfixed. Then suddenly, she pressed the light switch. Ramkumar sat frozen in the corner. The tube light lit up the room and his eyes opened up fiercely.

“What happened?” She asked in a shocked tone.

“It's Narayanasamy.” He screamed.

His wild eyes fixed upon her in fury and he shouted again, “It's Narayanasamy,” and fell into a faint. Her motherly instinct triggered her to rush forward to hold him. But he fell unconscious and remained for a while. After she sprinkled some water, he tossed and repeated, “It's Narayanasamy; it's Narayanasamy,” and cried.

“What's this Narayanasamy?” She asked Aunt Mala.

“Narayanasamy is the secretary of Pepperland Sabha.” Aunt Mala answered.

The following morning, Ramkumar urged his mother to go to Tiruvaiyaru and sing in his place. She left reluctantly. After she returned, she found him ill. For three days, he had been ill. His throat pained. All the wild practicing, praying, meditating and chanting took its toll. It continued. His mother waited for a change. He was tossing on the bed and couldn't sleep. He kept repeating the chant and moving his head. His mother sat next to him worried.

The next day, Venkatesh came to the house and pleaded with his mother to meet Ramkumar. She was angry that he was being disturbed nevertheless, let him in. Perhaps Venkatesh may bring some cheer to her boy.

Venkatesh went into Ramkumar's room and tossed a visiting card on his bed.

“Hey Ramkumar!” He said, “Guess what? Narayanasamy's visiting card and personal mobile number! He has booked a concert for your mother. She got a chance to sing at the Pepperland Sabha. This April, she will be packing off to US.”

“Narayanasamy, Narayanasamy, did you say? Amma, do you think I am blessed? Do you think I am lucky? Do you think I got chances and contacts? I call it blessed, don’t you, Amma? I knew it. You have got that golden chance to sing at Pepperland.” Ramkumar was in ecstasy. But, his voice had suddenly turned husky.

He continued. “Did I tell you I got all those chances for you, Amma? And, now you sang at Tiruvaiyaru and Narayanasamy was there. Venkatesh talked to him immediately and booked a slot for you at Pepperland Sabha, US. Am I not lucky?” His voice fell into a whisper.

“Why dear, you never told me.” She said.

Ramkumar got back his health but spoke only in whispers. Aunt Mala told his mother, “Sudha, your music chances are growing and you have even bagged the prestigious Music Academy chance; but your son lost his voice and a musical career that would otherwise have been blazing.



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Unexpected Reprisal

Meenu lived with her mother in the town where she and the music professor, Krishnan met during the girl-seeing ceremony. It was a tiny, dim-lit house that seemed to Krishnan both crowded and neat with little moving space among overflowing but well-arranged furniture and pictures of gods and goddesses covering every inch of the walls. Her mother was a road-side hotelier's widow—a demure woman with an unadorned forehead and a feebly husky tone. Meenu worked in a bank, had many friends and collected and stacked interesting artifacts at home, but never cooked, and her mother's constant culinary activity was probably the reason. Not that she bothered. Making fun of cooking was a routine, so also with housekeeping—though she liked to read “The Hindu” aloud in English, and also “Reader's Digest” at the top of her voice as she turned a corner eye and a stifled giggle on the uneasy neighbor on a recipe-collecting errand. Engineers were in queue—the marriage broker said—and so were three or four doctors. She rejected them all. It surprised everyone especially the broker when she blushed at English professor Krishnan on the cool breezy day of the *Margazhi* month of December. Aromas of coffee and snacks filled the room and laughter resounded like the tinkle of anklets. “Is the coffee—Meenu said. “Is the coffee sweet enough?” He smiled a yes. In a moment, he felt seized with her. Her voice lingered in his heart like the ring of a strummed *Tambura*. He never wanted to leave her. She was the breath of his flute.

Forty-five years had strolled on. The evening before they left, Meenu ordered rice and vegetables for the whole week from the nearby supermarket. “You have ordered the same thing again,” the delivery boy said in a tone of surprise and curiosity, handing over the provisions that looked exactly like the big bag delivered earlier in the day.

“I will never have to order again,” she said after the boy left. “I guess I can eat home-made food made by experienced cooks,” she said, “or dish up some easy-to-make food too. It'll be like in a serviced apartment.”

She took out the provisions from the bag she'd been holding and poured the rice into the steel drum. Then she stacked the vegetables in the fridge again, pulled out the end of her *sari* she'd tucked in her hip and arranged the *mundanai*. She was a dark and slim-hipped woman, sixty-five years old but worn-out and tired, with fine legs, strong arms and feet, but large, elephant-like

ears. Her voice that was as sweet as a Cuckoo had gone from silvery to husky without Krishnan noticing when, and she spoke in a feeble way, as her mother had done. (It had alarmed Krishnan's mother who was a voice teacher. The feeble and husky voice more than the tiny crowded house had told her everything about strength and health. But otherwise Meenu, with her strong, shapely figure and large, fish-like eyes was nothing like her mother. She had a curved forehead, which she hid by combing some of her hair in front on it—usually after tying her hair into a traditional bun. She simply loved her long hair and would happily wash and dry it every week without feeling the pinch.

She was the same on this day too—gregarious and uncertain as she was, sweet and feeble.

It seemed to Krishnan that the last time Meenu cooked dinner was ages ago. Not that there was anything new about it. Meenu had always wanted to skip cooking surviving solely on light meals and diet plans. Krishnan and the daughter, Hasini had got used to it. With her cooking schedule, it was not uncommon for them to go out for dinner at least twice a week.

The new dinner schedule was different. Ordering dinner—mess, pizza shops, and hotels. And, when the delivery boy comes, it would all either be excitement with eyes popping out or agitation at ignorable, miniscule details. But, brunches or lunches would be quiet and cooked happily by her—with the cook putting in most of the effort.

It was getting worse by the day—her memory. The evening before, she went to a shop to buy jasmine flowers but instead bought bananas. She insisted she went to buy bananas and looked scared pointing at her shadow that grew longer all the way to the shop and back. She went to the railway station to take the evening train to her daughter's house in Bangalore but returned home by dinner time. She said that she got irritated with a co-passenger.

It was confusing. She'd talk to her friends about the mix-up and laugh at herself. "Don't worry," she said to Krishnan, "I just get tired in the evening just like I used to, those days after work." He asked if she had been taking any anxiety pills for her high blood pressure. She brushed the question aside but came back to him with a cup of tea and said sorry for not responding. "I am not on any medication. Maybe I should have an energy drink."

Hot or cold energy drinks—energy drinks for women didn't help. She would open the fridge and stand figuring out what she wanted to take. While lifting a spoonful of rice to her mouth, she would lose her hold and drop it, spilling all over the table. She would yell at the increasing sounds of footsteps—of people coming home in the apartment corridors. She'd ask Krishnan where Hasini lived.

“Is it New Jersey or Seattle?”

“Bangalore,” he said.

“When did she return?”

“Five years back.”

“Nobody ever tells me anything here.”

Krishnan felt vague explaining to the doctor. “She probably tires herself out to sleep well in the night,” he said, “so by evening, she cannot stand any agitation or noise.” He was unable to explain with success how Meenu's evening spells now seemed routine. Was it just a phase of life? Or, was it the stars? Or a natural decay of the mind?

“Well,” the doctor said, “It's not really possible to say anything now. Probably it is the aspect of sun-downing. Maybe if there is some sort of frequency to it, we can find a pattern.”

After sometime, finding the pattern didn't matter. Days never passed without the clink and clank of steel spoons, tumblers, or vessels falling over the kitchen floor. Meenu, who went for an evening walk to the park in front of the apartment, strode off through the rear gate and meandered to end up in a far-away street. The residents asked her name and she replied correctly. When they ventured to ask her address, she swore that the house on that street was where she lived. But she made the mistake of asking if they'd seen her daughter, when an old resident there recognized her.

The daughter was born miraculously after the doctors gave up on her. It was after a few years following the birth of a stillborn son. Or it might have been after her mother's death. Hasini's large eyes and rotund face matched hers when she took her to participate in local music competitions. In those days, Krishnan, who shifted to teaching music at a local college (a rare foreign degree in music being the impetus), was seen by some people as modern and revolutionary in trying to bring about changes in the teaching system of the music.

There was an elaborate ritual performed by Ageless, a senior citizen residence with geriatric facilities far away from the city only after which people could be admitted. Propitiating the gods was followed over the ages for long life and good health. The taxi was waiting below.

“Let’s go!” Meenu swung a black handbag on her frail shoulders.

“You are wearing an old saree,” Krishnan remarked.

“Only it is the wedding saree,” she said looking happy and radiant. “I pulled it from under a pile of other old silk sarees last month, hung it on the terrace, hand-washed it, and then gave it to the drycleaners. Now, it looks as good as new.”

It was the time of their wedding when the priest called out to bring the girl. The time to tie the holy wedding thread was fast approaching. Meenu entered the hall. She wore a green silk saree instead of the traditional red one—the reason being she represented the goddess of her town. The color went along with her dark skin contrasted only by a huge bunch of white jasmynes decking her long hair and a shyly-happy smile showing her pearl-white teeth. She did look an exact picture of the goddess.

If she could be so bright and calm, and so clear and correct, could she really have a problem?

That was all he could do not to leave home and stay back.

The manager explained to Krishnan how the residents would be made to undergo a variety of tests for the first three weeks. They needed to create medical records for them at the time of joining. Before that, there had been people who brought in a whole set of infectious diseases to existing residents. Not that Ageless did not care for the unhealthy, he said, but just that they needed to know. And, the residents needed to be alone all those weeks without any visitors calling or calling upon them.

They had been to Ageless once before to visit an NRI childless couple who found it fashionable to settle there and breathe their last too. There were concrete buildings with red-oxide floors and facilities modern to those times. Now, the floors were all plush and shiny granites, clubhouse and tennis courts added, profuse greenery as lawns and creepers on well-laid walls, and shrubs and plants trimmed as landscaped gardens.

There had been many questions: why leave her alone there? Why don't you employ a caretaker? Why don't you be there with her too? Everything was tried—a few dozen caretakers had sighed and left. Hasini tried to help being here but couldn't handle. Krishnan himself had a six-month funded project to train students with self-developed elementary music learning; and he couldn't drop it just like that. And, it was a matter of a few months. Then, he will get her back and be with her all the time.

Krishnan called everyday to speak to the attendant and get a satisfactory report on Meenu's tests and general health. Meenu's blood pressure was normal. Other tests and scan reports showed normal health. She had mild fever, the attendant said at the end of the first week—though it was slightly uncommon for residents to go through that to adjust to the new place. They normally catch a cold but probably she was just too sensitive, he said.

During the initial years of her marriage, Hasini used to call and visit frequently. But now, with a kid of her own, constant job shift of her husband's, and her own non-starter music career, she hardly finds time to call up. Krishnan informed her of her mother's new place for which she muttered a sigh and a few consoling words. He did not have to tell her about not visiting the first few weeks as she was not going to visit her anyway, for now.

Like men of his age, Krishnan went for walks. He walked on the streets around the beach as the sun peeped into the sky and left it bright yellow over the fishermen's hamlets that were bound by quiet waves splashing on beach sand and human waste on it. He came back, took his bath and ate the breakfast made by the cook. Krishnan and Meenu usually breakfasted together though in their working days, it was rare to see them all eat together—even dinner. They never shared thoughts about work, plans or future—only a bed that showed signs of intense intimacy in those fiery youthful years that reduced to mere hugs and kisses in the last couple of decades.

During one of his study vacation (men going abroad to study after marriage, was quite uncommon; thanks to the providing wife) while doing a PhD abroad, when he visited his wife in Chennai for a month, Krishnan received an airmail that contained a painstakingly-packed box. Meenu picked the letter stuck in a corner of the box. It was from Charlotte, and described their

last day together, and cloying, yearning in a way. The girl was someone to whom he gave private tuitions and affections but parted amiably when her family left town. After the last lesson, he treaded softly on her lily white skin with his artistic fingers exploring all the curves and contours. He told how her mouth tasted as sweet as *Panchamritam*, a honeyed dish made of mashed bananas, milk, curd, and jaggery. He saw her and the family off at the railway station. It was least likely of her to even remember him let alone send the *Panchamritam* in the box. Meenu opened the box, took out the bottle, and rushed from the flat. From the window, Krishnan saw her feeding it to a flea-infested, stray dog. Although it was her first, Meenu didn't yell, cry, or react at all. When—and if ever, she spoke, it was matter-of-factly. There was no sarcasm, irony or even frustration in her tone. Only a stony silence filled the house. Nobody talked about it—or anything at all. Krishnan spent all his time with the two-year old Hasini. The day before he went back, Krishnan got drunk. He went to Meenu and took her hands in his. There was a vacant expression in her eyes. Hasini crawled to them, giggling and babbling. Meenu wriggled out, lifted Hasini and took her to the crib. Krishnan waited patiently for the child to sleep. Then, again he took her hand in his and promised her a new life—without making the error of confessing.

If ever Krishnan was appreciated for carrying on the family tradition of being the seducer (though he had declined to call himself that as his conquests never equaled his grandfather's, the flute maestro at the erstwhile Kingdom of Gauripur), he knew nothing of it. His grandfather had a wife but visited her only during the day; and she received words of his spending nights at various mistresses' houses. They were childless and then, she adopted Krishnan's mother in retribution to washing his sins and giving life to a girl child. Krishnan, who was a child then, played with the urchins and specialized in throwing tiny stones at the dark 'thing' that lay open when the flaps of the *vesthi* of a sleeping old neighbor was carelessly parted. He, however, never had even one mistress; just a few flings here and there, which anyway required him to 'bear lots of crosses'—that was his pick-up line with his young and immature students—so what was the fuss all about, anyway?

Thus, he went on, paying no heed to his promise, but getting cleverer by each affair in his ability to mask them. He prided himself on conquering white females; something his grandfather could

not lay hands on—combining sizzling *Kamasutra* experiments with artistic and sensitive foreplays. While Indian girl students needed secure and protective lovemaking, taking one step after another; not going the whole way; not too far; and definitely not too soon—the learning he got while teaching at the college, after completing the foreign conquests, white women were easier. And, of betraying Meenu—which, of course, he had, what was better? Leaving their wives as others did or being with them? He could never think of it. After getting back, he spent lots of time with her, especially in making love at nights.

Yes, defended Krishnan, Meenu was a major part of his life, but not his life completely. His music needed an outlet. He served as jury for grants, published papers, taught with an experimental teaching model to the envy of other local professors, and held private tuitions at his home. Although Meenu never found any concrete evidence, there was nagging suspicion cancerously multiplying in her mind. She would often complain to her friend how her husband was always surrounded by young girls. Most of his students were girls—music, and especially Carnatic music not appealing to boys as a serious career. Despite most girls learning music were for the sake of singing that one song on their girl-seeing ceremonies, some of them took to it as a career too—a soft career that could be continued after marriage without disrupting marital harmony. In a hitherto unknown manner—unknown to Indian customs, Krishnan would always close the door while teaching students, even at home. There were the nubile whose thighs he would grope while teaching them to play the *Tala*. If they didn't object, he would make progressive overtures. If none of his normal overtures worked out, he would fall back on his ever successful pick-up line, 'You know, my wife never cares for me, she is only bothered about her job.' True, Meenu had a job which needed more care, and all the more because that job provided for her all her life including the one decade when Krishnan went to study abroad and sent money home irregularly. An occasional exchange student would be treated to the complete act in the hotel he would have arranged for her to stay—all this during daytime under the pretext of having some work to do around there. He arranged another flat in the same apartment complex for college students to stay—those ones who found it difficult to stay in the hostels. Students practicing in the wee hours in the mornings would get a visit from him discretely, quick kisses, caresses and quicker orgasms followed by the routine morning walk. Devoted students would receive an initiation as disciples by 'surrendering' to the guru.

Krishnan never felt particularly worried about Hasini. She was growing up by herself, looking prettier by the day, and taking after her mother. She was learning to sing with another teacher, more successful than Krishnan. Meenu took an active interest in her singing career and chided her husband on not nurturing Hasini's talent. But, now, something happened that made him throw away his job and devote all his energy and time to getting Hasini married and married well.

One of his disciples whom he had tried time and again to brainwash unsuccessfully left, not only from him but from the career itself. In her place, came two new girls, who seemed too content to be by themselves. Actually, Krishnan later found out that they found solace in each other's arms. Some found them tonguing in dark corners. The new angle thrilled Krishnan enough to begin his overtures. But, no sooner had he done it, these girls started singing like canaries to the other professors. So, before anyone asked him, he took voluntary retirement. There was fear in the household that Hasini's life may get affected. So, by the time she graduated, she was married off to a suitable boy. Krishnan spent lavishly on her marriage—the only thing he could do and did for her. Her music took a backseat.

The family breathed a major relief. They sold the flat and shifted to a smaller one in an upscale area. Both his wife's and his savings contributed to it. They decorated the flat together. He urged her to go on morning walks with him. He taught her to like having expensive tastes—from soaps/shower gels to fashionable outfits and cosmetics. He had tried to teach her to sing or play the flute but she would have none of it. They invited relatives and other neighbors often, and Krishnan didn't try to involve himself—no careless caress while handing over the coffee tumbler, no seemingly-accidental bumping on women of any age and so on.

All for the good, Krishnan thought, when it cooled off. He thanked the two cozy girls for the songs that landed him in soup. Yes, he was out of his mind and could not continue like that. It was just at the nick of time. He would probably have landed in greater trouble than what he went through with the hidden shame. What if he was accused of fathering kids; what if he had got infected; and what if there were photos and blackmails—nobody knew when things would go

wrong. It would only be a matter of time when it would have cost him his Meenu, had he continued.

Krishnan got a call from Ageless. “All the tests are over. You can come over to meet her.” The attendant said. The next day, he woke up early and put on his best shirt and well-ironed *veshti*. He took her comb and brushed his grey hair, or what was left of it. Humming the *madhyamavati* raga, he rubbed three fingers in holy ash and drew the three lines on his forehead and added a red *kumkum* below it. She liked him in Indian attire—an observation she made after they had got engaged. While studying abroad, he had looked so westernized to the extent of wearing loose shorts exposing thighs that almost reached his bottom. But, now all that has changed. He looked more traditional than the most traditional Carnatic musician.

While driving, he felt like how he felt that day when he was meeting her for the first time—the girl-seeing ceremony. He wanted to discover her and know her all over again. The rain had subsided. Potholes and pools of water remained on the roadsides, but the freshness on that warm and bright Sunday morning lifted his spirits. The broad, country roads looked like they had been given a thorough wash. He had a box of her favorite cashew nut cake, sweet and diamond-shaped, which he had never bought for her before. He entered the gates of the residence eagerly looking like a lovelorn husband.

“Please come.” The attendant said, “Hope the journey was smooth.” Pointing to the lift, he told Krishnan to take a left on the third floor and the last room on the corridor. He was a wiry, thin man who looked like he had forgotten to eat for a few days. “Please go; I’ll join you in a few minutes,” saying, he left.

Krishnan knocked. There was no response. He looked near the door to see if there was a calling bell. He rang. Still, there was no response. He turned the handle. It was locked. “Perhaps she has gone to her friend’s room,” the attendant said, walking down the corridor. “He stays on the other side of the lift; again at the end of the corridor.” Krishnan hesitated, holding the bag with the box of sweets. “You could keep it on her table; I have a set of keys and will open the door for you,” he said. Krishnan told himself that the sweets and a thin man with keys didn’t match well. “No, thanks,” he replied, instead. He led Krishnan to the other side of the corridor and rang the bell.

“This is the person,” he said, pointing to a gold-colored name plate mounted on wood. The letters of the name were in black and embossed. It said, “Dr. K. Ramasamy”. A familiar name, Krishnan mused, while waiting for the door to open. He knew a Ramasamy but then, the name was so common. Like his own name, Krishnan. However, Meenu was too stylish for their times. Perhaps, he was a medical doctor, he thought. He wished.

The door opened revealing somebody in a wheelchair. To Krishnan, the familiar name now had a face—familiar too, but aged—exactly who he had hoped *not* to meet now, or at any point in his life. There sat on the wheelchair, the crippled form of his former Head of the Department of Music. No, he never reported to him. In fact, when Ramasamy was made the head, it coincided with Krishnan leaving. The irony was this Ramasamy was younger than Krishnan; and Krishnan could never hope to become the head. When Krishnan was a senior professor (and the women-related rumors went on strongly), it felt best to retire voluntarily and gracefully. But, the venom in Krishnan had continued for a long time. And now, when he had left everything and turned a new leaf, this had to happen.

“Sir, his wife is here?” The attendant broke the tension. He stretched his neck and saw Meenu sitting on the chair, watching television. Assuring Krishnan, he left.

“Hello, Krishnan,” Ramasamy said, trying to sound normal. “How are things?” He brushed aside his thick, white hair falling over his forehead—an act that always turned Krishnan green. He had maintained his health; his tall and slim figure proved it. His face and demeanor was nonchalant with something of the charm of a dignified lion with only the darting of the egg-shaped eyes giving away his excitement.

Krishnan simply stretched his lips without a smile and acknowledged by nodding his head.

Looking across towards his wife, he stepped in. Ramasamy moved to give way.

Krishnan saw Meenu’s profile. A ripened skin hid a flabby cheek in a way he had never seen before. Her eyebrows were drawn closer and she was watching the movie with keen eyes. When he got near her, she looked sideways towards him and smiled—the same shy and charming smile that had attracted him during the girl-seeing ceremony.

“See what they are showing—*Kathalikka Neramillai*—the movie I had always wanted to watch during college.

“But, didn’t you just watch the movie yesterday evening here, with me?” Ramasamy said.

“Maybe it was some other one. You forget too often,” she said, her eyes looking at him warmly. “Shall I make some tea for you?” She asked. The family from where Krishnan came—the court musician family with its vestiges of royalty-like lifestyle, it would be great dishonor to mention a ‘lower-level’ drink like tea. Krishnan had made sure that he and his family followed only the highly-revered customs from the very beginning. Maybe the royalty themselves have taken to modern habits the American billionaires with new money or homegrown rags-to-riches billionaires followed; but Krishnan and other such—the second rung—steadfastly stuck to old-world customs and preserved them like pickles, although fungi-filled.

If it were pre-Ageless times, Krishnan would have thrown a fit. Instead, “Shall we go to your room, Meenu?” he asked softly. He held her arm and tried to help her get up. But, she would have none of it. She rose with one hand on the arm of the chair holding strong. Still, he held her eyes.

He wanted to hug her and say how much he missed her. But, something about her sudden rigid face and guarded smile—something that looked like she was guarding Ramasamy from him—and him from Ramasamy—made him put on his guard too.

“Look what I have brought!” Krishnan opened his bag. “Your favorite sweets,” he said. Meenu was turning in the lock of her room. “Great, you remembered to lock your room and carry the key too,” he added. “But, I had never forgotten,” Meenu said.

“So you go to his room often?” Krishnan asked. Meenu pretended not to hear. “That man, I meant,” he stressed. “Oh,” she said trying to recollect. “Ramasamy?” “Oh, that’s nothing. He is a childhood friend. We studied in the same school, which was a co-ed till eighth class. Then, he went to a boy’s school and the family eventually shifted to Chennai.”

“I never imagined that he could be a musician. In fact, he worked at the music department at the college and retired as the head.” She said.

“I know him alright. He worked where I worked.” He said.

“Where did you work?” She asked.

Krishnan was taken aback. “The College.” He said with a shocked look on his face.

“Really?”

There was a pause. “By the way, you didn’t even take a look at the sweets.”

“But, this is not my favorite,” she said, “I like *Laddoos*.”

“You always told me you hated it—it being a commonplace sweet.”

“Actually, I hate these cashew cakes. They are too rich.” She said.

Krishnan looked at her helplessly and then his face fell flat. Pointless, this talk.

“I’d better go and watch the rest of the movie.” She said.

“But, you have got a TV here.” He retorted and switched it on.

“Oh, I thought this was some fancy box,” she said. “All those days I went over to watch movies; what would Ramasamy have thought? Maybe, it must have occurred to him that my TV was not working,” she coaxed herself.

All that interaction left Krishnan wondering if she remembered who he even was. Not able to hold any longer, he said, “Meenu, I am Krishnan, your husband.”

“Of course, I know who you are. Shall I make some tea for you?”

It was upsetting. First, that unannounced Ramasamy; then, Meenu not accepting sweets; Meenu bothered about Ramasamy; and now, that stupid tea! Well, he could not do anything and he knew it. He merely clenched his teeth and sat down with a hand on his head. He breathed a deep sigh. A silent thought brought back some of his cheer. *At least she recognized me in that Ramasamy’s room itself.*

“No, thanks. I don’t want tea,” he said, “I made hot filter coffee in the morning and poured some into this flask for you. Care for coffee?”

“Sure. It will be a refreshing change.”

Meenu sipped the coffee and watched the favorite movie of hers sitting on an ease chair.

Krishnan went in search of the attendant. He was knocking at a door holding the breakfast plate of *Idlis*.

“Yes, sir.” He said.

“Where can I get the test reports?”

“In the office. I can get them in a minute after handing over break fast.”

Looking at Krishnan’s worried face, he said, “Madam’s tests are normal. Nothing to fear,” assuringly.

“What were the tests?” He asked while in the office with the attendant.

“Here, sir, are the reports. Please take them.”

Seating himself on a chair, Krishnan went through the test reports—general ones—blood reports, scans, X-rays lay on the table. Yes, everything was normal—only it didn't seem normal.

“See, my wife is very forgetful. Is there any test for that?”

“But, sir, old age has its problems. Maybe today she was in a bad mood. Now that the tests are over, she may relax and start feeling normal soon. And, you could probably visit her often.

Seeing you here, she may feel secure.” The attendant shot off the worldly-wisdom tidbits.

When Krishnan got back, she was still watching the TV. He had never remembered her sitting down to watch TV when she worked and after she retired. And now, she was glued to the set.

“Do you know they are going to play another favorite movie of mine, *Ninaithaale Inikkum?*” She said with her large eyes sparkling with wonder. Krishnan said goodbye. She waved at him.

Every Sunday turned out to be the same. There was no change in her; and he couldn't adapt.

What was the point in adapting for a few months? He would bring her back after that project for sure. Meenu suspected that he was her husband but treated him like a temporary visitor, who left her curious as to why he acted very familiar with her. Every time he left, Krishnan had a nagging doubt if she really recognized him as her husband. If he asked her directly, she would say yes without hesitation. Then, he would feel relieved. But then again, she would treat him with a distance interspersed only with some special interest on and off. That will raise the subsided doubt again in his mind.

The attendant would keep saying that with time she would be alright. And, on the contrary, he thought she was getting happier by the day. Krishnan needed to have patience, which was all.

He then told him that about Ramasamy—nothing that he didn't know before and added that Ramasamy's wife was away at her daughter's place in the US, seeing her through her second pregnancy and will join him after those crucial months.

Most Sunday mornings, Meenu would always be in Ramasamy's room watching some favorite movie. He had long and shapely fingers with which he would grip and lift the cup of tea Meenu made for him. Then, she would pour hot water from the electric kettle into her cup. Shaking the tea bags for a while and pressing the remaining tea with her spoon, she will add milk and sip.

Krishnan would watch both of them tucking in and enjoying the silence of each other's company. Not that they would be tuned into each other. Instead, their minds would sink into some thoughts or dreams of their own and linger on till the last sip. They ignored each other whenever they stayed close. But if Krishnan interrupted this silence to remind her of his presence, Ramasamy's eyes would take on a marked look. He would ask Meenu for more tea and get her busy.

Those days when he comes very early to catch her sleeping in her room, Krishnan would be disappointed seeing Ramasamy and Meenu taking their morning walk on the well-laid walking path surrounding the building accommodations. Having just healed a foot fracture, Ramasamy would lean on his crutch and walk slowly; and Meenu would synchronize her steps with him. They would then sit on stone benches in the park across the buildings where they would watch tiny tots laden with heavy bags as big as their own heights arrive to the nearby kindergarten school. Krishnan would stand on the other side of the bushes listening to Meenu recounting her childhood in her husky voice and soft tone. A giggle would follow. Ramasamy seldom spoke.

Krishnan increased his visits to twice a week—Tuesdays and Sundays. Sundays, as Krishnan had already discovered were gala days, something like a village fair. Hordes of families visited their grandfathers or grandmothers or both. The culture of senior citizen home was a new one. Most of the sons or daughters lived abroad and felt safe sending their parents to such a home rather than they live where they lived with fear of getting burgled or killed. So they egged local relatives to meet them as much as possible; of course, in exchange of favors of all types including finding jobs for them abroad. Yes, they cared. And, they wanted to show it to their nit-picking siblings or relatives or extended families. Well, to the whole world, they felt. It was not new watching excited kids wearing American shirts and shorts running along corridors and adults in Jeans and bright colored T-shirts walking jauntily with wives in Salwar Kameez in tow. Nobody visited Ramasamy—and he and Meenu kept off the Sunday fair. They rose early, went for walks and had tea together before the fair trickled in. Sometimes, Ramasamy's room would be locked from the outside and Meenu's, from the inside. What kind of intimate conversations would be going on, Krishnan couldn't imagine. If Krishnan didn't find them in the park, he would check Ramasamy's room. And, if that were locked, he would hang around Meenu's room hesitating to knock.

One Sunday he saw Meenu—looked like her—helping Ramasamy walk. Her short, thick, jet-black hair was tied up in a bright red ribbon, the way the local women in that suburb wore. He began noticing her saree—plain ones but bright colors or mild colors with loud floral prints—the kind that were sold at the local supermarket. The place is showing on her—revealing the gradually cropping distance between them. Krishnan felt sad.

On a Tuesday, when there was silence around, things looked normal, everyone relaxing in their rooms, Ramasamy was out meeting his doctor, Krishnan snatched those brief moments to be with his wife. In one of the maddening yet friendly conversations with her, he asked, “Did you go to the beauty parlor in the town?”

Meenu stood up and looked at herself in the mirror. “Why? Don’t I look lovely with short hair? I have always loved my hair short.”

After joining the college, when Krishnan tried to teach music in the new way, students—regular ones who wanted to excel as performers mocked him. They only wanted to learn the traditional way and his methods confused them. But the next few batches were different. Girls who didn’t qualify for any other subject landed in music. Some of them were older girls still unmarried, about twenty-six or so. Some of them had music background of sorts—a few fathers of such girls dabbled in playing instruments amidst juggling odd jobs, that’s all. So, instead of sitting in their dark and dingy flats, these girls showed up for classes.

“If all you are expecting is fun, you can try creative arts classes,” Krishnan told. Some left to have fun while others took it up with missionary zeal. They brought with them a certain discipline and orderliness into his irregular and zigzag living. One of them—Sunada—contradicted Meenu in everything. Though she was not too dark like Meenu, she had round face with high cheek bones. The affair lasted till she completed her degree, until her father found her a husband. Not wanting to leave Krishnan, she would constantly update him on her father’s attempts and expect Krishnan to rescue her from the noose knot of marriage. Finally, when Krishnan and Meenu attended her wedding, she sobbed telling them how she was leaving her hometown to join her husband in a few days. While Krishnan patted her a fatherly goodbye, Meenu consoled her wondering about Sunada’s exaggerated reaction to something so normal.

The very next day, Krishnan found someone else to amuse him and his desires. It was the daughter of another of his married student—half of Sunada’s age—a girl of fourteen. In a couple of years or so, girls, young and bold would walk into his office declaring love. They didn’t make a big deal of sex—to them, it was a natural extension of love. They prided themselves on openness and freedom of choice. But Krishnan had not abandoned his caution. His weapons were alertness—to the extent of being always alert (not leaving behind a trail or evidence) and complete brainwashing, which meant weaving all sorts of lies to make the girl feel she was born for superior things and always talking of music and its greatness with others so that everybody thought he was focused. Moving with young girls made him feel youthful and brought him out a certain melancholy that pursued him from childhood. He even risked singing, something he had never done after his voice changed as a teenager. He used to feel ashamed of opening his mouth during those few months when he developed a deeper voice. Even as he spoke, his breaking voice would be something his friends never stopped making fun of. Learning to play the flute was his only refuge. Now, he could sing in any register he wanted to. With a flexible voice, he could be heard practicing during those free hours in the old college building corridors.

Meenu never tried to learn Veena or the flute. She never showed any inclination or respect towards music. During their early marriage years, when Krishnan sat down with a flute to teach her, she’d try blowing on a few holes and give up very soon. In the beginning, she sat down to impress him. But, when she realized that it was not easy to displace his music or the girl students, she brought back accounting files from bank to work. Listening to music while working felt like a luxury to her but after suspicion entered her mind, it was irritating to the extent of making her hysteric. But in the last few years, she tried her hands on the musical keyboard. Hasini had left a keyboard at home, her son’s, a small one with limited tunes and tones. Krishnan realized then that people like Meenu related to visual learning than aural. She played the *sa ri ga ma pa da ni*. Like kids, she changed the instruments, tones and frequencies and played them all. She banged the drum buttons; and she pressed some pre-recorded music and nodded her head to the tunes.

The next time he visited, on a Tuesday, he took the keyboard with him. Her room was locked. Ramasamy's too was locked. The paths and the stone benches were empty. Krishnan went to the attendant's office. "Oh, she's sick," he said, "and resting at the hospital in the next building." "But, why didn't you call me?" Krishnan asked. "She's not so sick; just mild fever. We didn't want to hassle you," he replied.

Meenu was lying on the bed. Krishnan never knew that there was a small hospital building nearby with just enough beds for an emergency. Meenu didn't look like somebody with a mild fever. She was wearing a long gown and her hair was disorderly. Beside her sat Ramasamy as close to her as possible. He was patting her back talking to her like as if he was consoling her. The collar of his shirt was up and he was tying his loosening *veshti* again. He looked like he had come there in a hurry. He seemed tired and worn-out. Meenu saw him first. Her worried face changed to relief. Ramasamy turned. His face didn't show much relief but there was some change. He didn't let go of her hand that kept it pressed on the bed.

Krishnan laid the keyboard by the side of the wall near the bed. "I thought you would like to play it," he said. "What is that?" she asked. "The keyboard... you were playing it every day till you left," he said. Meenu was lost trying to recall it. Then, she waved her hand and turned her attention back to Ramasamy who was trying to pull his hand out of hers. She turned her face to the other side.

"What happened?" he asked. "What happened, dear?"

Krishnan's gritted his teeth at the 'dear'. *How dare he call my wife that?*

Ramasamy went to the other side of the bed. "Are you crying? Oh, come on" he said. He pulled out his clean white hanky from the side pocket of his *jibba*. "Take this," he said and she grabbed the hanky and dried her eyes and face. Then, looking up at Krishnan, she whispered, "Please ask Ramasamy to stay. I see you come here often and hang around us..." At that time, Ramasamy shot a glance at Krishnan. His questioning eyes rested on him. There was a momentary look of confusion.

"Please don't get angry." Meenu said looking at Ramasamy in an effort to coax him. "Can I at least call you while you are in the US? We can talk using Skype. You can send pictures of your daughter's baby." Meenu pleaded with him.

“So, when are you leaving?” Krishnan asked. His tone got back the long-gone spark.

“This evening. I hurried to the hospital learning your wife was not well.”

“Don’t worry. I am here. I will take care. Please get ready for your trip.” Krishnan announced.

Ramasamy left. Krishnan took in Meenu’s hands like Ramasamy had done. But she pulled her hand away and propped up some pillows against the hood of the bed and lay watching the ceiling.

“Don’t worry, sir,” the attendant said, “she will forget after some time.”

Krishnan smiled at him and tried to hold her hands again. This time, she pulled it away strongly and clutched at a pillow and sobbed. Krishnan stood there blankly wondering what Ramasamy would have done.

“Sir, do you want some tea?” The attendant asked. When he turned, the attendant continued,

“We can leave her alone for some time and then check on her.” Krishnan took the friendly advice and the cup of tea and strolled in the garden near the gates of the hospital. After throwing the paper cup into a nearby dustbin, he walked over to Ramasamy’s room.

“So, is it a boy or a girl?” He asked.

“Boy.” Ramasamy replied packing his things and without lifting his eyes. Krishnan smiled to himself.

“But there were no plans of you going, right?”

“Yes. My daughter wanted to see me and show the baby boy. She suddenly felt an urge to see me—probably thought I was dying or so.” Ramasamy threw his hands into the air.

“So when are you back?”

“A month or two. Depends on her. It may even be more, I really don’t know.”

For the first time in the last few months, Krishnan felt a rush of happiness. There was only a month to go for him to complete his project. And, before Ramasamy returned, he would have Meenu back to his apartment. He will take such great care of her; she will forget Ramasamy, like she had forgotten him.

“Here, let me help you zip the bag,” he said with a voice overflowing with warmth. Krishnan was with him the whole day hanging around and helping out whenever the necessity arose. Not that he suddenly developed an endearment towards his arch nemesis but just that he didn’t want him going back to his Meenu. When the time came for him to leave, Krishnan went to the

hospital and came back to Ramasamy to say that Meenu was sleeping and the doctor had advised that she should not be disturbed. Thus, ensuring his rival could not meet Meenu, he felt a sense of triumph. Bad days were over. His tough phase had left. Now, it was only Meenu and him.

When he came back on Sunday to visit his wife, Krishnan discovered that Meenu had not got over the sorrow of separation from Ramasamy. Back in her room, she just lay on her bed. Her food was left untouched. When the attendant forced her, she just packed it in a newspaper and threw it in the backyard. The sweets he brought found its way into the maid's hands. Even the fruits he had bought for her were given away. She stopped going out for walks. If Krishnan insisted on taking her, she just looked at him with curiosity and said, "Don't bother"—like as if he were a stranger who had taken pity on her health and requested her to walk along with him. The attendant wouldn't listen to any of her tantrums and walked her on the corridor. He tried to make Krishnan walk her. But, she withdrew. Her hair was looking dry and untidy. Her eyes were puffed up with crying. She wore old and wrinkled saris and preferred to stay on the bed or sit on the chair nearby. Her TV was always switched off.

Whenever Krishnan visited, the attendant would egg him on to motivate her to walk or work so that her muscles didn't degenerate. But, Krishnan never had any luck with her. At first, Meenu treated him as a friend, and then a kind stranger. But now, she had taken a certain dislike to him. He reminded her of her last day with Ramasamy, which she hated to remember. Not only did he stand around like a log, but didn't persuade Ramasamy to stay despite her plea. Krishnan was fighting a losing battle—his attempts to revive their marriage, to even remind her that he was her husband had failed.

The doctor called him into his office. "Meenu has Alzheimer's. The diagnosis is over and her problem is clearly identified," he said, "Although she was getting along well, now, with her physical health taking a toll, it is not going to be easy."

"Doctor, please don't bother. Next week, I am taking her back to my apartment and will personally take care of her." Krishnan replied.

"It's not about you taking care of her. It's more about her well-being."

"I will bring the sunshine back into her life." He said.

The doctor was not convinced. "I was actually thinking if you could stop visiting for a couple of weeks by which time she may have coped with Ramasamy leaving."

Krishnan felt insulted. The doctor continued, "Please don't misunderstand me. At this age, one should stop thinking of such things and just do whatever is required to be happy and healthy."

"Well, in which case, I will not come here for the next two weeks but nevertheless take her back home after that." He announced.

"Sure, as long as she gets healthy," said the doctor.

After two weeks, a happy Krishnan turned up early on Sunday morning only to find Meenu shifted to the hospital. Ageless told him that unless her tests results were normal, she would not be allowed to leave it. That was the policy of the residence.

Krishnan didn't want to do it. But then he picked up the phone. He had waited for a month and another. There was no sign of him. He entered an ISD code, the area code and the phone number. A female voice answered the ring. No, he was not there; he had gone to the supermarket. Not sure when he would be returning to India, no plans made yet.

Standing at the entrance of the hospital, Krishnan pressed the end call button on his mobile. He didn't want to go inside. Sitting on the verandah chair, he recalled the information and ruminated on what to do next. He had felt relieved when the daughter had picked up. He had not left his name or contact number, merely mentioning him as a friend of her father's.

He left in the evening and brought back a suitcase filled with clothes. After dinner that night, he went to the internet centre. He logged into his Skype account and dialed the number again. It was morning in the US. Ramasamy's daughter picked it up. Her voice was flat. Krishnan introduced himself as Ramasamy's friend from Ageless. There was a pause. He was trying to make up his mind whether to say he was the same person who called earlier that day; and decided not to.

Ramasamy was not there; he had gone for his morning walk.

"That's ok. I would like to speak to you," he said.

"Sure," she said.

"My wife who is at Ageless is not well."

“Mmm, my father does talk about her often. Oh, so, is she unwell?”

“Yes,” and not knowing how to proceed further, Krishnan paused.

“Can I talk to you about something?” He asked.

“Sure.”

“When is Ramasamy likely to return?”

There was a pause. “We have not started thinking about it yet.”

“It’s just that my wife was here all by herself and Ramasamy was very helpful to her. I’m sorry. What I meant was they became good friends. And now she misses him.” Krishnan couldn’t believe himself saying this.

“My father too speaks about her almost every day here.” She added.

“Well, now, with him gone, she has stopped taking much food or water or food supplements or even medicines. After he left, she has spent most of her time at the hospital here. I really don’t know how to explain but all I know is that if she sees him, she may start being herself.” Krishnan took a deep breath.

There was no reaction for a while. Then, she said in a flat tone, “I will discuss with my dad. Can you call, say, by this evening?”

“Sure, thank you,” he said.

“But, again I cannot assure you anything.” She said.

“No problem. Please let me know. I will surely call you in the evening—your evening,” he said.

He had survived the first obstacle; actually a major one at that—probably the first and the last one too. He had not really told her but told her enough for her to find it important to get back. He had heard another woman’s voice in the background pacifying the crying baby: a shrill and penetrating one better suited to shout out commands than cuddling little babies. Probably Ramasamy’s wife, she was. He was imagining the physique going with the voice—a short woman with stout legs and hands and a broad chest. Her age would be showing up on the layers of flesh in the midriff. Not like his Meenu who is now looking slim and athletic.

The answer to Meenu’s prayers will come the next day morning; no need to wait with anxiety, just sleep off the night and then, the answer.

He lay watching the moving fan. He tried to sleep but his thoughts went back to the phone conversations. There was the sound of TV too—playing the TV early their morning; it was catching up here. He recalled his days there when there were not too many immigrants. He had managed to be there before it got flooded by Indians, that is, before the tech boom. Now, New Jersey looked like New India. It didn't feel like a new place at all.

So early in the morning he had called and there was no male voice. Her husband had probably gone to work by then, he thought. He remembered how a friend of his had gone to visit his daughter with a visiting visa for six months and came back rushing in just less than a month. He went on and on about how they don't have servants there and his daughter cleverly involved him and his wife in all the housework. She said that she needed rest. Fine, they adjusted to that. But then, again, they were so cloistered. They could not just take a bus to watch a movie or go to the mall. It had to be the daughter's car. And, only she had to drive it. He didn't have an American driving license. What more, they didn't have friends—people of their age. If they met other Indians, they were not Tamils and they really couldn't relate to them. It was an isolated existence with overburdened housework. Krishnan's friend had gone on and on. He thought the Ramasamy household may be different. At least he gets to do his morning walk.

Meenu was in the hospital, he was here in her room. He wanted to be with Meenu. But, he ended up seeking Ramasamy—his arch rival. He was waiting anxiously for a call that he would never have wanted to make in his right senses. Krishnan sighed. It had to come to this. There was a sad tinge to the thought. He closed his eyes and slowly drifted away to sleep. The suburb air was cool and breezy. It was nearly three in the morning.

A loud knock woke him up. Adjusting his *veshti*, he opened the door and found a flask with hot coffee kept by the side of the door. He looked up the time. It was six thirty. He hurried with his coffee and took a brisk bath. Wearing a white *jibba*, he rushed out to the internet center. There was no time for his *vibudi* or *kumkum*.

It was not open. He rushed to office and took a set of keys and ran to the center. He switched on a computer and logged in. The phone rang for a long time and went to the voice message. He wasn't prepared for that. Still, he left a message telling he would call after half an hour and it was really important he spoke to the daughter.

He tried to check mails and surf the web for news. Nothing could make him focus. After a long half hour, he called up again. The ring went on. He was almost going to give up when the daughter picked up the phone and said hello. She apologized for not being there as there was an emergency and she had to go to the pharmacy to pick up medicines for the kid. Krishnan knew it was a lie. But he proceeded to ask her about the kid's health.

After a pause, he asked her about Ramasamy's plans of coming to India. She excused herself for some time and handed over the phone to her mother. Krishnan had to go over the perfunctory greetings and enquiries about everybody's health and particularly the kid's, again. Suddenly, the daughter came over and she said no.

"Sorry, Mr Krishnan, my father cannot come over now or anytime in the near future," she said, "and the reason is that I am alone here with the children and my husband has to shift to Seattle for some time on work. My father himself wants to be here to take care of us."

"Couldn't he make at least one visit?" He asked.

"Well, the kid needs our attention. It's not like in India where you could just drop the kid off into any relative's house for caretaking. Here, it's just me and my mother. And, we have to do the housework, change the kid's nappies and all that. There are no servants like in India." She said. Of course, Krishnan knew. He was there for more than a decade. And, later too, he visited on and off and sometimes stay for a few months too.

"I do understand the situation. But if he can spare a week, maybe a few days, or maybe just a day; I don't mind paying the expenses," he insisted.

"We can pay for it alright." She said as if he had insulted her. "But I still cannot drive him to the airport or pick him up from there. If I take all that trouble, I'd prefer to make a long-pending trip to India myself."

"Well, I have taken a bus to airport many times myself. I know all the bus routes and can help Ramasamy with that," he said.

"I am not sure you and my father are on speaking terms. I don't think it will work out. What will he get out of it anyway?" She said flatly.

Krishnan didn't mention Meenu again; he didn't try appealing to her gentle feminine side knowing she didn't have any.

"Anytime now, the kid will be having its naming ceremony," she added.

"Yes, I do remember how busy my daughter was all those times," Krishnan said.

It was the same with Hasini. But they never needed him to be around. Only Meenu would try to blackmail him into doing things for Hasini and her child. Mother and daughter had formed a world of their own. He was never privy to any secrets, be it complaints about Hasini's husband or her coping with married life. Women had a way of ganging up. When motherly feelings were abound, no one could stop them. The mother would mother the daughter and the daughter would mother her kid. Krishnan could never be part of the motherly feelings galore in that house.

"So your wife's not well?" The daughter's voice said. Some gentleness was peeping into that flat tone for a change.

"Yes, Meenu is not well and I'm afraid that her health may deteriorate further."

"Oh, is that her name? Meenu? Sounds a bit modern for that generation, I think."

"Yeah. She was their only daughter; and they were very fond of her," Krishnan recalled.

"Mr Krishnan, I don't think there is anything to hide. My father, I don't think, is interested in meeting her. Not that I asked. Nor did he tell me anything. Even if it were, it seems to have passed away. And, I don't feel like leaving him there as it may create more distance between my parents and me. As I told you before, I also don't have any help here and they have been much more than help."

"Well, are you ever considering—sorry, if you haven't thought about it—" Krishnan said. "Are you considering shifting to India?" Krishnan's voice now was almost a whisper.

"No. We are planning to settle here. If possible, I will try to get citizenship for my parents too."

"These days when children in India itself leave their parents in senior citizen homes, it is a great deed of yours to decide to keep them with you, really great." Krishnan said.

"Sure, thanks. But it's not all that easy." She said.

"Makes it all the more great," he said.

"Actually, it is not so. The situation we're in; the times we're in leave me no choice. With our house here on mortgage, I would need my father's savings as well as his pension money and even though converted to dollars, it isn't much. Nonetheless. It's a mutual help, actually." She said.

"I see," Krishnan said.

"Moreover, there is no job security for my husband. With two kids and the expenditure, I need to fortify whatever little for our future. Recently, my husband shifted to a job with lower pay. Why and what, I don't know. I am not supposed to ask, nor can I take up job of my own as of now. He

has to face many difficulties himself. His moods are very volatile. Marriage, you'd know well, with its myriad adjustments and compromises, is not easy."

"Sorry to hear that." Krishnan said.

"Married life needs so much tolerance," she said. "Well, you obviously know it. The kind of changes I've made to myself because of him is so much I just cannot mention."

She started taking off. Talking to a voice without a face can sometimes have that cathartic effect. She talked of her anxieties and worries and generally leaned on him.

"Hope you're not thinking that I am a selfish and cold person and don't understand your troubles." She ended.

"Not at all. You're just seeking a sympathetic heart. It's your life and expressing it to a stranger does sometimes help."

"No problem. In case, you change your mind, please contact me." He said.

She refused taking down his phone number, just wrote down the email id. Still, he insisted that she note it down.

"Did you say you were living in the city?" She asked.

"Yes."

"Then, why don't you move in with her. Don't people shift to such homes as couples? Or are you separated?"

"No. Not at all. Actually, I just shifted yesterday. I simply had to complete an important project so I left her here for a few months intending to take her away after that. But, these authorities wouldn't allow her back to her room as her tests are not normal." He explained.

It was time to end the conversation. He had wanted her to help. Instead, he was made to help her; whatever little. And, add to it, the unsolicited suggestion.

"Hope your kid gets well soon," he said.

"Sure, thanks. Thank you for your time and understanding." She signed off.

Krishnan sat staring blankly at the computer. His attempt has failed. He had prepared himself to counter obvious reasons that would include refusal by Ramasamy's wife. In fact, he was even preparing himself to face her. He would have vouched that it was not *that* kind of friendship they shared—the kind everybody would think of; and especially a wife. He was going to tell her it was just an old age companionship sort of friendliness—of which he himself was trying

consciously to affirm in his own mind. But, the daughter had given completely different reasons—of which he had no knowledge of; of which he was only familiar with; of which he usually kept the longest distance from. Descending from the royal court musician family, money was something they never spoke of. Even if they were hard-up, there would be euphemistic words or phrases substituting, say, God’s grace, blessings of the Goddess of music, and so on. The first time he had heard a direct reference was from Meenu’s mother. Ramasamy’s daughter must have seen him like Meenu’s mother—a person mouthing cacophony of useless knowledge that was far away from reality; a person who dreamt and expressed imaginative concepts; a person who experimented and researched all his life; a person who somehow was lucky to land a working wife and run away to foreign lands leaving behind marriage responsibilities; and a lifelong jerk. Asking to send her father just to regale his wife, which world did he belong, she must have been wondering.

He stretched on the chair feeling hopeless. How could he handle a person like that? Exasperation took over. Whenever he faced such people, he felt helpless. Maybe they made him feel uncertain about his deep beliefs. Maybe they were his alter-ego. He felt desolate.

Like his daughter, she too might be finding it hard to make ends meet. But, Hasini never asked them to help out. She was independent and took care of everything—even when she was abroad intermittently. Probably living abroad longer has its consequences—makes the children more selfish and mercenary. Or probably it is the recession—makes them insecure.

Three weeks later, he heard the sound of his mobile message coming from the top of the TV table. It disturbed his afternoon siesta. Dismissing it as the advertising messages that pick this irritating part of the day for making their noises, Krishnan slept off. In the evening, when he checked them, there was the message from Ramasamy’s daughter, “Please call me your evening, say, six-thirty.”

“Hello,” she said. “Sorry I hope I am not disturbing you.”

“No problem.”

“My husband has been shifted to India, Bangalore. Is it possible for you to find us a rented apartment there till we find something of our own?” She asked.

Krishnan felt like a broker. Surely, she knew how to use anyone—someone as remotely connected to her as he was. He didn't reply immediately.

“Sorry I'm asking you for this. It's just that we don't know anybody there and I thought you would love to have my father visit regularly.”

That roped him in. Krishnan said, “I am not sure.”

“I thought you said your daughter was there.”

“Yes, I'll try.”

Later his daughter told him that Ramasamy's son-in-law was actually thrown out of the job and they didn't want their relatives in Chennai knowing. Krishnan called her up and left a message regarding Ramasamy's visit. He stayed near his mobile all the time.

It rang. He let it go to the voice message box. “Mr Krishnan, I am Ramasamy's daughter. Instead of the visit, I thought it would be better if my father joins the residence again—mother most probably staying with me. Your wife may get back her mind, if not health. It's just that there is another thing I'd like to speak to you personally about. Please call.”

The search for a cheap apartment after many rejections; his daughter personally receiving them at the airport; she letting them live with her for a week till they moved in; she arranging everything from the house-warming ceremony to school for the kids—all that happened in just under a month. He was thinking of that as he dialed her number. That and whatever was to come. Her no-nonsense voice greeted—this time changing immediately to a honeyed one.

The attendant was bringing Meenu into her room—now Krishnan's and hers. It was a bright morning and the clock struck eleven. They could hear kindergarten kids practicing a prayer song. Music filled the air and flowers were in full bloom.

Meenu sat down in the chair. She asked Krishnan, “What a wonderful keyboard this is! Did you buy it for me? How I would like to lay my fingers on them and play merry tunes!”

“Meenu,” he said.

“I knew I lived here. And, you left me here alone,” she continued, her bright eyes slightly dimming.

“Meenu, you know who’s coming over today to visit you?”

Meenu stared blankly. A gust of wind pushed her hair onto her face.

“I forget names. That tall, handsome man who lived here long ago?”

She stood up and put her arms around him. Ramasamy too hugged her. “Oh, I’m so glad to see you,” she said. Then, removing her arms, she hit him playfully, “Why did you leave me for so long? Will you leave me again?”

Ramasamy said, “Never ever.”

Krishnan went off to the office leaving them alone to pay the residence fees for Ramasamy’s room.



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Gone Bonkers

It was something out of the world—the plan. When I first heard it, it sounded amazing. We were in South Chennai – on the beach at Kottivakam—Chinna and me—and this idea of kidnapping occurred. It was not like the Marina beach, all crowded all the time. Perhaps the only sound there—waves lashing—gave us that idea. It appeared a great idea at first, however, Chinna said afterwards, ‘*Pocchu-da!*’; which however we didn’t find out till it had all been done.

The bungalows there, independent houses, were richly decorated and quite stylish. Facing the sea, they towered over villas. Even the apartments there, which were rare, were spacious and built for the wealthy. The inhabitants were rich, classy, casual and content—a mix of businessmen, software professionals and popular Carnatic musicians. Businessmen didn’t stay there with their families; they visited and stayed for a few days; software people there were young couples and childfree; but musicians lived there and prided themselves on their houses. In fact, they would never leave the houses.

Chinna and I needed a lump sum to pull off a bank heist at North Chennai. All we had at that time between us was a mere one lakh in rupees. We needed another ten lakhs to buy the tools necessary to open modern technologically secured safes and other electronic locks. We discussed it sitting on the stone slab by the beach. The evening sun was pleasant; and the stress-less time brought out the best plans in our heads. In all our kidnapping experience far and wide in the state, we knew that this was a quiet place not much known in the city and easily gone unnoticed. The roads were big and trees on both sides of them hid many a walker there. Big houses with huge gates and securities who never stirred out made the place still and quiet. No neighbor cared for the other. Even if someone was murdered and they raised an alarm, it would go unnoticed. One never knows what goes on in those houses. Maybe they are smugglers, we reasoned out. Maybe other illegal activities too happening there, we said. So, how would it matter if we did that and made a few lakhs. We were not going to kill or do other such despicable activities. The police station was not near and even if so, only constables populated it.

We chose a boy of ten as our victim. We had seen him before at the beach. He was quite a talkative boy and argued over what constituted the baked salad—the Italian vegetable, Artichoke—with a friend of his while walking back from a hotel they had visited earlier. We had followed him. Chinna said that if a boy talked as much or more than a girl, you know he is naïve. That was good. His father was a Carnatic performer; not that we knew what Carnatic music was. As a kid, I had just heard it on the radio when my grandma was listening. The only explanation she gave was that it was the music Brahmins made. Being an old-fashioned woman, she revered them. But, I couldn't care less. They were the same to me as anybody else. In fact, the thing I knew of Brahmins was that they were a nervous bunch who lacked any courage of any sort. The father, they called him, Sanjay Parthasarathy, was a reputed singer who had traveled the whole globe. I guess he earned in dollars, something even software professionals in the country didn't get. Ten lakhs would be nothing to him. Even if we asked twenty, it would not burn a hole in his pockets.

Towards the south of this high class area was the East Coast Road stretching till Pondicherry. After five miles was a row of desolate bungalows at Palavakkam. If people coming to this beach were sparse, the other beach at Palavakkam was completely desolate. Much land between those bungalows was vacant with only a small room at the end of the site built for the watchmen. Chinna knew a watchman who had gone home for holidays and given him the key to stay there.

We chose a Tuesday to do the job. Even if the beach was sparsely crowded on weekends, it was still risky. Weekdays were really the right time. After watching the place on Monday, we set out to do it the next day. The kid was playing cricket with his friends on the road. It was dusk during the cold December season. It grew dark very fast. Although the time was five, it was starting to grow dark. We waited till the boy went to pick up the ball in a deserted plot near the road.

“Hey, little boy, you must be tired playing all the time. Have a chocolate,” said Chinna.

“Get lost,” he said and hit Chinna on his left cheek.

“Don't you worry, Chinna, we will raise the ransom,” I said, getting into the driver seat of the autorickshaw.

Chinna took an obscure black-colored cloth bag from his pocket. The kid tried to run. Chinna ran faster and ahead of him. He put the bag on the kid's head and covered his face. The boy put up a fight biting Chinna on his hand. He shrieked at the top of his voice. Chinna grew nervous and closed his mouth with his hands. He bit Chinna's fingers. He started kicking him too. Chinna overpowered the boy and caught his hands and lifted him. The kid kept kicking him everywhere—especially on his groin. Chinna bit his lip and rushed into the waiting auto. I accelerated and drove it as fast as I could. I knew all the shortcuts and didn't touch the main road where traffic policemen observed all the vehicles. We took him to the room. Chinna stayed behind. I drove the auto back to my friend's place and returned to him who let me use it when I had requested it to go on a jolly ride. Then, I walked back to the room picking up some *barotta* and *kurma* on the way—for the kid as well.

Chinna was applying some lotion on his wounds, scratches and bite marks. Sitting on a cot covered wearing a dirty lungi, he was watching water boil away on the gas stove and the boy banging on the steel cot to the rhythm of the water boiling. The room was a small one with a cot at one corner and an old television on the opposite corner. Adjacent to the TV was a gas stove and some utensils. When I went to turn the stove off, he took up a stick and cautioned me against going there.

“Hey, don't turn it off, the sound of the speed, at which the water boils will change,” he said. I was shocked. Could a boy of ten speak so clearly? I wondered. He really seemed intelligent.

“Don't worry,” said Chinna, “He means no harm.” Chinna rolled up his shirt sleeves and examined the bite marks.

“Heck, no, he seems an intelligent kind of boy,” I said.

“Yeah, he's alright. When you were away, he was teaching me to drum on the chair here. He knows all kinds of patterns. I was swayed by his rhythmic sense. In fact, he even made me dance to his drumming. He made me repeat after him: *ta ki ta* for three; *ta ka di mi* for four; *ta ka ta ki ta* for five; and so on.

I looked at him banging away on the cot. He sure seemed to be having a great time. He liked it here, amidst the dank smelling things in the room, dirty clothes hanging on the clothesline, and dirtier walls. It was funny how a rich kid living so clean and dapper can get bored with unending cleanliness and feel happy to be dirty. Sure, he was having great fun teaching Chinna the rhythms.

“Hey, Krishnan kutty,” he called Chinna. I looked questioningly at him. “What the heck!” I yelled.

“No bother,” said Chinna. “The boy said I look like his uncle, Krishnan kutty and so he calls me that. His uncle is a *mridangist* and I seem to be drumming as well as him, it seems.” Chinna’s voice had some pride.

He gave me a name too—Ambi—another uncle of his who was reticent and never forthright. Though I didn’t like the reasoning, I liked the sound of the name. The name was rare and used by Brahmins. It sounded better than mine—Pandi.

After we had tea, we took him to the beach there and showed him some catamarans. He played cricket with the fishermen boys while we watched some damsels cooking fish. He didn’t make any effort to escape. He liked the fisher folk, the danky room and us too. When we spread out the *barotta* packets back in the room, he sat quiet for some time and prayed. He relished the *barotta* and *kurma*, I wondered if his mother ever cooked. He gulped them down in mouthfuls; and his eyes were wide and watery. Perhaps the whole ordeal made him badly hungry. Then, he broke into a long speech broken only by more drumming and teaching rhythms.

It went like this: “I like this place a lot. I am having a great time here. My mother never lets me go out; even if I had to stay at a friend’s place, she doesn’t agree. I am glad I am here; that way I don’t have to go to school. I don’t have to do homework. My mother makes me study all the time. There is some test or the other always. Oh, it is so tiring. I have a pet dog. Shall we bring him here too? You know, I saw a large rat in my house yesterday, but this room is so compact and clean. Give me more *kurma*. I like those boats. Can we go in them tomorrow? Can we eat fish? The beach here is so much better than the beach near my home. My father wears diamond earrings gifted by grandfather. Why are your eyebrows so thick? Ramesh got beaten by me today at school. He must have complained. Good, I don’t have to go tomorrow and get punished. Frogs were croaking all over that village. Can we catch them tonight? Can we go fishing tomorrow? Can we borrow nets from them? I will also teach you to make pizzas and pastas. You know, Sarika has got six fingers. Why is it so silent here? Why are you watching this boring program? There is a better one; I’ll tell you all about it. Do you have a cook coming in tomorrow morning? Ask her to make my favorite dish—*pal payasam*. Tomorrow early morning I will teach you both sa ri ga ma.”

In between all this babble, he would inspect the utensils in the kitchen corner. He would sift through the leftover vegetables that had gone dry by then and attempt to name them. He would remember that it was time to practice his music lessons and sing them at the top of his voice. When he sings high notes, it would make Krishnan kutty shiver. He had Chinna terrorized from the start. He had a thick and strong voice that roared when he sang. If he practiced quietly, it was a quiet roar and when he hit high tones, it was like the roar of a victorious lion that had killed its prey and now all set to eat it.

“Shark king! Would you like to go back to your home?” I asked. After the little walk to the fisherman village, he called himself the Shark king and insisted we too call him so.

“Why?” He said. “You don’t want me here?” he started crying. “I don’t want to do homework. I don’t like to get up early in the morning and practice music. I don’t like to take bath early and pray. If I make even one mistake, my father will get angry. Sometimes he would thrash me for not singing to the right pitch. I don’t like school. Please don’t take me home. Ambi, please don’t take me back home, will you?”

“Don’t worry,” said I. “And, definitely not right now. You can stay here for some time. You’ll get good food and ride in the boat.”

“That’s great!” said he. “I have never had such fun in my life. We will definitely go riding on the boats, won’t we?”

He wouldn’t go to bed even when it was eleven. We picked up the dirty cloth covering the cot and laid it on the floor. The cot was not wide enough for the three of us. There was a noisy table fan that the kid was fiddling with. He had not seen a table fan. Perhaps his house was fully air conditioned—the one that changed its temperature according to body temperature. He ordered us to lie down quietly. He would fix the plug into the socket and switch on the table fan. His hands were not able to reach it but he was adamant. After a few attempts, he managed to fix it right. He also switched the light off promptly and lay between Chinna and me. He was quiet for some time but his energy got the better of him. We knew he would not run away but had us awake for more than three hours. He would jump and sing at the top of his voice. He would show us how rhythmically he jumped. He would jump in a pattern and ask us to identify. At last we fell asleep.

I had a troubled one and dreamt that I had been kidnapped by a Carnatic family and made to sing under whiplash.

I woke up hearing a loud shriek. It was so high-pitched I couldn't believe even now that it came from Chinna. I had never heard Chinna yell in pain before. He was a leader, the gang leader, now just leading a gang of two. He had a bass voice and barked commands. But, now under reduced circumstances, he had taken even to whining. But a feminine shriek was farfetched. It was not a great omen to hear such noises at the start of the day; more so that which wakes one up.

When I got up with a start, I saw Chinna wearing a *veshti* (not the *lungi* we were used to), holy ash on his forehead and sitting cross-legged in a humble way and a bent chest, singing something incomprehensible. The boy had got up early. He slept late but got up early. He was sitting in front of Chinna and had a cane in hand. The kid waved the cane in front of Chinna's face to make him beat his right hand on his thigh to that rhythm. I had never seen Chinna humiliated so much in our gangster life. Chinna has gotten to that low a level that even a kid is able to wield its cane on him and was visibly scared. It was the fear that drove him to do that. He had picked up fear after his bosom friend and trusted lieutenant had cheated him.

I made a swift stride towards the duo and took away the cane from his hands. The kid was adamant at teaching me, but I told him that if he didn't sleep then, I would take him to school. He didn't feel scared as I had expected. He was unyielding. Only when I said I would also learn the music, he calmed down. I had to lure him with trips on the boat and fish fry. There was a lot of such luring talk I had to do to get him to cow down. At last, I managed to get him back to bed and catch a few winks myself. But Chinna didn't sleep. He didn't even close his eyes. The kid terrorized the gang leader—a big wonder I still couldn't digest.

Day breaks late in the December month. If in summer, daylight floods in by five thirty in the morning; in December, there is some light seen only at six thirty or so. The music session had started at five, an unthinkable hour when we used to get back from night time robbing sessions. Here, the musicians start off their activities at that time. Strange routine people have, I thought. I

learnt one thing at that time that one should not try to rob a musician's house as who knows, he may be awake at four too.

I got up at six thirty. The kid was sound asleep. Chinna who was having a tea asked, "Why did you get up so soon?"

"Well, my stomach hurts and I cannot continue sleeping."

"You liar," said he, still shivering, "You are afraid that the kid would start caning you, isn't it?"

"Stop it, Chinna. What has happened to you? From when have you started fearing even children? Don't you remember those days when you were such a tyrant?"

Chinna went into nostalgia. His face got sadder and he went and sat crouched in a corner. Now, he would start on to a self-pitying mood and waste the whole day.

I had to change his mood. So, I gave him motivational talk. He began responding to it, thankfully. He stood up and bared his chest and said, "What a tyrannical kid is this? Do you think its parents will give money to have it back?"

He was sliding back again. I had to say something positive. "Parents like such kids. In fact, they dote on them. Isn't this kid their only child? They will surely want him around, no question about that. A son and an only child—what more can we ask. Now, why don't you wake him up and help you cook some breakfast while I make a survey of how the family is facing the fact that its child is missing."

So I took a bus to Kottivakkam beach. There was no direct bus to the beach. I had to go to the bus stop at Palavakkam, which was more than a kilometer from the beach—walk all the way upto the bus stop—wait for the bus—actually that was not much of a problem; any bus coming here would go there—just two or three stops—then walk another mile to the beach house of theirs. Morning near the kid's house was more silent than our own deserted dwelling. There was no flurry of activities. There was no police vehicle. There was no crowd thronging that place. It was as peaceful as an ashram. The misty morning was cold but that didn't deter me from making a few rounds about the place to check on reactions.

When I took a peep at the kid's house inside the large gate, there was no forlorn feeling I could observe. On the contrary, the servant had drawn the morning *Margazhi kolam*. Lights were on

like it was a celebration and not a bad day. Singing was heard. It was the same sa ri ga ma that the kid sang. There was some kind of instrument sound too. A middle aged woman was pouring coffee in a tumbler. Her hair was wet and she had worn a towel on it and tied it up on her head. Maybe she is the kid's mother. The father, the musician was singing. Was there anybody else at home? Perhaps they had not yet discovered that their little child was now in the folds of rowdies. It looked like she was not going to drink that coffee, probably there was some elderly person at home and she was giving him that. The coffee smell hit my nose— wonder what coffee was that, so strong. I decided to go back to the dwelling and have tea. We only have tea. That's cheaper.

I again went walking to the bus stop and took a bus back there. It seems like a bus is fast and saves time. But for distances of two or three bus stops, it is better to walk and that would be faster—saves on bus waiting time. I knew the shortcuts but felt lazy to walk. After all, we have got hold of the golden-egg laying-hen. Why not spend a few rupees for the bus ticket?

It was at least an hour since I had left. When I approached the dwelling, I heard the same song. As soon as I opened the door, the kid had again managed to hold the cane and begin teaching the song to Chinna. The boy's eyes were all wide and he seemed more threatening than teaching. Chinna looked like the scared deer the lion kid was going to pounce on.

“He poured water on my face to wake me up during the rare moment I had slept off,” said Chinna still shivering. “What's more, he said, his mother would do it when he slept longer in the mornings. Do you have a knife or any weapon?”

I took away the cane from the kid and stopped all the singing session. “How dare you meddle with this *bhagavathar*? No one dares stop a singing session and a sacred one like teaching music session. Be careful.” He said waving his hand in lieu of the cane.

We made tea and gulped it hot. Only when some hot tea went through the gullet, was I able to say something. I sent Chinna out to fetch some breakfast from a tea shop nearby. We could have bought tea also instead of making it here. But I didn't have a vessel to bring tea. If we asked for three teas, it might arouse suspicion. Although we took him yesterday to the fishermen village, it was a sparse part that we went to. Had we gone to the centre of the village, people would have talked. I took the kid to the beach for his toilet. Then, we walked by the village side again and

the fishermen had already gone fishing. Although it was chilly, they left very early—before dawn—into the sea. The kid was sad that he missed the opportunity to be on board a fishing boat. So, I changed its mood by hinting breakfast.

Chinna brought back *idlis* and *dosas*. The kid was not too keen on eating. For him, it was the same fare as at home. So I had Chinna buy some bun and butter biscuits to be had with tea. The kid relished the poor fare. He wanted *barottas* but that was not served for breakfast. I also had Chinna buy some *puttu* sold at tea shops especially near fisherman villages. He had it with sugar and banana.

After breakfast when the kid was amusing itself with the sand near the dwelling, I told Chinna, “I went there and was surprised that there was no worry yet. It was too peaceful for words. They may not yet have discovered him missing. Maybe they thought he was over at some aun’’s or friend’s house. Anyway, they may start suspecting when they don’t see him home today. So, the best time to call up would be tonight and we can get the message of ten lakhs across to the father.”

Just then I heard loud drumming. When I went out, the kid had a broken aluminum plate in hand and made some beating noise. He went collecting thrown aluminum plates on the sand. He had twigs in his hand and went drumming the plates. He liked playing with the sand. His face and dresses were all sand. My mother never lets me play with sand, he said. Testing his aiming skills, he threw a plate at us. I ducked but it hit Chinna on his head. The fat kid had force. His fat arms were actually strong for a kid. Maybe he drums a lot. Chinna passed out. He made a noise like the sneeze of a cow and fell staggering on the steps. His head fell straight on the sand and made a thud noise. I immediately pulled him up.

“Doesn’t this kid look like a small version of Lord Yama?” He asked.

“Take it easy.” I said. “Breathe deep for some time and you’ll get back your senses.”

He folded both his hands and pleaded with me. “Please don’t leave me here with this pest.”

I ran out into the sand. The kid saw me and ran faster. I chased after him. The little kid ran into crevices that adults could not think of. With its nimble feet, it ran everywhere. It was right in front running but always a few steps ahead. My adult strength was compensated by the kid’s agility. It took at least ten minutes of chasing before I could lay my hands on him. He made me

really angry. I caught him at last and shook him till he screamed. A slap on the mouth silenced the scream.

“If you run around like this and hit Chinna, I’ll send you home straightaway.” I said. The boy began sobbing. All my hard hits had only ended up in him sobbing and not crying. His sobs were not genuine. He was only trying to plead.

“Please, please don’t send me home. I didn’t hit Chinna, it was only for fun. But, he also hit me when you were not there. Please don’t send me home. I promise I will not hit. Please.”

“Ok and behave yourself.”

“Can I also teach one song to Chinna? Please. It’s my favorite song and my father taught me that. I get a chance to teach only here. At home, everybody teaches me,” he said.

“I don’t know what song you’re teaching. Ask Chinna and if he agrees, do so. Only both of you will be here today. I am going outside.” I said.

I took the kid to Chinna and said that everything was ok. The boy smiled at him and told him not to worry. As a concession, he would teach him a song he had already heard of and not something totally new. He began interviewing Chinna.

“Tell me a song you know.”

“*Vaadi muniyamma un kannule mai.*” Chinna sang.

“I have not heard it. Some song that is more Carnatic,” he said.

“What is Carnatic?” Chinna asked.

“They will sit and sing. They will shake their heads and sing *sa ri ga ma*, all that.” I butted in.

“Oh, that. Those Iyer people sing.” Chinna replied.

“Not Iyer people only. Other people also sang. Mother said. But, they left it. Now, only Iyer people are singing,” the boy said.

Both Chinna and I were astonished at the kid’s expert knowledge to argue and make a point at this little age. Family, I said. Family and genes make a lot of difference.

“So, is it like that film, Sankarabharanam?” Chinna asked.

The boy was thinking. He said after some time, “Ok, I don’t know much about it but I can understand the type of songs you have in mind. I am getting an idea. Give me some time. I’ll start the teaching.”

I took Chinna aside. He was still shivering and didn't like the whole thing. Why do I have to be the one to be with this little pest? He asked. "You know me, Pandi. You know what a great gang leader I was. We robbed successfully in rain and shine. I led that great train robbery down south too. We did so many things together and did everything victoriously. But now I am losing my nerve, thanks to this little kid. I am not able to tolerate this pest any longer. Please don't leave me with this pest long. Please, I beg you."

I said, "I'm going over to that beach near his home and keep a watch today. We need to check out the beauty of our work—how people are taking it. But before that, let us write down what we have to talk to the father, Sanjay."

I continued, "I'll be back for lunch. Keep this boy as amused as you can. Don't get into any fights with him. I can see that you may not be able to handle, if he tries to run away. So, accept his superiority. Treat him as your leader and just bide your time."

Before we were further disturbed by the boy, we set out to make the terms of the message clear. Chinna and I got some paper and pen while the shark king ran out into the beach to check the remaining boats. Chinna looked very upset. When I asked him what the matter was, he pointed to the kid. Who will pay ten lakhs to get this kid back? He asked.

"I agree that he is the only child and an only son. But he is a pest. For all you know, his parents may be his victims. They may only be feeling happy that somebody took him off their hands. If we urge them to pay ten lakhs, they may send the police after us and make an agreement to make us proxy parents for life."

"Chinna, you are just too nervous right now. Probably it is not the right time to talk," I said.

"All I am saying is let's lower the ransom," he said.

"What's the figure you have in mind?"

"Five lakhs," he said.

"That's too low. I'll not agree," I said blankly.

"Ok. Six." He said.

"No, that's not on. It's really low," I said.

"Well, seven." He said.

"No"

“Eight”

“No”

“That’s not on, Pandi. Give some respect to my words. I was the leader once, right? If it is not eight, it is nine; what’s the big difference?”

“OK. Fine. Eight, it is, then,” I said, “I am not happy with the lowering. Remember you said, these rich musicians can afford even twenty lakhs, now we are reducing from ten.” I didn’t see Chinna change his mind. So be it, eight then.

So, to satisfy Chinna, I finally accepted. We tore a paper from an old notebook and set out to write it. Only if we have it written down, we would be able to speak easily over the phone.

We called the little boy and asked him his home phone number. He was reluctant to give at first thinking we might call his father and send him home. But, when we convinced him that we were calling to get him *pal payasam* from home, he complied.

So, we wrote down what we were going to talk to Sanjay Parthasarathy:

“Have you wondered where your son was last night? Are you bothered that he is not home? If that is the case, we have him here. Yes, he is kidnapped. And, he is taken far, far away from your home. It is useless to search for him. You don’t need to call the police or send any detectives after him. If you ever do, it will be at your own peril. And, what we demand in return for your son is a sum of eight lakh rupees. If you try to be smart, the sum will increase and he will be taken further away from where he is already now. If you agree to these conditions, leave a written letter saying you will send the money below the first stone bench on the right side of the road by eight at night. Leave the money in a grey colored suitcase at the deserted plot opposite to your home when midnight strikes. Your son will be home at five sharp the next morning. If you try any tricks, we will have no other choice but to send your son’s head by post. Beware!”

Chinna had written another note. It was shorter and looked more like pleading with them. It went like this:

“We know now that your little son is a brat and that is why you have not bothered to look out for him. You may probably thank us for having rescued you from him. I would not like to call it kidnapping, just displacement. He also likes it here. We are not harming him in anyway. So, if

you can be broadminded and have him back, we will be grateful. Please do not bother about anything. We will bring him back as soon as possible. But, there is a thing called money. I know you would like to part with more than twenty lakhs for him but all we ask is only eight. Don't you think your son deserves to be valued at eight lakhs for two days of torture that he had given us? Please do not call the police or the detectives. They may ask you for more money. It would be cheaper for you to just deal with us.

PS: Even if you don't give any money, please take him off us. I beg you."

When I read this note, I just tore it off. "What kind of talk will you do based on this note?" I asked. "Are you out of your senses?"

"I cannot see any other way," he said.

"There are other ways. Moreover, this will be our last kidnapping. So, you can rest assured that we won't have to tolerate any more brats." I said.

That gave him some joy. I folded my note neatly and put it into my pocket.

When I was about to leave, the kid came up to me and asked, "Can I go boating with Krishnan kuttu?"

"I don't think there are any boats here now. They have all gone fishing early in the morning like you get up early and practice. Chinna will take you for a boat ride if there is any boat still there." I said.

"I'm tired of sitting in this room and singing. My father never allowed me to go boating. He would only sit and sing all the time. Please, please can I go?" He repeated.

I was getting mildly irritated myself. "I told you, you can go. But there has to be a boat."

"I have made friends yesterday with some boys. They told me I can also come for fishing today." He said.

"Chinna will take you. If you run away by yourself, we will ask your friends to take you back home," I said.

"Ok, ok. In which case, Chinna will have to learn that song and then we all go boating," the kid said.

"It is not something difficult," said I. "Chinna will learn the song and then take you boating."

Overhearing this talk, Chinna came near me and looked suspiciously. It was clear he was getting crazier by the hour. A small sound and it shook him as if an earthquake had suddenly shaken the ground off his feet. He was getting very sensitive and edgy.

“Now, what am I to do,” saying he jumped.

“You are to learn something he is teaching and then take him out on a boat ride.” I said.

“What?”

“Didn’t you hear what I said,” I said. I felt bad trying to command the erstwhile leader but then when leaders tend to go crazy, somebody else has to hold the reins. We were only two. I assumed leadership.

“I don’t like this singing and all this shaking music. I cannot listen to this kid singing also. About the boat, I don’t know any fishermen here who could give both of us a ride.”

“You’ll have to tolerate the kid and his wishes—at least till midnight. Be sweet to him or else he may run away. He may tell on us too, who knows.” I said.

“You don’t have to do anything. Just obey my orders,” the kid said. That was it. Those words sent Chinna reeling. Both his hands went to the sides of his head in an effort to pluck his hair away. His face went into a contortion. I had seen him do this when he was extremely angry, which was rare in those golden days when he ran the show. Now, he starts to act nervous and angry alternatively; and for every little problem. Now, everything became a problem to him.

“Look, Chinna,” I said trying to pacify him. “It’s a matter of one day. It is ok to let the kid lead. Think of it this way, he is a bundle of our prospective money. Why not let him command for just a day?”

For once, Chinna calmed down as suddenly as he had risen in anger. “Ok. But you hurry with the whole thing. We could have as well taken the letter I wrote to talk to that father of his.” He said.

I took a bus again to the Kottivakam beach. It was pleasant at that time too. It must be ten in the morning. In the summer months, going out at ten was unimaginable. It would be scorching hot. When I was a kid, I never wore slippers. We would run in the noon heat from school without chappals to eat hot lunch at our hut. Then, the schools started providing lunch. Sometimes, it would give me a stomach ache. But then, I had to eat it. There was no other choice. If it were not for that lunch, my parents would not have let me go to school as well. I hated school. This kid hated too.

I went to the tea shop next to the road where the kid's house stood. It was a cart, a street cart that served tea and other snacks. A few people had gathered around it and were sipping hot tea. Sales was good for him especially during these months. One old man said that there was a fat boy—the *bhagavathar's* boy—who seems to have got lost. The tea man concurred. Some others also said that they had heard that the boy was lost from the previous night. I had heard enough. So, it was not as happy as I thought it to be. Instead of making that phone call in the evening, I hurried up and made it right then.

A few yards away, there were petty shops selling many obscure things. They also had a PCO/STD. I chose the one with a small booth so that it was private. I took out the note from my pocket and called up the number. The musician himself came on line. Without waiting for any kind of talk or response, I just related what was written in a stern voice. I didn't wait for any reply and just banged the phone down. There was a relief in me. I paid up the one rupee for the phone call and headed back to the dwelling.

The door was locked. I went to the little village to enquire about them. An urchin told me they had returned from the boat ride long back. I searched the beach and combed through the sea weeds grown wildly near the huts. Then, I got back thinking they may have come back to the room while I was searching the beach. But it was still locked. I wandered around and peeped into nearby bungalows. The watchmen gave me a queer look and I had to refrain. Again, when I went back, it was locked. I sat on the steps not knowing what to do. Then, I decided to wait rather than take any action.

I suddenly heard a rustle in the bushes nearby and then, emerged Chinna from them. His face had a pleading expression. On the road near the plot, the kid was emerging. It was walking softly. It reached the gate and stood hidden behind the fence and watched Chinna stealthily.

"I'm sorry Pandi but I had to escape from the kid," he said.

"What happened?"

"I sent the kid home. Don't get angry with me," he said.

I stood staring at him. He thought I was going to blame him and laid out the explanation.

"There is a limit to my tolerance. It's true that I am a grown man and an adult and am stronger than a kid, even a strong kid. But this kid—the fatso, always running around hyper, and when not

running, singing, drumming and eating ferociously—is too much for even a wrestler to bear. I don't think any kidnapper at any point would have faced such a kid. Even the strongest gangster leader would want to escape from such characters. Nobody would have faced such supernatural tortures in their lives. So, I left it at home. I didn't honour our terms and am sorry for that.”

I smiled. “So, what exactly happened?” I asked.

“After you left me, he made me take a bath. He scrubbed my back so hard, it started to pain. All the while, he was singing some song or the other like “aaaahh” or “tatarinana”. I had never heard this kind of unending music all my life. Then, he made me wear that *veshti* again. He sat like a teacher and ordered me to repeat after him. If I couldn't pronounce some words or sing to some pitch, he would repeat it so much that I got frustrated. The lesson was taking hours. I would have done well at school itself if I had known I would be subjected to this kind of torture. When I was a kid, I used to make fun of teachers. I tied crackers to their saari ends. I would place plastic bags on their seats that would burst when they sat. Then, we would all laugh. I think those teachers must have cursed me. And now, this little devil is sending me to hell with his teaching. I cannot control him. I cannot spank him.”

Chinna trailed off. I had to bring him back on rails. “Get to the point. Then, what happened?”

“At last his singing got over. If he sat and sang, he had to run around all the time that he had sat. He alternated between being a disciplined and quiet kid to a hyper and running around sort of kid. So, his next venture was to make me wear the *lungi*. He took me down to the beach and hurled up some more brats to go along with him. There was no adult in the boat. These little ones handled everything and handled it very well. Only if my father had taught me to ride boats and fish, I would not have had to do all these,” he reminisced.

“Chinna, stick to the subject on hand. Don't trail off,” I said.

“There was a spare boat and all the brats got in. That shark king made me get in too. Those kids are so charged up that they can face any kind of waves. They rowed. That brat also rowed. He couldn't really control his joy at the ride. He was all jumpy. I was even scared that he might jump off the boat. If he drowned, what would happen? I have been a robber and have seen lot of police torture. But I have never killed anyone. Murder is not my cup of tea. As a gangster when that *marwadi seth* asked if I could finish off some competitor of his for an unimaginable sum, I didn't get swayed. I stick to robbery of all kinds, but murder, no.”

“Chinna, back to the subject,” I reminded.

“Those kids were going far out into the sea. I feared at my own life. Then, I remembered that I could spank those kids and bring the boat back. It worked. But, that shark king started shouting adamantly. I told one of those kids to threaten him that he would be sent home, if they didn’t return. It worked. We got back at last. By then, I knew that even you will not be able to handle the brat. Waiting till midnight for the dough would be futile. So, I told him I would get him *barotta* and made him walk with me to his home. When we reached the building next to his house, I pushed him further and ran away from the spot. I never knew I could run a marathon and that too, so fast.” He said, brimming.

“I think you have gone crazy. Is your family any history of madness?” I asked.

“Why would you chide me so? I know you are angry we don’t have the money.”

“It is not about that. Look behind you,” I said.

Chinna turned and saw the brat. He collapsed again on the steps. His hands were on his forehead. He had given up; he knew he would not be able to survive the next round. I too sat at the steps next to him. I was getting mildly scared, not due to the kid but getting worried about Chinna’s sanity. After some time, I told him that he need not wait. I had already made the phone call which we had planned that evening. If that Sanjay *bhagavathar* fell in with our plans, we should have the money by night and scoot the place. We would not only have escaped with the kidnapping but also the kid. Chinna’s face brightened a little. He felt well enough to do another round with the kid. This time, it was the game of collecting old plates and twigs and hurling at each other.

After resolving the problem on hand and negotiating with Chinna and the kid, I felt exhausted. What I needed was some *barottas* that would keep me going the whole evening and night when the exercise would begin. So, I went and bought as many as I could lay my hands on. The kid relished it. So, it could be distracted for some more time with all the eating. When I brought them, the kid came running and ate all of them except one for me and one for Chinna. What a huge stomach it had! Kids these days were fatter than their parents when they were kids. When I was a kid, even rich kids were thin. They grew fat only after marriage. But now, even these fishermen kids were getting fat. Too much of eating and too much of watching TV, I reasoned

out. So, I had to go again to the *barotta* shop and eat well there and parcel some for Chinna. When I returned, I saw the kid talking to the new fishermen friends and Chinna cleverly sneaked into the room and ate heartily.

At dusk, I went to the Kottivakam beach. I knew a place where I could hide and wait for the message. Behind the stone bench, there was a wall surrounding a deserted plot. The wall was strong and had glass pieces entrenched in it so that nobody could climb on it. But, I was an expert at climbing such walls. So I climbed into the plot and onto the sole tree that was in it and hid among the branches. I knew when the constables would arrive, exactly one hour before the ordeal and leave after an hour. Then, they would go and report that nothing could be done. Lazy ones, but it helped us. It was getting dark. In another hour or so, I would get the message and then after a few hours, the money itself. I waited with alacrity. I had worn a dark colored *lungi* and no *banian*. My skin was dark and that helped. At eight sharp, nobody came. After ten minutes, a boy riding cycle came and threw away a paper, possibly the message under the stone bench. I knew then that the constables would be watching out now for the next hour.

The night was cold but not so cold as to warrant clothing. Some villagers, I had seen, had lately taken to wearing sweaters. Maybe they wanted it as cold as other hilly places which rich people visited. But I would not fall into such traps. I had never worn and would never wear. After an hour, I could see constables wearing mufflers around their ears sipping tea on the street. Had they had the sense to look up, they would have probably caught me. But, if they had all that sense, they would not be constables. I was laughing at them in my mind. They looked at both sides of the street and slowly started walking off. I waited another half hour. There may be policemen in mufti or somebody looking from some window through binoculars. I had to be careful. Another half hour went by. It should tire the observer, if any. He should want to take a break. So, I slowly climbed down the tree and stealthily, like a slithering snake. I walked near the bench and in a flash, laid my hands on the note and took it out. It looked very casual. Then, I increased my walking pace and when I left the road, ran to the dwelling. I didn't read the note till I got together with Chinna.

The note went like this:

Dear Rowdies,

Thanks for the ransom call you put to me this morning. You said that I had to give eight lakhs to get back my little Pranav. You are expecting too much. Eight lakhs is a lot of money. If you thought you can make me raise eight lakhs to have the brat back, you are mistaken. On the contrary, I offer you another offer, a counter offer. I can take the kid off your hands if you pay me eighty thousand rupees. By now, the whole place knows that the kid is lost. So if you come tomorrow morning, they might beat you up and I will not be held responsible. So, you come at midnight tonight and hand him over. And, don't forget the eighty thousand.

Yours sincerely,

P. Sanjay

“What the hell! The arrogance of the spineless musician...” I called him names. I knew all the choicest words that would come out at all the right times.

Then, I looked at Chinna; and he looked at me. But, he didn't seem so angry. On the contrary, he looked like it was godsend. I seemed now to be the only obstacle in the way. He looked imploringly at me. His eyes had that begging expression that he yields to, so often these days. Where was the leader in him? Wasn't it at this time that he should be showing courage? I was disappointed.

“I told you. He is a brat that even his parents cannot handle. If we ignore this letter and go there to wait for the money, not only that we will not get it, we will be saddled with this thing for the rest of our lives. Like I said they would make proxy parents of us. Rich or no rich, this kid should be sent off today,” he said.

I didn't reply. I was angry and stone-faced. He appealed to me again.

“Look at it this way: he has only asked us to part with what we already have and not more. What is eighty thousand compared to peaceful nights and days? I will go crazy and end up in Kilpauk.

You may look ok now but you will also follow me sooner or later. I think he is not spineless. That *bhagavathar* is a gentleman. It is a great offer. Had he asked us to part with an equal eight lakhs and return the kid, what would we have done? Think of it that way,” Chinna continued. “Well, actually, this shark king was also getting on my nerves. You are right there that sooner or later both of us would have ended up in Kilpauk.” I said.

We fed him *barotta* that night and tried to make him sleep. He was half sleepy when we were carrying him. He tried to retort mildly. When he discovered we were taking him to his home, he shook violently. We managed to convince him only after explaining sweetly that we were taking him home for just a few minutes to fetch the fishing net his father had promised to give. After we got it, we could go real fishing the next day and farther and farther into the sea. I would also teach him to swim in deep waters, and so on. We had to really exert and explain. He was always cross-questioning and disbelieving.

It was really cold that night. There was no moon. We had wrapped him in a blanket and carried him to his home. When we opened the gate, the porch light went on. It was twelve sharp. A dog was howling somewhere far away. The door opened. It should have been us counting the eight lakhs when Chinna was handing over eighty thousand to the *bhagavathar*. We opened the bundle and out came the kid. He was all smiles and asked his father about the fishing net. When it occurred to him that we were leaving him home, he put up another tantrum and held tightly on to Chinna’s hand. The *bhagavathar* had to forcefully pull him away.

“Please hold him till we run away,” I said.

“I will try; I used to be strong but now I am not sure I can hold him long. Please run away soon,” he replied.

“Please keep him for at least the next half hour as that would give us sufficient time to vacate our place.” I added. “He knows the dwelling and could escape from his father’s clutches and come back to us,” Chennai said. Chinna ran as fast as his thin legs could. He was already at the room before I caught up with him. In the next few minutes, we ran away from the place, took a bus and went to North Chennai to our regular hideout.

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Untitled

The anniversary rituals had just got over at noon and the day was blazing hot. In the Iyer's house, the third year death anniversary conducted by the grandmother, Laxmi Ammal had just got over, and Nithya, who had gone to read under the mango tree, could see banana leaves being laid for lunch in the hall; cousin Sridhar murmuring to Nithya's mother; now the noon light heating parts of the hall through the windows; and Sridhar's brother Narayan's long drawn face listening to the priest's advice.

It was cool under the shade of the mango tree and the shadow of leaves on top made an aesthetic painting on the ground. There was stillness in the colony that comes with a hot summer; and it was the dreaded hot June. One lay indoors and hoped for some blessed cool air to blow now and then and longed to drink iced lemonade or just eat those ice cubes straight from the freezer of a rare and expensive fridge that only a rich household in the colony had; and where even an air conditioner was uncommon to have. It was always sweating and in the landlocked Trichy, the burning heat was at its peak.

Nithya had completed her eighteenth birthday three months back. Narayan had indicated that he liked her and wished to marry her (when they are both grown-up); she liked him as a friend but consented to it nevertheless. His parents had died in an accident, and she didn't have the heart to say no. At that sprightly age when her spirits never drooped, she still studied badly, couldn't concentrate on anything and slept badly too. It was five months after he had proposed. She sat withdrawn under the tree watching them sit on the floor and eat the three-course lunch served by the Brahmin cooks who were given charge of the kitchen for that day.

Someone looked at her through the window, it was Sridhar; he came out and stood on the shady verandah. He had just completed his engineering degree, heard his brother talk about the proposal, and came rushing home. Years ago, his mother had been talking of a possible match between Nithya and Sridhar; and he had carried her in his heart from then on. It was easy for South Indian families to marry their cousins and the whole process of matchmaking and marriage was easier. A man could marry his paternal aunt's daughter and a woman, her maternal uncle's

son. But a marriage between a man to his paternal uncle's daughter (father's brother's daughter) would be a taboo as they are considered brother and sister. Nithya's mother was the sister of the dead father of Sridhar and Narayan. Sridhar had got a job in Delhi and was eager to propose, however, his brother, Narayan bagged her first.

Sridhar was wearing a well-ironed shirt and a white *veshti*. He was bony, fair and had deep set eyes but all the same, handsome with a well-defined chin and shapely nose. Seeing Nithya sitting with a book on her lap, he went up to her.

"Why don't you come in; it's so hot," He said.

"Oh, I'm alright. Besides, I can look at Narayan from her," she said.

Sridhar's face fell. Nithya noticed it. There was an awkward pause. "I'm sorry about your parents," she said wondering if that was the reason Sridhar fell silent.

"No, that's ok," he replied. There was silence again.

To break it, she asked, "So, when are you having lunch?" "After they leave," he said, pointing out to the priests who were tucking into the large spread.

There was silence again. This time, she could not bear it. Curiosity got the better of her. She had to take it out of her chest.

"I had observed you feeling so sad from the time you came home. Is there any problem?" She asked.

"Well, not exactly," he said. There was a pause. It was not a decisive reply. The idea was to provoke further questioning. Nithya was a curious person and never kept any secret to herself; and it was not very difficult to provoke her.

"Hmm. So, did you hear about Narayan proposing to me?" She asked. That was the hot topic; relatives of her age were talking about it. Of course, it had not gotten to her parents or aunts or uncles yet.

Sridhar was mum. He just nodded. That provoked her again. "So, what do you think?" She asked.

The proposal was a newfound interest in Nithya—not that she was madly in love or infatuated. It was interesting to be proposed to; interesting to feel engaged; and interesting to feel that she had a man interested in her.

Sridhar didn't react like her other relatives—happy. He didn't say anything; in fact, his eyes had a glazed expression. Unable to understand—Nithya was slow even otherwise too—she asked again.

“Well, what can I say?” He replied without saying anything complete.

“So, you are not happy about it?” She asked.

“Not greatly happy,” he said.

“And, why is that?”

“I cannot really say it.” He said.

Nithya was shocked. She had never hit a roadblock earlier in her life—for that matter, her life had been all of eighteen years till now. His reply made her think.

“Are you guys not hungry?” Nithya's mother called from inside the house.

“Has everyone eaten?” Nithya asked.

“Narayan ate along with the priests. He is the eldest son and had to do the rituals. Grandma is old and cannot bear hunger. Now, it's you, me and Sridhar.” Nithya's mother said, “Come on, don't waste time.”

Grandma was talking loudly with the priests but lowered her voice while talking of the accident. Till they get the compensation, they're depending on my meager pension for everything, she said, sounding important. Her daughter, Nithya's mother had come to stay there to cook and take care of the two sons as well as watch over Nithya, whom she admitted at a nearby college to do BA (music) and stay at the hostel. A servant cleared the banana leaves, wiped the floor and set new, washed leaves on the floor for the next batch. There were only three leaves. All the remaining food in dishes was pushed towards them to let them serve themselves. Grandma could not bend and serve, Narayan, the man was not expected to serve, and the servant worked only with the cleaning part.

“Eat well,” grandma said to Sridhar. “All that hostel food had been taking a toll on you. See how thin you are,” she said. She didn't speak to Nithya and would not beseech her. Female members of the family were not pampered or appreciated. They were only supposed to do housework and reproduce. Working outside was rare and provoked jealousy from other women; and if they worked outside, it was in addition to the housework and reproduction. If a girl managed to get a job, she'd be badmouthed so much in an attempt to malign her character. Ineffectual housewives

find a weapon in such talks. It works both ways—torment her if she works and enjoy if she leaves.

Nithya didn't mind. The treatment had seeped into her blood that she never even thought about it. At her sprightly age, such traditional treatment didn't affect her.

“Sridhar, you have not even had a second helping of the rice,” grandma observed. He just continued eating and didn't look up at her.

The death anniversary lunch included special dishes made of sesame seeds, a favorite of Lord Shani—the God of Death. Nithya's mother and grandma began conversing on the dishes. Sridhar and Nithya ate in silence.

After lunch and a siesta, Nithya's mother made coffee. Nithya was urged to sing songs to regale grandma. Narayan sat and listened silently. He had completed his degree four years back in commerce and was apprenticing at a local chartered accountant firm but had no definite income yet. He was pursuing the CA exam and written thrice or four times and not passed “inter” yet; even one of the exams.

At six in the evening, Narayan went out to meet his friends. The women cleared the rooms, brought back from outside clothes left to dry, folded them, combed their long hair into braids, and washed their faces, while Sridhar kept drinking more coffee. He went out alone saying they need not expect him for dinner. After dinner, Nithya and her mother went into a room they shared and slept off.

At midnight, Nithya woke up hearing Sridhar come into the house. She lost her sleep and sat up. Her mind went on wondering what had made Sridhar sad. Ever since, Narayan had proposed to her, Nithya kept thinking the same thoughts: Was I wrong in accepting? Are we suited to each other? Now, a new thought was added: Why was Sridhar sad? The thoughts were persistent. Sometimes, when she was not worried, she would replay the moment Narayan proposed to her, how she was accepted him slowly, how she had learnt to be contended with this not-so-capable man, and so on. She never worried about future; and it was far, far away. She had three or five more years to go; and some miracle would happen and everything will be alright. At that sprightly age, Nithya was new to worrying. And, even if she worried a bit, she didn't know she was actually worrying.

Through the open window, she saw the leaves of the mango tree fluttering in a rare, mild breeze. It was so hot in the summer months that the windows were always kept open. Men would sleep on the terrace in the open air.

“Why suddenly is my mind letting in thoughts about Sridhar?”

Perhaps everything was happening too fast. It was too early to get tied to someone. Or was it Sridhar’s unspoken thought. Why couldn’t she get Sridhar out of her head? Why?

The day broke. It was five-thirty in the morning. Grandma woke up. “Wake up.” Nithya’s mother shook her hard.

“I didn’t sleep at all last night. Please let me sleep.” Nithya said.

“Don’t make excuses. Just get up.” She didn’t stop shaking her hard.

Nithya’s mother felt she was a model mother who knew how to raise a daughter well. She took pride in showing off her daughter’s singing skills but privately treated her hard. It was not that she didn’t like her daughter. It was just that she felt she was following the tradition of upbringing a daughter by being hard on her. If daughters are pampered, they would not be able to adjust to their in-laws—a crucial ingredient to a successful marriage. To top it, Nithya looked like her father’s sister on whom Nithya’s mother had taken a strong dislike from day one.

“Go, you sleepy eyes; clean the porch and draw the *kolam*,” she said.

After lunch, grandma and the mother took a nap. Nithya was in the kitchen making coffee for Sridhar. It was an unusual habit to take coffee after lunch. It was probably a western habit; and engineers wanted to live the western lifestyle. In an earlier visit, when Nithya was just ten, she remembered her late aunt ask Sridhar to clean the toilet. Village toilets were just a tiny room where one defecated and cleaned oneself. There was no flushing. Once a day or two, somebody would clean the whole thing. Probably repeated rural habits makes one want to escape, adopt and hold on stubbornly to western ways, thought Nithya.

“So, what are your future plans?” He asked.

“What plans?” Nithya asked.

“When do you plan to get married and where do you want to settle down?”

“I don’t know.” Nithya handed him the hot coffee tumbler.

“Don’t you think of any of these things?” He asked. “Or would you complete your music degree and sing for your supper?” He mocked. “At least tell me when you are planning to tell your mother.” He said.

“I have not thought about these.” She said. “Narayan will say,” she added.

“Probably when Narayan has a job, a steady job at that, you will tell your mother,” he said.

“Marriage is too far away for me to think about it,” she said.

But, Sridhar was happy he was able to sow the seeds of a strong criteria for marriage—a job, his strength—into her mind.

“Now that your life is linked with his or at least in both your minds, you’ll probably end up here all your life, which is contrary to the Chennai dream you were having.” He continued, “You were winning music competitions always including the Madras Music Academy’s; and you wanted to make a music career at Chennai.” He said. “Go to Chennai, become that musician, and then plan for marriage,” he said in a turn of friendly advice.

In the evening, Narayan came back from office where he was apprenticing. Nithya went out alone in a cycle saying she needed to buy some gifts for her friends. Narayan joined her at a hotel. Nithya’s mother didn’t allow her to sit in Narayan’s bike as only husband and wife were allowed to do that. They could not do a tete-a-tete at home too. They would be looked at suspiciously if they even talked to each other with everyone around.

She was back at six thirty—the maximum time allowed for any outing of hers. They all had dinner and went to bed. Nithya had got her bag ready to leave early the next day morning to college.

Narayan visited her at the college and took her out. Nithya continued enquiring about Sridhar.

“Yeah, he is getting thinner, doesn’t eat much,” Narayan told with a brotherly concern.

Sometimes, he would feel irritated about her frequent enquiry over Sridhar. He was the apple of his mother’s eye till Sridhar was born. Although his mother had retained her affection for him, Sridhar’s stellar performances in studies made it difficult for her to ignore Sridhar. Probably Sridhar wanted all the affection and knew that the only way to get it was by reaching such heights that others could never think of. He always stood first in class. His excellent high school scores got him a seat at a top engineering college. He was someone the whole family was proud

of. In contrast, Narayan began fading out. To get back at him, Narayan blamed Sridhar for the accident which had taken the lives of both his parents. He had not directly or openly blamed him but Sridhar's eyes understood and feared Narayan's. That was three years ago.

Sridhar was leaving for Delhi in August. Nithya's exams kept her busy. Sridhar visited her on a Sunday before her last exam. Looking dapper in blue jeans and a casual white shirt, he removed his dark glasses and greeted her.

"I am leaving next week," he said.

"So, you like this job of yours?" She asked.

"It's ok. Nothing great." He said. Nithya observed how casual he was about his job.

"You have still not told me why you are sad," asked Nithya, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Maybe it's time." He said and paused.

"I don't know if you remembered that the elders in the family would talk about marrying you and me when we grew up." He said.

"Oh, so that was what this is all about, ha?"

"Well, I just assumed that that was what was going to happen." He said.

Nithya fell silent. It was true and now she did recall those comments by Sridhar's mother. As a child of ten, she had felt happy at her name being linked to his. Sridhar was good to look at, even as a kid. If she had known that he had harbored her in his heart still, she would have definitely accepted his proposal. She knew it.

Seated at a café, she saw his light hair falling on his forehead. Yes, she would miss this handsome man; she would miss his charm; and she would miss the opportunity of having him all her life.

"I don't know what to say," she said. She knew she was starting to miss marrying the successful man in the family and she was tied to the brother. Suddenly, Narayan looked like the poorer of the two, uglier of the two, and luckless of the two.

"Well, anyway, I got to go," Sridhar said. The evening sun fell on his face lighting his fair skin. As he left, darkness fell.

That night, she woke up again. The missed opportunity tormented her. Why had she not been smart? Why had she rushed into saying yes? Why didn't she use her head? Sridhar was already there for the taking; and all she did was miss it.

The thought of spending the rest of her life in some old, dilapidated rented house with Narayan making no foray into a job frightened her. Who is this Narayan guy? She had never once looked at him even as a kid. She was only attracted to Sridhar. Why did he suddenly propose? And, in a moment of weakness, she had accepted. In fact, she had tried to argue before accepting that she had never believed in marrying cousins. She wanted only to be friends with them. She had better schooling and was exposed to places outside Tamilnadu. But, her cousins were living locally in a town and had no idea of lifestyles other than the local ones. Despite all that, she caved in.

Her mind went back to the day Narayan proposed. When Narayan asked her why he should not marry her, she was speechless. After a pause, Nithya had replied that she didn't know if she would marry and if she did, she would probably consider him—which he actually took as a yes. Her reply was actually non-committal. But, Nithya made the mistake of thinking that Narayan understood it exactly as she said. In the end, he went about thinking that both of them were engaged. He spread the word to his brother, cousins, and friends and even began matchmaking for his brother, the next step, according to him. Not knowing what to do and confused at that time, she simply went along with it. So, what finally prevailed was what Narayan wanted. Nithya felt angry towards Narayan. Somehow, he butted in between Sridhar and her. She began wondering if Narayan had ever known about the general understanding of all the relatives regarding Sridhar and her. Was he so ignorant? Or was he pretending?

Why would Sridhar not tell Narayan? Probably, he would have wanted to find out how she felt first.

She woke up the next day. After writing the last exam, she stayed back. All her friends went to their homes. Nithya mailed an application and an audio cassette of her music to an institution in Chennai. Then, she packed her bags and went home. She would tell Sridhar that she too had been wishing to marry him from childhood. Then, he would tell Narayan and break off their “engagement”. It would be too delicate a task for her to handle, she thought.

It was a ten day vacation and Nithya planned to make the most of it. Narayan was pleased to see her. She arrived in the evening and went straight to her room and left the bags. She didn't smile at Narayan. Sridhar was having his coffee as usual. Grandma was watching a boring programme on the national television.

Nithya went into the kitchen and took a sip of water. She had to make it quick as she will not be able to have a private audience with Sridhar, at least not at that time. "I thought over what you said. I too had thought the same way from childhood. And, yes, I'd like to get together with you," she said.

Sridhar smiled. Narayan entered the kitchen and noticed her smiling at Sridhar. His face was jealous when he asked if everything was ok. Nithya nodded and left.

He turned towards Sridhar and looked at him questioningly. "Don't ask me; I don't know anything," Sridhar said. Nithya was taken aback when she overheard it.

Not knowing what happened, Narayan invited Nithya for the usual evening outing. Nithya agreed thinking she would break the news to him. Sometimes, courage can be a double-edged sword. It can make one take too many risks—some unnecessary and insensible. Sridhar let her face the music. She realized Sridhar was too laidback to initiate anything; he would even wash his underwear only once in two days (revealed when Nithya's mother jokingly asked him when he was going to take bath why he was not washing it; Nithya just happened to be present there and heard it.).

At the coffee shop, Narayan ordered her favorite cake. Nithya was mum until then. Whatever he spoke was not responded in kind.

"There is something I have to tell you," Nithya broke her silence.

"What?"

"Had you not heard about Sridhar and me being talked about as possible bride and groom by the elders?"

"No," lied Narayan with a vague expression. Nithya felt pity for him. She felt bad that she was trying to cheat an innocent person.

"Well, Sridhar has feelings for me. And, please don't get angry with him; I too have feelings for him," she said. She thought she had to defend Sridhar by laying out the fact that she too was at fault.

“Well, you are free to do whatever you wish,” said Narayan.

That was easy, she thought. He was gracious enough to give in and that too, right away. She wished him well and said she would look out for a good girl for him.

The next few days were tumultuous. It was not a graceful Narayan she saw. Influenced by envy and rivalry, Narayan had not missed any opportunity to take Sridhar out to a drinking bar and curse him. He also did not let Nithya and Sridhar meet or even talk to each other. He called Nithya names. For his part, Sridhar kept off Nithya. Narayan took him out to bars and coffee shops and brainwashed him talking of things that tarnished Nithya’s reputation. He forced Sridhar to keep off Nithya, which was now easy after Narayan had tarnished her name. Spineless Sridhar who couldn’t dare to even stand up for his love, now packed his bags and left home to Delhi. Sridhar told Narayan that Nithya was dead to him, and he would never have anything to do with her anymore in his life. Narayan promised to get Sridhar married to a good girl.

After Sridhar left, Nithya was back to where she had begun. Narayan had pushed away Sridhar; and now the only one left to her was Narayan. It was then that the letter from Chennai arrived.

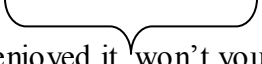
Godsend. The school had approved her singing and was willing to pay her a stipend to learn music at Chennai. She finally realized—in her late teens—that whether she could depend on a wily Narayan or spineless Sridhar, she could always rely on her own music to help her stand on her feet.



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About the Author

Anant Acharya is a freelance writer and editor who also happens to perform Carnatic music. Anant's articles including financial and business articles have been published in print and online media. Anant also has bagged many awards in Carnatic music and performed in concert halls in India and abroad. Anant Acharya is the pseudonym for the author. Anant can be contacted at writeracharya@yahoo.com.

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Anant Acharya

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