

LOOK HOMEWARD

(A NOVEL)

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Ravi got up in the morning. He was staying in a motel. His watch was not working. Only a few days ago he purchased it. It was an automatic and a costly one. He could not understand why it stopped. He came out of the room. He walked slowly to the next room and gently tapped on the door. A young woman opened the door slightly. She was in her dressing gown. He stepped back for he did not expect a woman to be there, that too an Indian.

'Sorry to disturb you. I just wanted to know the time. My watch has stopped'

'It's six now.'

'Thank you.'

She just looked at him for a minute and closed the door. Ravi set his watch and wore it on the wrist. He wondered why she was staying there, whether she was alone. He dreamily walked to the wash basin. He looked at his face in the mirror. He was pleased with himself. Still the question troubled him who that woman could be. He came to Estes Park and he was to go up the Rocky Mountains that morning. It was an early morning in May, slightly chilly but not cold. He saw the beautiful panorama of nature all around. There were mountains nearby. Almost nestling in the mountains there was the lake Estes. It was about eight in the morning by the time he came out of the motel. In front of him lay the vast expanse of nature. He was not given to walks in the morning but the beauty of the landscape caught his imagination overpoweringly. He could not resist the temptation of walking to the lake. It was facing the motel. Only the road was in between. He saw a few men angling. He moved about slowly watching the

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whole scene. The water spread itself. Everything seemed to be dreamily silent. But for the few men angling, there was not any other activity. The water in the lake seemed to be reflecting the tall rocks by its side. Ravi took a few snaps of the scene, came up to the highway. He saw a small restaurant. He had his breakfast. By the time he reached his room the woman in the next room was looking out for him. He was surprised.

'I couldn't take my bath. Somehow the tap doesn't work well. How is it in your room?' she questioned.

'Mine is all right' Ravi replied.

'May I come in and see how it works?'

'Of course you can With pleasure' he added.

He led her to the bath tub, demonstrated how to operate. She was watching him. As he raised his face it caught hers. She smiled pleasingly and almost mischievously.

'Thank you very much.'

She walked out briskly. He followed her to the door.

'I am sorry, I should have introduced myself. I am Prem studying in Denver.'

'I am Ravinder doing my Ph. D. in State University, Manhattan. This morning I am going up the Rocky Mountains. How about you? Have you any programme?'

'No, nothing in particular.'

'Then come with us. One of my American friends will take me to the Rocky Mountains.'

She looked at him for a minute wondering whether she could trust him and then said with a finality, 'All right I will join you. I shall get ready.'

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She disappeared. The movement was nymph-like, thought Ravi. When he came for this holiday he never bargained for this turn of events. He was amused. He had been friendly with a few women before. It was not as though he was seeing a woman for the first time. But the way it happened, quite unexpectedly, especially in the least expected quarter, a motel—this baffled him. He was not a great believer in destiny. He believed in his will power and he thought that he was the master of his own life. If he wanted anything he had to work for it sincerely. He could not take chances with life. So the way things were happening from the morning gave him a jolt. He was not prepared for this kind of experience. All the same he could not withdraw once being in it. He had to go through it whether he liked it or not.

By about ten in the morning Ravi and Prem were picked up at the motel by one of the officers connected with the Rocky Mountains. So they were taken care of splendidly. They stopped on the way in two or three places while climbing. The whole place was delightful. Tall trees, thick vegetation, wild life—all these had a novelty for Ravi and Prem. The Bear Lake, the Dream Lake and several other lakes looked picturesque. Prem and Ravi instinctively touched the water. The water was cold. When they reached the top of the mountains, the highest point on the Trail Ridge road, they found a huge wall of snow. It looked as though for ages the snow had been there. It was solidified and looked like a wall. In certain areas the snow was melting. But it was not much. The sun was mild. A gentle breeze was blowing. Prem's sari was bluish in colour almost like the blue of the sky. Her hair was dangling with ends falling on her face. She looked enchantingly beautiful.

'I am indeed grateful to you for bringing me to this place. Much of this fun would have been lost if I had come all by myself. I am glad I found you.'

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'What are you doing in Denver?'

'I am in the Drama department. I wish to specialize this year. I am very much interested in writing, acting and in producing plays.'

'That's fine. So you are an Arts student. I belong to the Engineering branch, the Mechanical side.'

'How long have you been in this country?'

'Two years. How about you?'

'I came to Denver a year ago.'

'On a fellowship, I suppose.'

'Yes, of course.'

'You come from Andhra Pradesh.'

'Yes.'

'So you know Telugu.'

'Of course. . . . Well, does that mean that you also speak Telugu?'

'Yes. It is surprising that we two should meet like this.'

'I wonder how old are these mountains.' She wanted to change the topic because they were becoming too personal.

'Pretty old. The tall trees must have been there for ages and ages. The oak, the pine and the fir trees especially are the sentinels of the forest. These mountains remind me of India.'

'O yes nature is plentiful, full of potentialities in India too. Only we have not explored and exploited the resources as the Americans have done.'

'We leave nature's bounty untapped. It's a pity our country is not yet fully industrialised.'

The person who brought them was sitting comfortably in the car, reading the newspaper and listening to the wireless. He

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must have come several times to these mountains. So there was no special attraction for him. He left Ravi and Prem all to themselves, to move about and watch the spectacular scenic background. Also he had a pride in showing his country's splendid spots to the foreigners. Prem and Ravi watched the wild life. The deer and other animals were moving about. The whole place was exotic.

'When are you leaving Estes Park?' Prem asked.

'Tomorrow' said Ravi.

There was an awkward silence for a few minutes. They did not know what to talk about next. They slowly walked towards the car. The gentleman asked them whether they enjoyed the sight.

'Splendid' Ravi said.

'Beautiful' Prem added.

They got into the car. They came down. The gentleman was in a hurry. Promising to see Ravi later he went away leaving them at a hotel. Ravi and Prem were feeling hungry. They wanted to have lunch. They sat at a table facing each other. The waitress came and gave them the menu card. Ravi looked at Prem meaningfully.

'Are you a vegetarian?'

'No not particularly' she said. 'Let us have vegetarian dishes' she suggested.

Ravi asked for vegetarian meals. The waitress nodded her head and disappeared. Soup was brought steaming hot. Ravi and Prem were watching each other. She had good table manners, Ravi thought. She considered him decent in his behaviour, gentlemanly, urbane and refined. The last one to be served was the pudding.

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' I like the pudding ' commented Ravi.

' That's the best part of the western food ' Prem said.

' I think you miss our food.'

' Yes, I miss it badly.'

' Once in a while I go to a Mexican Café to have some hot stuff. It amuses me to see the green chilly being put on the rice.'

' I would like to try.'

' I shall take you tonight. We will look for a Mexican Café. Perhaps there may be a Café in this area too.'

' Perhaps.' She echoed. But her mind was given to various thoughts. She wondered what on earth she was doing. Meeting a person by chance, then moving about with him for hours and hours—all this looked strange, and yet quite pleasing.

And all the time Ravi was saying to himself that Prem had an artistic sensibility, that she was an artist herself. Her hair-do, her expressive eyes, her sweet voice, all these fascinated him. So the conversation was part of a sophisticated, social set-up. They could talk like that for hours and hours over meaningless trifles quite hiding their inward feelings and emotions. They were both disciplined enough not to exhibit any undue haste in revealing their minds. The lunch was over. They walked back to the motel.

In the evening they strolled about. They visited a curio shop of the Red Indians. Most of those articles amused them. They made some purchases. They sat in a park nearby.

' The presence of these shops in the midst of cities is very odd. Perhaps the Red Indian life gives to the American civilization a certain antiquity and historicity.' Ravi commented.

' A harmonious blending of the old and the new cultures ' added Prem.

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'The Americans would like to try everything. They were great adventurers. They still retain their spirit of curiosity and adventure. So they give a fair deal to every one. It may be a theosophist from India or a religious preacher from some other country. They wish to know what exactly is the newness in these concepts. They are not rigid.'

'That helps them to march forward.'

'Have you any intention of settling down in the U.S.A.?' asked Ravi.

'No, I would like to go back to India. My father is anxious to have me back as early as possible. My mother died two years ago. I am very fond of my father. I can't be away for a longer time.'

Ravi smiled. She blushed. She wondered why he was smiling.

'What makes you smile?'

'I was only wondering what would happen to you if you were to be married.'

The moment he mentioned marriage her face became suddenly changed. She was pale. The conflict in her mind between staying with her father and getting married was visible. She murmured,

'Yes, one day I have to be married. Let that come when it should come. I am not in a hurry. I leave it to the great forces above.'

'You mean God, fate or predestination.'

'I mean all that. I really do not know the theological subtleties. But I do suppose that there are certain insuperable forces operating on man, over which he has no control. Especially marriages are cases of predestination.'

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'Poets have said that love is blind and that whosoever has loved must have done so at first sight.'

'Perhaps the second sight would change his mind.'

'Maybe' Ravi laughed.

'There are such unreliable persons that perhaps they should be pinned down the moment they are caught.'

Instinctively Ravi edged a little away from her as though he should not be caught.

'Any way I am not going to be trapped. I believe in free will. I wish to exercise my free choice and choose a partner of my liking.'

'It means you have not yet decided.'

'No, not yet. I have been too busy with studies. I suppose one day I too should don the robes of marriage.'

'Celestial robes.'

'Yes, yes celestial, if it is the proper woman, or else it can be damnation also.'

'You seem to be very hesitant about marriage.'

'Not exactly so. Only I don't want to be involved in any emotional entanglement when I am busy with my research work.'

'As if marriage comes in the way of research.'

'In a way it does. I take research as dedicated work. It brooks no rival. It demands full attention.'

'I think it is Swift who ridiculed the researchers.'

'Well I am a student of Science. I don't pretend to be having creative imagination. But I do realise that research work is all absorbing, no dilly dallying about it. And when I get married I should be prepared to enjoy the company of my wife. Marriage is partnership for me. The stream of life

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has to be smooth sailing and for that you need a good steersman. Or else even the best pilot may go wrong.'

'Ravi . . . I am sorry, may I address you as Ravi?'

'Of course you can.'

'Ravi, have you ever thought of any woman as a fitting partner to you? I put this question, for you seem to be very sure of the type of woman you would like to have. You do not want to give any place for predestination.'

'Prem, I quite appreciate your query. I was indeed very fond of Rupa, one of the girls in the college I studied before coming to America. She was good looking. Physically she was attractive. I liked her for her good looks. She was sweet and innocent. She had a natural grace. Her endearing looks, disarming smiles captivated me. I thought I could marry her, I proposed to her. But she was not of my caste. Her father was furious. He did not listen to her. I hovered about her place like a pestilence, in their words. She was helpless. My parents too were not for this alliance. Rupa was given in marriage to some one else. That gave me a shock. I was upset. Meanwhile this fellowship came my way and I am now wedded to my lady research.'

Prem smiled. She understood that Ravi was passionate. Only he was trying to cover up his weakness by a show of studied indifference to love and marriage. Any day he could be won over, she thought. Ravi seemed to be still in the world of Rupa. The day of her marriage, her helplessness, her piteous looks and his impassioned appeals to get her, all these floated before his mental vision.

'I hope I won't make the same mistake' Ravi added.

'I hope so' was the comment of Prem, 'but these mistakes are lovable though' she added after a pause.

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'Yes of course, or else there is no life. If we get everything we want we may lose interest in them. What is easily gained is easily lost. Human endeavour is fraught with success as well as failure. And I am in love with the struggle in life. I am prepared for the full measure of life, its delightful recreational pleasures and its sordidness and misery.'

'It's good to be prepared for the trials and tribulations of life. And the best part of life consists in facing them with faith in oneself and faith in God.'

'Faith in oneself is absolutely necessary, or else you'll crumble and go down when the blasts of life blow on you.'

'I wonder why you have cautiously avoided faith in God. Are you an atheist?'

'O, no, I believe in God. Only I put more emphasis on human effort. As a rationalist I rely on reason as my guide. Nothing pleases me like rationalistic thinking. To a large extent the impersonal concept of godhead appeals to me. Perhaps it is difficult for me to surrender myself completely to the will of God.'

Prem smiled.

'You don't mind surrendering yourself to research, what harm is there if you surrender yourself to God?'

'No harm, but it requires greater courage. Always the ego in you tells you that you are doing everything and that you are achieving everything through your individual effort. It will be difficult for you to overcome this pride and to accept God's will in its totality. If you can do it you are ascending the scale and becoming one with God.'

'It is too deep for me to understand. My mind is not mature enough to delve deep into these mysteries.'

'You will know them all right. There is nothing profound

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or mysterious about what I have said. We all grow. But the only significant part of it is that the approach of the intellectual is slightly different from that of the ordinary person. He cannot possess that blind faith as the other has. He argues and reasons and applies human standards of judgment to God.'

'He doesn't realise that God's ways are mysterious and that there are more things in heaven than are dreamt of in his every-day life of reasoning.'

'Yes true. But one cannot help being a rationalist.'

'You can be a rationalist but too much insistence on reason at the expense of emotion makes you imbalanced. Human reasoning has its limitations.'

'I think you are right on the whole' agreed Ravi.

The next day they were to go back to their universities. That night Ravi thought about the whole incident. He was surprised. Even though he did not make any proposal he was definitely interested in Prem. But he was not prepared for any confession of love immediately. He thought of his home in India. His father Ramesam was very much respected in that village. He was noted for his generous impulses and philanthropic nature. He was one of the freedom fighters, a staunch Gandhian. Ravi remembered the day when Gandhiji visited his village. The visit was organized by his father. The cars went in front of their house. Ravi watched the whole show. He was taken to Gandhiji by his father and he was blessed by him. Men and women flocked to that village in large numbers in order to have 'darsan' of their beloved leader. Women offered their jewels. Large sums of money were given to Gandhiji. He made a short speech in English. It was translated into Telugu by Ramesam. Ravi felt proud that day. More than his father he enjoyed the whole scene. Everyone in the village said that Ravi's father was rich. He came to believe that they were indeed well off.

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His father, being a Congressman, worked for the uplift of the village. Most of his time was given to social welfare, especially educating the villagers. He worked hard and had a good following in the neighbouring villages. Ravi developed a tremendous love and admiration for his father. He was for him the great hero in that village.

Ravi also remembered the day when his father was arrested. Ramesam and his colleagues started picketing near the toddy shops. They had an argument with the toddy keepers. The matter was reported to the police by the village munsiff. The next morning the Sub-Inspector came with the police. Already the whole village had come to know of it. The police camped in the house opposite to that of Ramesam. The gentleman of that house came to Ramesam in the morning.

'Sir, the police have come to arrest you. I happen to know the Sub-Inspector. So please go to some other village. I shall say that you have gone to inspect your lands.' Ramesam had lands in the neighbouring village. 'I can thereby get you out of this situation' he suggested.

Ramesam was slightly irritated. He was with the movement right from 1920, the year in which he burnt all his silk clothes and took to the wearing of khadi. For ten years he had been propagating the Gandhian ideals. It would be cowardice now for him to run away from the battle. So he told the gentleman politely,

'Thank you very much for trying to help me. But I am ready to court imprisonment.'

'But your health, sir, is very delicate. Only on that account I thought, I could plead with the Sub-Inspector. Or else I would not have suggested. I know full well your sincerity and honesty. I dare not say anything more if it is going to be unpleasant and repelling to you.'

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He left it at that and Ramesam was firm in his views. All others, the Congress volunteers, who worked with Ramesam were arrested. But Ramesam was not asked to appear along with them. Meanwhile the situation became tense. From all the nearby villages people came in large numbers to see their leader. The whole place was full of people. It was a great novelty for them. It displeased them that a gentleman like Ramesam should be arrested.

But Ramesam was getting ready. By about evening when a fresh contingent of police came from the town Ramesam was requested to come to the opposite building. He understood the implied suggestion. The house was full of women. He was about to leave. Ravi went near him. He could not stand the sight. The very idea of separation from his father unnerved him and he was choked with tears. Equally so was the feeling of Ramesam. He loved Ravi most. So he quickly left that place lest he should break into tears. Ravi's brother was only five, he did not understand what was happening to their father. But Ravi was disconsolate.

Outside the villagers became uncontrollable. They started throwing stones at the police. Ramesam addressed them for a few minutes. Ravi could not go anywhere near that place. So he climbed the wall and saw his father from that distant place. Slowly the procession moved on and the whole village was full of gloom. Ramesam was sent to prison for nine months and he had to pay some fine. Those were glorious days, Ravi thought. Congressmen of those days stood for sacrifice. Most of them lost everything they had. They did not mind. It was a tremendous movement, unprecedented in the history of the world. India was fortunate in having the Mahatma as the liberator and a statesman like Nehru to steer the ship. Ravi was a great admirer of these two great leaders. Ramesam was not a politician, he was simply a Congressman.

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On his return from prison he had to face much of the financial stringency faced by almost the whole world in the thirties. Ravi had to be educated. He grew up to be a promising young man, ambitious for learning and his father simply could not satisfy him with all that quest for learning. For very often he used to tell Ravi,

'We have to take care of the family. We can't spend everything we have on you alone however brilliant you may be.'

Ravi used to argue with his father and request him to give him the full benefit of education. Ramesam found it difficult to curb the genuine interest of Ravi for studies. But at the same time he realised it was beyond his means, and especially in the last years of his life he started feeling unhappy because he had to sell away the lands that were given to him by his father. He was going down the steep hill. But his generous nature was the same. When he himself did not have money he used to borrow from others and give it to the needy. They never repaid and he had to pay those amounts with interest. Ramesam never refused to help others even if it meant risk for him. Especially to the poor boys he was very kind. The image of the father was always very high for Ravi. All the good work done by his father to the villagers had its reward. He came to the U.S.A. two years ago on a Fulbright fellowship. It was a godsend for him and he interpreted it as the compensation for all the benevolent deeds of his father.

Ravi's mother came from a good family. She happened to be the daughter of a government officer. She never forgot that. She would always talk of her urban life. She did not very much like the rural set-up and the agricultural background of Ravi's father. But she was a kind lady and she was a fitting companion to Ramesam. She had a robust faith in herself and she always inspired Ravi with ambition by telling him of her father. Whenever he went to his maternal grandfather's house

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he enjoyed his stay. The grandfather always told Ravi that he resembled him. Everytime he said that he felt he ought to go up in life like his grandfather. But Ramesam did not very much like his father-in-law partly because of the political differences. Ravi's maternal grandfather was not merely an officer, he was a scholar too, especially in Sanskrit.

That night as he lay in his bed thinking of his parents his problem was how to tell them that he would like to marry Prem who did not belong to their caste. They were expecting much from him. Would they accept his choice or should he leave it to them, he argued within himself. Slowly he started sleeping.

Prem slept all right the moment she went to bed. But suddenly she got up. She could not sleep again. She could not say that she was in love with Ravi, but definitely she liked him. He was not like the common group she met very often. He was of a serious type, an intellectual and one given more to reason than to emotionalism. She did not know how he felt about her. Then there was her father, a very highly placed administrator. She was the only child and especially after the death of her mother she became indispensable to her father. It was a terrible blow to her father when she had to come to the U.S.A. He yielded at last. In a year or two he would retire and naturally he would like to stay with his daughter. So his plans about her marriage might be different from her choice. So she asked herself whether she had any justification for choosing anyone on her own as her partner in life. She wanted to be helpful to her father. Yet her own emotional involvement might go against his wishes. Then how could she face such a conflict in life, she wondered. Yet unlike Ravi who believed in his free will, she left it to God. She consoled herself that God would take care of her.

The next morning when Ravi and Prem met each other they felt all of a sudden a little shy and reserved. It was a strange

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feeling for a minute, but then they were in their usual spirits again. Ravi smiled and said,

'I hope you slept well. I was mostly thinking of my parents.'

'I too was reminded of my father.'

The conversation stopped there. They paid the bills, they moved on. Prem requested Ravi to come with her to Denver University. He followed her. He was introduced to her friends in the Drama department. In fact a play was being rehearsed by the time they reached the university. Dr. Rogers was busy directing and supervising the students. He was considered to be good by his students. He was of a friendly disposition and he greeted Ravi warmly. That night Prem and Ravi were invited for dinner by the local Drama Society. Ravi could not be very much interested in their talk when it came to technical terms in the art of producing plays. Yet he could whole-heartedly participate when the talk was about India. He was a stout champion of India and being the son of a sincere patriot he could not be otherwise. He supported everything that was Indian. He was not blind to the limitations of his country, yet he felt that he should not expose his country to the taunting remarks of others. When he came back he could be very critical, but while he was there he was an unofficial ambassador for his country. The members put him searching questions about Gandhiji's policy of non-violence and Nehru's political philosophy of neutrality. He argued,

'Gandhiji's creed of non-violence is positive. It is not negative. It does not mean that one should run away from fighting. But one should abhor violence. Applying that ethical idealism to practical politics Nehru propounded the idea of dynamic neutrality. It is non-involvement only so far as we are not interested in joining power blocs. But our freedom is a great responsibility and in its defence we do not hesitate to fight.'

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Most of these statements of Gandhiji and Nehru sounded like contradictions to the outsiders but they suited the country all right. 'We have to maintain our individuality and Nehru gives a great image of our country that way,' pleaded Ravi.

The dinner was over. Ravi was left at the Olin hotel. Prem went back to her flat. She promised to see him the next morning before he would go to Manhattan. That night Ravi thought of Lal, one of the young men introduced to him in the university by Prem. He did not very much like him. He appeared to be too westernised. He was non-serious and he was cutting jokes with Prem. He wondered whether he could be the friend of Prem. Suddenly a jealous feeling seized him. Even though he was just a casual friend of Prem he could not tolerate anyone else being too near her or being too friendly with her. That disturbed him for sometime. The next morning when Prem came to see him off the first question he put to her was about Lal.

'Who is that Lal? Yesterday itself I wanted to ask you, but we were very busy.'

She smiled.

'I hope you are not jealous of him. He means nothing to me, and perhaps he has no special feeling for me. He is the friend of everyone. He is very sociable. He will talk like that with everyone. No girl takes him seriously.'

'I am glad you say that.'

'Any way will it really matter to you? You are going away, we may or may not meet again. It was a splendid experience for me. I will never forget it, but in your case it may be different. You are an intellectual and these emotional entanglements do not mean much for you.'

'Prem please do not say that. I am fond of you.
I love you'

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He held her hand and gently pressed it. She was tender hearted. Her eyes expressed all that joy. For one moment she could not talk. She was enraptured. As he still held her hand she leaned on him and looked at him with endearing looks. He kissed her and she responded warmly.

'I am glad you love me' Prem said.

Then it was difficult for Ravi to leave her and go away. He could not extricate himself from the pleasurable feeling of being in the company of Prem. But his ticket was booked. He had to go. It was time for him to leave the hotel. He paid the bill and Prem accompanied him to the station. In the taxi they did not talk much. Yet they seemed to be enjoying each other's nearness. Their hearts were so full of happiness that their looks communicated with each other all those innermost feelings. Words were unnecessary. There were so many things to talk about, but that was not the time. The first inexplicable communication of joy was all that they wanted at that time. Very soon they reached the stations. Ravi gave his address to Prem and she gave hers to him.

'Are you a good correspondent?' he asked Prem.

'How about you? You may be busy with your research, but you should write to me as often as possible, or else I shall be miserable.'

'I shall definitely write, and write frequently. Perhaps you may be bored with them after some time.'

'O never, it will never happen like that. When do we meet again?'

Ravi paused for a minute.

'As early as possible.'

The train came on time. Ravi got into the train. Prem said good-bye. As the train was moving she was still saying bye bye.

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And he was watching her. She felt suddenly lonely. It was a curious feeling. She only wished that she would see Ravi again and all would be well. She went back to her flat with a sad and heavy heart. She repeated to herself several times that Ravi would be loyal to her.

The next morning when she went to the university the first person to accost her was Lal. He was all smiles for her.

'Hallo Prem, how are you?'

'I am all right' said Prem rather curtly.

'What has happened to your friend? Has he gone? He seems to be rather reserved, one of those old timers, I suppose. Maybe very steady, though.'

Prem did not say anything. She moved on. Lal followed her.

'Prem where are you going?'

'I am going to the library. How about you?'

'To the canteen. Why don't you come and have something to eat?'

'O, no, I had a heavy breakfast. I am not keen on eating anything now.'

Lal smiled mischievously. Prem was slightly irritated.

'What makes you smile?'

'Nothing.'

'You cannot smile for nothing. There must be some reason for your smiling.'

'I hope you'll not be angry. I think, and poets have said so, when you are in love you won't be hungry.'

'Don't be silly' Prem snubbed him.

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She walked fast and entered the library. He watched her for a minute and went to the canteen. She said to herself that she should not be friendly with Lal, especially now that she was fond of Ravi. Lal always talked like that with every girl in a very familiar tone, as though he had been her boy friend. So the girls were scared of him. They would avoid him. He never realised that he was shunned. He had a very high opinion of himself and his good looks. He thought he was smashingly attractive and talked as though he had a right to do so. In a sophisticated society appearances had to be maintained. So no girl could openly cut him out and that gave him the advantage. But no one ever bothered about him and took him seriously. They said he was a joker whereas he felt he was like Lord Byron with a daring look for women. The way Prem left him for the library was not very much liked by him. He wanted to watch her. In the evening as Prem was about to go he stopped her.

'Prem let us go to a picture.'

'I am sorry I can't come' said Prem.

'You seem to be peculiar. There is nothing wrong in coming with me to a picture. I hope you are not engaged.'

'No not exactly, but I like Ravi.'

Lal did not say anything for a minute. He seemed to be disappointed.

'That explains your behaviour this morning. All right, good evening.'

He abruptly left her and went away. She did not like all that fuss about nothing. She never gave him any hope nor was she friendly at all with him. What he thought of her or whether he had any love for her she did not know and she never bothered to know. It was therefore strange and even exasperating to see Lal behave in such a manner. She could not understand in

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what way she had offended him. Any way she wanted to be careful with him.

On the third day of Ravi's departure Prem expected a letter from him. She looked anxiously for it. There was no sign of it. She was worried. She even distrusted Ravi, she wrote a letter in a slightly irritated mood to Ravi and asked him to write to her house address. He wrote back informing her that he had already written to her. Apparently the first letter was collected by Lal. She understood what a dirty trick Lal played on her. A week later as she was going to the library Lal gave a letter to her.

'I am sorry this was by mistake given to me by the postman and I forgot to give it to you. I hope it's in no way an urgent one.'

He smiled mischievously and went away. It was the letter from Ravi, he might have read it. Prem looked at him with contempt. That was the first time she really hated anyone in life. She was so good natured that she loved everyone. But on this occasion she could not help hating him, at least for the moment that was her feeling.

At the other end Ravi met his friends. They were all happy to see Ravi back after his holiday.

'Any luck man' jocularly put in Gupta.

'I hope you had a good time' commented Sundaram.

'How was your holiday trip' politely enquired Ramesh Babu.

Gupta was all admiration for American life. He identified himself with the customs and manners of the Americans. There was Ham who shortened his name to sound like an American. They all liked Ravi even though they could not very much appreciate his Indianism. Sometimes they pitied him for he could not enjoy life as they did.

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Ravi explained to them that he had an exhilarating drive up the Rocky Mountains and he described to them the spectacular scenery very cleverly avoiding any reference to Prem. But they were curious to know whether there was any woman in his life. He invariably avoided any talk about women. So they always teased him.

'Ravi what fun is there if you go all alone for a holiday. You should have some woman with you.' Gupta leeringly said.

'Don't be silly' Ravi said.

'I mean it seriously. Look at me. I am getting married to Rosie. I will settle down here.'

'Hearty congratulations' Ravi said with mock politeness.

'We have all decided to settle down in the U.S.A. We wish to convert you to our way of thinking.'

Gupta spoke on behalf of all his friends. They all nodded assent. This gave him support to proceed with his theme.

'What is there in India except grinding poverty, squalor and misery?'

'True, but there are many countries in the world that are poor. Men and women do not run away from their countries on that account.'

'Those who have pluck and courage, they alone go out. The others remain accepting life with resignation. Sometimes they explain this as philosophic contentment or detachment. All this is nonsense. You come into the world to have the best of it, not for suffering.'

They all laughed, including Ravi. They all said,

'Three cheers to Gupta and his wonderful advocacy of materialism.'

'Unfortunately India does not offer the facilities for ad-

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vanced research work. The universities have yet to develop' put in Sundaram. He was genuinely interested in research work. He was a dedicated worker in Space Research. He was afraid that if he were to come to India all that work would come to a close.

'Everywhere in India there is corruption. It is sickening. The government offices, the business concerns, the educational institutions all seem to be seething in the pool of corruption. There is a lot of nepotism. You can't expect any fair deal from anyone. I would never go back to India' vehemently pleaded Ramesh Babu.

'In India very often there is no right place or opening for the type of research work we wish to do. For instance, the training we receive here in Food Technology, Aeronautical Engineering or other branches of advanced knowledge has no relevance to the employment opportunities in India. We have to depend mostly on the government. We are kept as pool officers or pensioners, or sometimes if we have a good pull we become administrators and all this research work will be a waste, a colossal waste. So we mean staying here even though we too love to be in our country' Ham argued.

Only Gupta insisted on money and the material comforts wealth would give. All others had different views on the matter. Their motivation was mostly based on research and the opportunities that were denied to them in India. Ravi listened to them with patience and sympathy. He started slowly but deliberately.

'What you say is true. Those who go out, in any country, are the adventurous ones. They are more than average. Their intellectual equipment is greater than that of the others. So they seek new paths, new pastures to graze. But after having fed themselves they should go back.'

'Provided they are wanted' interrupted Ham.

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'Of course they are wanted. Especially in a developing country there is always the demand for the brighter ones' Ravi argued.

'But the country does not want us. There is the sense of alienation. Always all other considerations except merit will weigh heavily with the appointing authorities. The universities that ought to be centres of learning, that ought to accept the best in the country are now given to provincialism, casteism and communalism' Ham argued again.

'Who is responsible for all this? We have to blame ourselves. We have to fight it out. What is the use of running away from reality? We become escapists. Scientific research should be useful to society. It should have an applied bias. A developing country cannot afford to spend much on pure research. You have an obligation to your country, to your community. The work you do here, at least most of it, can be done by others, unless you happen to be a nobel prize winner. But in our country even this work will be far too advanced. Thereby you will stimulate others and you open new horizons and new vistas of knowledge. At least you will shake people out of their complacency' Ravi pleaded.

'Who will go and work for a poor pay in India, I won't go' put in Gupta.

'In this you are of course under a delusion, Gupta, you think you are getting a high pay but the standard of living also is very high. So in terms of purchasing capacity what you get is not much. If you lead the life of an American you won't have all that affluence you are dreaming of' Ravi answered.

'Ravi we have our own dignity, why should we humiliate ourselves? Our degrees have no relevance in India. Very often we have to be satisfied with some job that we don't like. We cannot put in our best effort. Our souls become deadened after some time' Ramesh Babu pleaded.

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' Ravi you yourself will be disillusioned the moment you go back to India. The training you have received here will be wasted. First of all it will be a Herculean task to get any placement in India. It is such a vast country, you will be drowned ' Gupta added.

' All these difficulties may be there. We may not get what we want and what we deserve. But by patiently putting up with such situations for some time we may be able to establish a climate of opinion favourable to advanced research. As regards a fair deal, at least once in a while merit will be recognised. Somewhere someone will accept you. Moreover as an Indian you have a right place in your society whereas here you are an outsider. You are an alien.'

' You are no longer a foreigner if you accept the American way of life in its totality. You suffer from peculiar complexes and you pretend to be puritans. You miss much of the new spirit. You become lonely. When you are in Rome you must be Romans.' Gupta emphatically put it.

All of them smiled again. This was not the first time they argued like that and this might not be the last time also. All of them wanted to return to India, but they were not sure of their future and often they were doubtful of the opportunities that India might offer to them. Ravi had a greater sense of commitment to his country.

' We should work for our country however discouraging the circumstances may be. One day through our efforts a greater India will be created. We have a greater responsibility to our country in the sense that we have had the best training in a foreign country. If India loses all its bright sons it will be a sad day for the country.'

They kept quiet. They did not argue. They realised the validity of Ravi's statement but they had their mental reservations.

'Let us go now and attend classes' Gupta reminded them.

They got ready and reached the university.

For two days Ravi was unusually silent. His friends noticed it, but they did not disturb him. He was left to himself. He was expecting a letter from Prem. It did come but it referred to the unpleasant episode with Lal and a request that he should write to her house address. He wondered whether Prem could stay in Denver with that kind of atmosphere. He wrote back in a passionate manner, and if necessary he wanted her to leave that place and come to him.

But there was no such need. Lal was finishing his course. He was going back to India. So he came to Prem one evening and apologised for his behaviour.

'Prem, I am going back to India. I am sorry if I have offended you in any manner. I didn't mean it but I wanted to tease you. Any way I shouldn't have done it. I am sincerely sorry for it.'

Prem looked at him unable to believe what Lal was saying. Was he playing any trick on her or was he really going away, she argued within herself. But courtesy demanded that she should thank him.

'Lal I am sorry if I said anything that upset you. Think of me well when you are back in India.'

'I could even see your father in Delhi. I shall be going to Delhi first. I really miss the Indian food. Our own customs are dear to us. We come here for a short stay. We see new things. We receive new ideas. But we have to go back and serve our country.'

This was another surprise for Prem. She never expected that Lal was capable of expressing such noble sentiments. This was a new perspective. She took him to be a frivolous person. But

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she had a peep into his mind now. She saw he was different. She respected him for what he said. She then saw the inextricable good and evil juxtaposed in man. One could be angelic and beastly too. Both the potentialities would be found in man. She thanked Lal for his offer to see her father. They mostly talked about India, the songs, the dances, the busy-idle recreations nostalgically.

The next letter she wrote to Ravi was full of praise for Lal. She explained how she was totally mistaken about him and that he was very soon going back to India. He failed to understand how Prem could give diametrically opposite views about Lal. Could it be that she was not mature enough to understand men, he asked himself. But Lal was going away, so why should he worry himself about him. He ignored the whole thing and he treated it as a closed chapter. He could look forward to receiving Prem's letters without any intermission and in the proper frame of mind, now that Lal's departure was impending. He heaved a sigh of relief.

The letters from Prem were coming regularly and he responded promptly. Meanwhile he wrote to his parents in India to know their views. He pleaded that his generous father should give him his blessings. A few days later he received the letter but it was disappointing. While the father appreciated Ravi's fine sentiments about love and marriage he was not willing to accept the proposal as Prem did not belong to their caste. This baffled Ravi. He took it for granted that his father would approve of his choice. His father was noted for his social reform. He could not understand why in this case his father should say 'no'. His father talked of traditional values and attitudes towards life and how each caste would cherish and nourish its own culture and customs zealously. The language was fine and the ideas of his father were crystal clear to him. But he never expected such a negative reply

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from his father. He thought he should again write to him and convince him that Prem was not to be equated with others. She was a class by herself and wherever she went she carried tremendous goodwill with her. Above all he found her to be his best partner in life. And life would be meaningless without her, he explained to his father. He waited for a reply. Prem was luckier in this respect. Her father left the choice to her. So from her side there was no hitch.

One evening as Ravi was sitting in his room Gupta entered. He observed that Ravi was not his usual self ever since he visited Denver. Even his research work seemed to be a little slow. So he ventured to ask Ravi,

'Ravi what exactly is troubling you? You don't seem to be cheerful. Any problem worrying you?' queried Gupta.

'No, nothing. I am all right.'

'Don't tell me man you are all right. You are not all right. Something is worrying you, I know you are in love.'

Ravi did not want to contradict. At the same time he did not want to confide in Gupta. But Gupta insisted.

'I may be non-serious in certain things, but in matters of love I can be trusted. You may rely on me for friendliness and advice.'

Ravi was a little more yielding than before.

'Gupta I know you are reliable. The whole position is like this. When I went for a holiday I met one of our Indian women studying in Denver. We liked each other and by the time we parted, we realised we were in love. We wish to get married, but my father is disinclined as she doesn't belong to our caste.'

'That's the whole trouble with these conventional people. Conventions and traditions are after all man made for the con-

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venience and comfort of society. Once they do not serve that purpose we should discard them, not hang on to them.' Gupta lectured.

'O, no, my father is enlightened. I have the greatest respect for him, for his views and for his judgment. Perhaps he has taken my proposal as a fanciful affair. He may be thinking that time will cure me of this passion.'

'Maybe, that also is possible. When he realises that you are deadly serious about this woman he may yield. So write again, you may succeed. But by all means go ahead with your love affair and get married to the woman you love. I give no credit for arranged marriages. My parents have not allowed me to marry Rosie. But I don't bother about their views.'

'But I can't be so bold as you are. My love for my father is so great that I dare not offend him. I have to convince him . . . ' Ravi paused.

'Do by all means, but don't disappoint your lady love, that's my advice.'

He moved out leaving Ravi all by himself.

Ravi had to attend a very important lecture that day by a Senior Professor of the department. So he rushed to the college. Luckily he was on time. He was in the Lecture Hall but his mind was given to all thoughts about Prem. The hour was over. He went to the library. It was no use. He could not concentrate on anything he read. He had a good game of tennis. He played for a while, had bath and felt refreshed to a certain extent. He came to his room and wrote to his father once again about Prem. Prem came from a good family. Her father was the Secretary to one of the Ministries in Delhi. She was the only daughter. He gave all these details to convince his father about the reasonableness of his action.

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But things were taking a wrong turn with Ravi's father. His participation and involvement in the Freedom struggle had rendered him almost poor. Year after year he started selling the land his father gave him. He would not clear the whole debt at one time. It was difficult for him to part with the land he inherited. It was the best land in the village. It was like keeping gold in the bank. Any day it could be sold for the best price. Sentimental attachment to the land prevented him from selling it, but dire necessity compelled him to part with it. His service to the village and his generous nature to help the needy no doubt were commendable but they did not give him any bank balance. The family had to suffer privations and his health also was not all too well. All these tensions and conflicts deprived him of his pleasant optimistic cheer towards life. In a way he was hoping too much from Ravi. He wanted him to marry a girl from an affluent family so that financially it would be a support to them. And then as he grew older he became more conventional and was afraid of opposing the deep rooted prejudices of the community. He was slowly learning the lesson of least resistance.

Ravi left India more than two years ago. He could not understand how human beings would change with the tides of time and become tame and submissive. Or else how could his father change, he argued within himself. He remembered distinctly the fiery speeches he made in the days of the Freedom struggle. He was robust in his faith and pronouncedly liberal in his views. The way he responded to Ravi's letter made Ravi think that perhaps age was telling on his father. Ravi was not prepared to go back on his promise to Prem. That was flat, he said to himself. Ravi thought of his family, his brothers and sisters. As the eldest of the lot he realised he owed a duty to the family and could not isolate himself for the sake of his pure and simple pleasures. But then he argued within himself that marrying Prem would in no way stand in the way of fulfilling his

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obligation to the family. In fact she was so good natured that she might insist on his helping the family, he thought. Sleep came to him as a relief. He dreamt of his village, his boyhood days full of cheer and happiness. He particularly remembered and liked those years of prosperity when they had rich, fertile lands. The harvesting season, his supervision and attendance on those occasions, the corn in the granary, the milking time and the bullock carts—invariably he would go to the fields in the carts—all these gave to him a thrill and a pleasurable feeling. Even though he had been in cities and now in a foreign country he essentially belonged to the village. He had a simple, unsophisticated mind, elemental in its strength. He still retained the rustic simplicity in him. So he stubbornly resisted temptations of a civilised life. Yet Prem had completely captivated him, he thought. He did not know why he was so fond of her but it was a fact that he loved her and longed to possess her as his partner in life.

The next morning Ravi heard from Prem. She was going back to India, she finished her studies in Denver. She was flying from San Francisco. She wanted to visit a few countries in the East, so she chose that route. She asked Ravi to meet her in St. Francis Hotel in the Union Square. He started immediately. He went by train. The cross country trip was exhilarating. The beautiful landscape, the vast tracts of land with wild life, the unending stretch of blue sky as he watched it from the observation car thrilled him. He sat for most of the time observing the glorious phenomena of nature. The train moved on very fast and it looked as though it was rolling on. He saw green vegetation everywhere. Especially when he saw tall trees and majestic rocks in all their pristine glory he was reminded of India. He often said to himself that one day his country too possessing all the natural resources would be as rich as America. He imagined to himself a state of blissful prosperity for his country. The train halted and he realised

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that very soon he had to cross the Bay before he would reach the city. No one told him about it. Everyone was proceeding to the boat, he too mechanically got in. The Bay area was very imposing. It was breath-taking. From a distance he could see the Bay bridge, the mighty gigantic one. He could also get a view of the Golden Gate Bridge, the world's tallest and largest single span suspension bridge. He reached San Francisco. He liked it immensely. The weather was very pleasant. It was early summer. The city was said to be nature's air conditioned city. As the taxi took him to the Union Square he said to himself that he was going to spend his time in the most delightful fashion. He reached the hotel, he took a room for himself. Prem had not yet arrived. That gave him a momentary jolt, but he was told at the counter that there was still time for her to arrive. He had a wash but he did not like to spend his time sitting in the room waiting for her. The weather was so fine that it would be an insult to nature if he were to sit inside the room. He came out. At the counter he left a note for Prem informing her of his arrival. The moment he came out of the hotel he saw the beautiful green park. All nature's blessings seemed to be there with man's innovative genius carving out underground parking below the surface of the park. All around he saw the theatre and shopping districts. He felt he was in the right place. He started walking, he was in such fine spirits that nothing deterred him. He started climbing up the hill. It was slightly difficult but he did it. Once he reached the top he started climbing down and he was at the Fisherman's Wharf. He roamed about. Then he found that a bus was taking the visitors round the city. He got into the bus. It took him to the China town. He felt that there was something oriental about the whole place. They were shown the shops and the temples. The temples with all the ritual reminded him of India. The scenes did not create in him any religious fervour but he watched the whole show with detached

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amusement and curiosity. To the westerners all that was novel, but to him much of the temple worship was common knowledge. The shops were full of curios, musical boxes producing music and sometimes even with little dancing girls dancing to the tune of music. The houses had the oriental architectural designs. Ravi got the impression that he was in the East and he could visualise the fascination of the East across the Pacific. By the time he reached the hotel it was eight and Prem arrived already. He inquired at the counter and he rushed to her room. She was quite relaxed and was reading a novel. Ravi tapped at the door and she opened the door. He saw her for the first time a few months ago at the motel. The whole scene came back to him with freshness and intoxication. She watched him for a minute, smiled and asked him to come in. He entered the room. Prem was the first one to speak.

'Ravi I am glad you have come. I wondered whether you could manage it.'

'Of course I could come' Ravi said.

'I thought I could spend two days with you before I would fly back to India.'

'So we have two days to ourselves. Fine,' said Ravi.

'In fact I have a taste of this fascinating city already. Unlike the other cities this place has an oriental touch. We will see as much as we can. We are in for a grand holiday' Ravi added.

'O, how wonderful it is to be with you. These will be the most memorable days for me.'

'How about having something to eat.' It looked as though Ravi wanted her to be down to earth from the ecstatic region of bliss.

'Why not we go out and eat somewhere?'

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' Yes, of course, we will go out ' Ravi said.

They both came out. They just walked for a short while. They found the theatres, the night clubs, the shops—all within walking distance. There were some Mexican cafés also. The music was inviting, the rhumba and the samba tunes were thrilling. They entered a Café. They had rice and curry. They did not like to taste the green chilly, lest it should be too hot. Ravi paid the bill. They looked at the shops, but they decided not to purchase anything at that time. They just wanted to stroll about for some time window gazing. By the time they reached the hotel it was half past nine. They entered Prem's room. Ravi was a little hesitant but she wanted him to be with her.

' Prem you are lucky. You are going back to India. I have to stay for a few months more.'

' Please finish your work and return to India soon. It will be difficult for me to be away from you ' Prem pleaded.

' I think we both need each other's company. Nothing like being together. But I have to take my degree before I come.'

' Yes of course, you have to get a degree.'

' If only I can submit my thesis within six months, it will be fine. I am longing to be back in India. I think I am every inch an Indian. Apart from my love and affection for my parents I have a commitment to the country. I feel that every Indian who comes here for higher studies should go back and serve his country.'

Prem smiled. She understood that more than his national sentiments there was a personal interest also in his anxiety to return to India. She realised that Ravi was deeply in love with her. But he did not say a single word about their marriage.

' I hope you have heard from your father ' Prem inquired.

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'Of course I have, but the first reaction is not very favourable. He has yet to be convinced about the seriousness of my proposal. He thinks it is only a fickle fancy on my part.'

'Is it only that, or any deep rooted prejudice against inter-caste marriages?'

'I don't think so. My father has always been a generous person. I have the greatest regard for him. I am sure he will like you. You have something magnetic about you. I often wonder how women can make or mar men. The way they look, sometimes lovingly and often coquettishly, amuses me. Woman is the most beautiful creation of God.'

Prem burst into laughter.

'Ravi I thought you were only a Mechanical Engineer. I never imagined you were so full of imagination.'

'I mean it sincerely. It is the woman's creative urge that draws man to her. He may be selfish, yet he surrenders himself to the woman through love and marriage.'

'As an intellectual perhaps the physical part of life may not mean much for you.'

'On the other hand I believe that unless you go through the mill of physical life you cannot attain the blissful end.'

'Of spiritual enlightenment you mean.'

'Yes the non-involvement in worldly entanglements. Non-involvement is a gradational process, that is attained through involvement.'

'I hope I shall be a worthy partner to you. I am proud of you Ravi, I am ambitious for you. I have written to my father all about you.'

'I wonder what you have said about me. I hope you have not painted me in glorious colours.'

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'Don't you worry, I have told him what I should tell him.'

'Your words baffle me. They are intriguing.'

'No, I don't think so. From my letter my father will know that you are a decent man, reliable and trustworthy.'

'Prem you seem to be giving a conduct certificate to me' Ravi smilingly added.

'My father feels lonely. His own view is that I should marry someone understanding and sympathetic. I am all the world to him as I happen to be the only child. Especially after my mother's death he has tended to be more dependent on me. It has been a great wrench for him to send me to the States for these few months. My mother was a gentle lady. She never tried to do anything that would displease my father. They were a loving couple.'

Ravi understood the implied suggestion that they too should be inseparable.

'My father was extremely devoted to my mother. Brought up in such a comfortable home I long for a loving husband and a peaceful home. I am happy and contented for I hope to have all this in a large measure in your company' she said.

Prem was sentimental. Ravi was silent. She looked at him for a reassuring answer. His silence intrigued her. She couldn't understand why he should be so detached.

'Ravi are you not sure of our marriage?' questioned Prem.

'Of course we will get married the moment I come back to India. I was only thinking of my parents, the simple life they lead and the little little joys they have. Yours is an urban background, mine is a rural one. But I can see that your sophistication has not spoiled you just as my rusticity has not made me a barbarian. The cultured family traditions in both the cases

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have given us the best. I only hope we'll keep up the traditional values and make life pleasurable.'

'Yes definitely. Life will be enjoyable. Anyway it's what we make of it. One must know the art of living. Life can be unbearable if one does not know that. It can be a veritable hell or even a heaven.'

'Well we will make ourselves happy. I know we can. Prem, you must be feeling tired. Tomorrow we have a busy programme. Let us relax now.'

Ravi bade her good night and left her for his room.

Ravi could not sleep for a long time. The whole thing looked like a dream. His father's consent was not yet given. But he had promised Prem that he would marry her. He wanted to be true to his word yet he knew he could not displease his father. The conflict raged in his mind but then he hoped that his father would ultimately accept his proposal. That gave him comfort and sleep overtook him.

The moment Ravi left her Prem slept. She felt happy and cheerful. She had no tensions. She had full faith in Ravi and her father gave his consent to her marriage with him. So her mind was given to fruition. Sleep came to her like an intoxication. She dreamt of a blissful life with Ravi.

The next morning Ravi tapped at Prem's door. It looked as though she just got up. She was in her dressing gown. With a beaming face she looked at Ravi. Her dream world still haunted her and he figured mostly as a dream figure not as a live man facing her. Very soon reality dawned on her. She blushed lovingly and sweetly. Ravi looked at her feminine form dazed and stupefied. All the loveliness and the freshness of the early morning scene seemed to be solidified in her gentle, graceful form and sweet smiles.

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' Ravi did you sleep well ? ' She looked at him mischievously. She gently touched his hand, ' Poor dear, you feel lonely without me,' she added. He drew her towards him and kissed her. It was a gesture of love and affection for her. It also symbolised the fruition of her dream. She was longing for it and she had it.

Very soon she got ready and they planned to go to Berkeley. She had a friend doing Ph.D. in Mathematics. She invited Prem to Berkeley. They reached her flat and they could easily guess the Indian dishes being prepared, for the fine flavour was everywhere. Suguna was from the South and she came to Berkeley a year ago. She was registered for Ph.D. as a part-time worker. She had to do some tutorial work for the department. She received Prem with warmth and affection. Ravi was introduced to her. Suguna felt happy and envied Prem going back to India.

' I wish I could also go back to India ' she said nostalgically.

But then there was a complication. There was Raghu studying in Berkeley. He was bent upon staying on. He had no intention of returning to India. He had already developed a curious attitude towards India. Suguna was in love with him. She could not wriggle herself out of that situation.

Prem explained to Suguna that she would get married to Ravi. The three had lunch. The food was tasty and spicy. Ravi complimented Suguna for the excellent dishes she prepared. They had ice cream as a finishing touch to the lunch. The two friends Prem and Suguna got busy talking. Ravi took a book and started reading. An hour later Suguna suggested that they would all go to Raghu. He lived in an apartment with some other Indian friends. It was only walking distance from Suguna's place. So the three walked to his room. Raghu was all smiles when he saw Suguna, and she became excited on seeing him. It was clear that they were in love with each other.

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Raghu received Prem and Ravi cordially. He was quite sociable. Only one thing Ravi did not like in him. Raghu repeatedly stressed the poverty in India.

'I wouldn't go back to India. I'll get a good job here and settle down in this country. What is there in India, except unemployment and grinding poverty?'

Ravi was hurt by his comments but he controlled himself. He added mildly,

'How can you be sure of your future? Who knows you may get a good job in India? In our country also there are persons in good positions. With your good qualifications you ought to be well placed even in India.'

Raghu did not agree with him.

'Who is bothered about merit in our country? All other factors except merit will count. I am thoroughly disgusted with Indian conditions. I don't think I'll ever get a decent job in India. So for me no more India.'

As he said that he was sad and pensive. All that exuberance was gone. It pained Ravi to see him metamorphosed so suddenly as all that. He understood that deep in his heart Raghu had tender feelings for his country, but only out of sheer desperation he was talking like that. But he also could not understand why these persons, who were at heart willing to go back, pretended to be settling down in the States. A certain type of bravado, a recklessness and an abandon, all mixed together perhaps worked on them, thought Ravi.

A minute later Raghu was his usual self again, buoyant and radiant. He offered to take them all in his car to San Francisco. Suguna was very much pleased that Raghu could give them a lift. They started. He drove through the woods. It was a delightful drive, all the time talking, laughing and amusing themselves. Raghu left Prem and Ravi at the hotel. They

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invited Suguna and Raghu for tea. They all had tea and then it was time for Raghu to go back to Berkeley. In the evening Prem and Ravi went out shopping. They had a ride in the cable car. They went towards the Bay area. They watched the waves in the sea fascinated and thrilled. They observed the heavy traffic on the bridges. The Golden Gate Bridge they thought was a marvellous engineering feat. Especially to Ravi all these were of great interest. As an engineer he felt he should build mighty bridges and dams, tame the Indian rivers, control the floods and bring prosperity to the teeming millions of the country. Such thoughts filled his mind. Prem had more of an artist's vision. The mighty ocean, the tall rocks, the beautiful flowers and the green vegetation all around, all remarkably impressed her with the magnificence of nature. The whole place was clustered with Sidewalk Flower Stands, full of lovely chrysanthemums and zinnias of all hues. They roamed about for some time in the Golden Gate Park. They liked the Japanese Tea Garden and the Portals of the Past.

The next day they visited Stanford. Stanford University buildings impressed them for most of them had open verandahs unlike the closed frontage for many other buildings in the other campuses in the States. Stanford reminded them of the Indian universities. That evening they wanted to spend in a quiet fashion in the hotel for the next morning she was flying to India. For the first time Ravi became sentimental. There was a softness in his tone.

'Prem I hope you'll write to me regularly. I should hear from you or else I may go crazy. These two days have passed pleasantly, rather too quickly. As the hour of departure nears I become unnerved. I wonder what'll happen to us. We can't look into the future.'

Prem took Ravi to be a cold intellectual, but now she saw him in his elemental passions. It was clear to her that he was

playing a part of being indifferent to soft sentimentalism. The cloak was off. The tenderness in him roused in her gentleness. She knew he wanted to possess her so that he could claim her as his own. She surrendered herself to him and revealed to him her supreme love. Their hearts beat in unison, their looks mingled together in harmony. They felt they were married that very minute itself and wished for unalloyed bliss. For the rest of their lives they would be inseparable, indivisible, they promised to each other in sweet endearing tones. The night wore on. Early morning Prem had to go. Ravi felt the ebbing of the flood. With weary steps and a heavy heart he had to go to Manhattan. For Prem there was the prospect of seeing her father and going back to her country. Not for him as yet that pleasure, that satisfaction, Ravi said to himself. Prem and Ravi reached the International Airport. Time was up. Luggage was checked. Prem was about to leave Ravi. They embraced each other. She hung to him like a tender vine for a minute, he looked at her passionately and lovingly. With difficulty she broke away from him. Her voice was choked with tears. She said good-bye and kissed him. Still looking at him and waving to him she moved on. She got into the plane. The plane took off. It was a big plane. As he watched it and as it mounted high it looked as though a gulf was created between him and Prem. He wondered why that thought had come to him. He told himself reassuringly that she would never disappoint him. How could a sweet lady like her be untrue to him, he argued within himself. No, never, he repeated to himself. He went to a Café nearby. He had his breakfast. That gave him some time to sort out his plans for his return journey. There was a train at 9 a.m. He could go by that train to Manhattan. Back to his studies and the world of research, he should finish his work quickly. There was greater urgency now that he had to be with Prem as early as possible. He reached the station, purchased a ticket and sat in the train.

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While doing all these he was like an actor in a play. He was not fully awake from the world of love. He saw only Prem and none else. As he sat in the train or as he moved about, at the back of his mind there was only the graceful figure of Prem and nothing else. He felt he was day dreaming. And Prem's mind was full of visions—of idyllic bliss of the last two days and the joy of meeting her father. She was looking forward to seeing her father in Delhi. The plane arrived in Delhi. It touched the Palam Airport. Prem's father Murthi and Lal were there to receive her. With a gentle hug her father welcomed her to India. Lal with a broad smile greeted her. She wondered how on earth could Lal be there like the invariable concomitant. Especially the incongruous association of the young man with the elderly looking man amused her. She smiled and said,

'Lal, how is it you are here? What have you been doing in Delhi?'

'I have my own business to take care of. That's why I took a degree in Business Administration in the States. I am doing fine.'

He sounded very complacent as he said 'fine'.

He added, 'I saw your father the day I came back to Delhi. I told him all about you and my great regard for you as a gentle lady, simple and unassuming.'

It looked as though he rehearsed the speech before he came. But she was in no mood to listen to his compliments. Her father needed some company. It was good she thought that some one was with him in her absence. More than that she was not prepared to visualise. She left it at that. She moved on. The customs formalities were over and the three drove on to Murthi's building. It was one of those big buildings in Ferozeshah Road with green lawns in the front. The old spaniel recognised Prem. Prem patted her and gently stroked her. She wagged

her tail and followed Prem to her room. Prem came back after a few minutes. It was time for lunch. It looked as though Lal was staying on for lunch. She was anxious to be with her father, she tolerated Lal at the Airport but she had no patience for him now. But nothing could be done about it. Her father seemed to be liking Lal. The lunch was a simple vegetarian one, perhaps to suit Lal. He was a strict vegetarian. There was not much talk. Prem was silent. Her father didn't like to disturb her. Only Lal now and then ventured to talk.

'Prem how was everything, your trip through the Eastern countries? I think you stayed in Tokyo for a day. Did you stop in Hong Kong also?'

She nodded, but she didn't like to be drawn into conversation.

Then he added,

'How is Ravi? Did he see you off in San Francisco?'

'O yes of course' Prem said.

'How long would he stay in Manhattan?'

'For a few months more I suppose' was her non-committal reply. Her father watched her uneasiness and gently interposed.

'Lal, thank you very much for coming to the Airport. I think we'd better give some rest to Prem. I shall ring you up again, you can come and see us later.'

Lal understood the polite request. He said good-bye to them and left the house. Prem heaved a sigh of relief as though Lal's exit was a good riddance. Murthi was a little puzzled. Lal gave him the impression of a good friend of Prem. So he allowed him to come to the Airport. But Prem did not seem to be very happy and pleased with Lal. So he commented,

'Prem, don't you like Lal? I thought he was your best friend. The way he was praising you gave me that feeling. I may be wrong in my guess.'

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'Lal is like that with everyone. He praises everyone, especially he is warm hearted towards women. But no woman takes him seriously for he is a trifier.'

'Trifier!' her father echoed. 'I took Lal to be your sincere friend. I am sorry if I have overestimated his admiration for you as fondness.'

'He likes me all right, I have nothing against him. He used to be friendly with me in Denver and talk to me now and then. But I never developed any attachment for him. You can't trust a person who talks too much about his love and affection for you.'

This was a new slant. Murthi realised that his daughter could judge for herself. She no longer needed his protective hand. She could manage things for herself. He left it at that. They talked about their family matters. The father told her about her cousins and uncles and the marriages that took place in the family in her absence. This brought him to the question of Prem's marriage.

'Prem I shall be glad to see you happily married, the sooner the better. The choice is yours entirely but I would like to have the marriage celebrated before I retire.'

She smiled.

'Dad, where is the hurry? Don't you want me to be with you and take care of you in your old age?' She asked smilingly. Murthi was unnerved. His eyes became moist.

'Prem, I want you to be with me but how can I be selfish? You have to marry someone and leave me one day. You are all the world to me, you know that. Even then how can I stand in the way of your happiness?'

'I know how you love me. What you say is true, but let that day come when it should come. Why ask for it now?'

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'True, but there should be some planning on our part. In the final analysis, it is God's will that prevails. There is a destiny that shapes our ends. But human effort has its own place in the scheme of things. Nothing comes to you unless you wish for it and long for it. God's grace comes only when human effort has gone on in the right direction. Those who love God are blessed.'

Prem was silent. The last sentence was striking to her. Yes we should love God, but sometimes the Gods above would delay or wait until the man collapses or loses faith in himself, she said to herself.

Murthi wondered whether he said anything objectionable.

'Prem why are you silent?'

'Dad, did you acquire all that faith in God? Do you think that the God you love is a just God?'

'Of course He is. He is just and merciful. Our own ego or our own blurred vision may not give us the right perspective and understanding of His ways. We need not blame God for any of our failures. The great God has made us divine. But in our foolishness and selfishness we distort and disfigure our divine visage. Even then His helping hand is extended to all those who pray to Him.'

Prem felt that her father had changed, changed a lot during these few months. He was a typical government officer mostly devoted to his work. Nothing else interested him. He never spoke much. But that he should speak now of God and man's relationship with God was something she never expected from him. He was considered to be a good administrator, rule minded and highly conscientious. She expected him to have a cabinet mind with all details remembered of every file he studied. Moreover he never talked to her in that manner on a footing of equality and comradeship. Her study abroad had given a new

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dimension to her personality and her father apparently noticed it and accepted it. She was very happy to be received by her father as a participant in his intellectualism. Murthi was on leave that day. So there was ample time at his disposal. He was anxious to talk to her of Ravi but unless she chose to tell him about him he did not want to introduce that topic. He understood the delicacy in talking to her about Ravi. She wrote to him only once about Ravi. He did not know whether they were still friendly or anything had altered their relationship. So he waited. It was July, it was a little hot and sultry.

Murthi said,

'Today it is a little hot. I wonder how it used to be in Denver.'

Prem was roused from her slumber.

'Except in winter in all other months I had a fine time. Lot of activity and good fun. The Drama department especially is good. My stay has been fruitful and pleasant. The people I met have been nice to me. I have pleasant memories of my stay.'

She stopped. But it looked as though she was eager to add something to what she stated. She checked herself. Murthi thought it would be a good opportunity for him to talk of Ravi.

'Prem ' he watched her before he said anything more.

'Yes, Dad, you were saying something.'

'Prem sometime ago you wrote to me about a young man Ravi whom you met while you were on a holiday.' He paused again.

'Yes I met him in Estes Park.' She was not communicative.

'Yes what has happened to him, when is he coming back? I hope you are still friendly with him.'

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This moved her. She thought she should no longer keep her father in suspense.

'Dad I wanted to tell you all about Ravi a little later. But now that you have asked me I shall tell you about my association with Ravi. Ravi is a fine, young man, cultured and handsome. He comes from a good family very much respected in that area. The family upholds traditional values though of course it is fairly liberal in its relationship with others. The father especially is noted for his generous nature. Ravi seems to be greatly attached to his father as much as I am devoted to you. I am fond of Ravi and he loves me. We wish to be married. His father has not yet given him consent for he is not of our caste. But he hopes he can persuade his father to accept his choice and bless him. I expect you'll agree to this alliance.'

Murthi slowly added,

'Whatever is agreeable to you is acceptable to me. I have given you full freedom in the choice of your partner. Only choose well and be happy.'

Prem was again struck with the concluding sentence. At every stage her father was concluding like an oracle. She wondered how he acquired all that wisdom in those few months. He did not acquire it, it was there with him. It was based on his experience of men and matters of life in its totality. He never talked to her in such a free and friendly manner as he did that day. In those days he considered her to be immature. Now she had grown in his estimate, so he was prepared to share with her his thoughts or accumulated wisdom as it might be called.

'Dad I know how you feel about my love and affection for Ravi. He is not that type of young man who is flashy and flamboyant. He is a steady, young man, quite balanced and thoroughly dependable.'

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'I am glad you say that.' He did not sound very enthusiastic or energetic as he said that. She understood that her father was trying to be polite.

'Any way Ravi can come only after finishing his Ph.D. work. He is taking a Doctorate degree in Mechanical Engineering, quite a tough job. But the progress is good and he hopes to finish his work on time. We may expect him after six months.'

'Don't you think it's too long a period to wait?'

'Well, it cannot be helped. I am in no hurry to get married. I want to be with you as long as I can.'

'That's all right. Are you sure that Ravi's father will allow him to be married to you? I am only worried about that. You saw Ravi only by accident. It may be called love at first sight. But it has to survive the test of time. The period of separation is the crucial test.'

'I think ours will be a happy marriage and all will be well.'

'Let us hope so. You relax for some time. Have a look at the garden.'

Prem moved about, strolled in the garden. Her thoughts were naturally given to Ravi.

Two or three times Lal saw Murthi while Prem was away in Denver. He gave him a distorted version of Prem's fascination for Ravi. On one such occasion he accosted Murthi.

'Good morning. I am just going to my office. I thought I could see you for a few minutes. How is Prem? When is she coming back?'

'Prem is getting on well. She says she will be back in two months.'

'I hope she does not bring Ravi also with her.'

'What do you mean?' inquired Murthi.

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'Very strangely she developed a fascination for Ravi. She saw him only once. I wonder how she could get any idea of him. She is the only daughter to you. Who knows Ravi may be interested in her wealth. One has to be careful in these matters.'

'I quite agree with you. I hope she will use her discretion in the right manner.'

'I am not so sure about it. I know Prem. We used to go out very often to pictures. I was fond of her. It was a reversal of values altogether when she chose an unknown man, almost a stranger, instead of the one who admired her. I didn't want to be rude to her even though I made it clear to her that I was not happy about her choice.'

'Lal I really cannot say anything. My only hope is that she will do the right thing. She is very intelligent and capable of dealing with others. She has managed this house for two years after the death of her mother. I should say she has done it well. I hope she will not allow her sentiments to overmaster her.'

'Yes true. She should not allow herself to be swayed by emotionalism. An educated girl like her should use her reasoning power.'

Murthi did not like the summing up of Lal. Would it mean that her reasoning power should be exercised only in the shape of choosing Lal? Ridiculous, he thought. All the same he was polite to Lal, told him that he was in a hurry to go to the office. Lal left him for that time.

A second time Lal came to Murthi. He inquired about Prem's coming. He was told that she would be back within a fortnight. Lal promised to come to the Airport. He added, 'I wrote to some of my friends in Kansas. They say that Ravi

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is a proud man, too sure of himself and not prepared to accept the views of others.'

The prospect of having such a person as his son-in-law chilled Murthi. He wanted someone who would be friendly and favourably disposed towards him. From the words of Lal he imagined Ravi to be an intellectual snob, a prig. He was a little disappointed with the choice of his daughter. On the other hand Lal impressed him as a friendly type, a commoner with no pretensions towards intellectualism and rarefied existence. He was humane and he was prospering well in business. Perhaps such a person might be more desirable for Prem, Murthi thought. So he encouraged him to come to the Airport. But the cold reception Prem gave to Lal cast some doubts as regards his wisdom in championing a lost cause.

Prem was relaxed and felt fine. She took charge of the house. She supervised everything and at dinner time she was the ministering angel to her father. Murthi was very much pleased. He prayed to God that such a dutiful girl should have the right person as partner in life. Prem slept in her room, slept well and thought of the good old days when her mother was alive and she was fondled by her. Her family ties were deep rooted and within a narrow range. As the lonely child of the family she received all the affection of her parents and all the comforts of an affluent home. She grew up to be a good natured girl, tender in her affections and loyal to her parents. The few months abroad only gave her a wider knowledge and a richer experience but she was still the same girl fond of her father and anxious to serve him.

Within a week Prem's friends came to know of her return. They started coming to her. Sarala, Vinala and Swapna visited her on a Sunday morning. They stayed till lunch time. They were all sophisticated. They were quite modern with bobbed hair, lipstick and pencilled eyebrows. They were polished,

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urbane and pretty. They were Prem's friends and they were all curious to know about the American universities. They heard spicy stories of dating and of romance. They wanted to check the veracity of those accounts with Prem. She was friendly and gave a detailed account of the American social life, their customs and manners. She particularly stressed the informality that prevailed in the class room. She praised the freedom given to the students in discussions and seminars. They all said they would like to go abroad and longingly looked forward to that day of emancipation, as they called it. They left her with cordial greetings and feelings of affection.

Prem received a letter from Ravi in the first week of her stay in Delhi. The letter was full of sweet memories of their stay in San Francisco. She read the letter several times. She was pleased with every sentiment expressed therein. She told her father about Ravi's letter. He was happy to hear that everything was shaping well. A month passed, there was no letter from Ravi. She wrote to him within that period. There was no response. She did not understand why Ravi was silent. Her father too was worried.

Lal turned up one day.

'What has happened to you, Lal? We didn't see you for nearly a month' Murthi asked.

'I had been to Bombay and Calcutta on business trips. I was away. I came back to Delhi only yesterday. I wanted to see you both' Lal said.

'It's very nice of you to have come. Somehow we haven't heard from Ravi for the last one month. I wonder why he does not write. Perhaps he is busy with his research work.'

'Don't tell me that he is so busy with research work. You know the world. These young men who fall so suddenly in love are not to be trusted.'

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Prem entered the drawing room while the two were talking. They became quiet as they saw her.

'What were you talking of?' queried Prem.

'O nothing in particular. Lal tells me he has been away, so he couldn't come and see us earlier.'

'It does not really matter. Anyway it's kind of Lal to see us now and then' Prem added.

She said she would bring coffee, she left them.

'Prem doesn't seem to be happy. I hope she'll very soon hear from Ravi and all will be well' Lal said.

'I hope so' said Murthi mechanically.

Murthi's faith in Ravi was gradually being shaken partly because of the indifference shown by Ravi towards Prem. Lal was gaining steadily in his estimate. When Prem came back, the two suggested that in the evening they would have a drive towards Okhla. Lal said he would take them in his car. She did not see anything wrong in going out with her father. So she agreed. Lal was jubilant. He promised to come by 5 in the evening. They said they would be ready by that time.

Things were taking a different turn with Ravi. When he went to San Francisco he did not tell his Professor. By the time he came back nearly a week was over. So he found it awkward to explain to the Professor about his absence for a week. He himself felt guilty even though the Professor did not refer to it at all. Being a sincere student he felt it wrong to go away like that. Then there was the letter from his father. It was icy cold. The father was not prepared to accept the proposal. He did not see any reasonableness in Ravi's action. There were equally intelligent and educated girls in their own caste. So he could not very much appreciate Ravi's infatuation for a stranger. Especially when his family was financially crippled

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and when Ravi could be of real use to the family it was sheer folly to disown his duty and run after illusionary shadowy nothings. So Ramesam took a very unhelpful attitude. With these problems on his mind Ravi was slack in his work. He did not make the progress he should have made. Ramesam also hinted to Ravi that by the time he came back some of the ancestral lands might be sold. He did not particularly like this aspect. Somehow they should retain the property, they should not lose it. That was his view. As the conflict raged within him he neglected writing to Prem.

Gupta entered his room one evening. He was the only person who knew of Ravi's fondness for Prem. He himself had his love affair with Rosie. It was coming to a stage of fruition. So he was in a cheerful mood. He was a little taken aback when he saw Ravi.

'Ravi what is wrong with you? No letters from Prem?'

'No not that way. In fact I didn't write to her for the last one month.'

'So everything is over. I am sorry for you. Better luck next time.'

Despite himself Ravi laughed. Gupta's cheerful spirits momentarily roused him from gloom.

'Gupta I am thankful to you for your advice. But the fact is that Prem and I love each other. But my father is not happy about my choice and I do not wish to do anything that may displease my father.'

'O I see, conflict in duties, primary obligation and secondary obligation, which should come first? Naturally primary obligation takes precedence over secondary obligation. But the question is what is primary, what is secondary. To a lover the primary obligation is towards his lady love. Take Antony, his first preference is for Cleopatra, not for his Roman empire.'

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'Wonderful argument' Ravi laughed, and added, 'But you know there is a loophole in your argument. Antony had a tragic death only because of the reversal of values and topsyturvydom.'

'O don't tell me all that. Shakespeare was in an awful mood, so he made it a tragedy. If he wanted, he could have given a happy ending.'

'Ravi I am seriously telling you to emulate my example. I get married to Rosie against the wishes of my parents. My father threatens to disown me. My mother pleads in gentle tones that I should cherish and nourish the hopes of the family. But I ask them why my marriage should be an obstacle to my helping my family.'

'Of course the question of conventions will come. In Indian social conditions such alliances may not be favourably viewed.'

'As if others do not have anything else except to watch us. All this is old fashioned, Ravi. I tell you honestly I have found Rosie in no way different from the Indian women. She is modest and very helpful to me. Her parents are not very happy about her fondness for me. But they hope that she may not be serious about it. They take it as youthful ardour, a bit of flirtation, nothing more than that. It will die a natural death, they think.'

'Perhaps it may' Ravi said.

'Nonsense man, it can never happen. The stars above may go down but not our love. It is sacred, inviolable. Nothing can stop it.'

Gupta was a little emotional. He loved Rosie to madness. He had met her at a dance hall. Everyone was dancing. Rosie was a little detached. It looked as though she had no partner. Gupta ventured to go to her.

'May I have the pleasure of dancing with you?'

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'Of course you can.' He took her gently round the hall. She realised he was good at dancing. They did a waltz. There was a break, Gupta brought a few sandwiches and tea for her.

'Are you studying in the University?' asked Rosie.

'Yes I am specializing in medicine. I come from Delhi. I took my first degree from Delhi University. I am now working for a postgraduate degree in medicine.'

'I like doctors. I myself wanted to go for medicine. I ended up with a degree in Home Science. Not bad for a woman but nothing like being a medico.'

'I am glad you say that.' The dance started again. The dance floor was full. Young and old, men and women, danced merrily. The music was pleasing and the dance was exciting especially to Gupta and Rosie. He held her tight. She did not mind. He became a little bolder and started complimenting her in a whisper.

'You look fine. You dance gracefully and elegantly. It is a pleasure to dance with you.'

She was pleased, immensely pleased. She nestled closer to Gupta. He embraced her. The lights were off for a minute. He kissed her. She warmly responded. At the end of the dance they moved out. It was too stuffy inside or perhaps they were so excited that they wanted some cool breeze. They left the dance hall. They started walking. On the way they saw a restaurant. They entered. It was self-service. He asked Rosie to be seated at a table and he himself brought a few cakes and tea. She looked at him lovingly. She was holding his hand gently underneath the table. This was a novel experience for him. She started talking. She tried to pronounce his name correctly.

'Gup ta, is it a surname or a Christian name?' she asked.

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'It's a surname. My Christian name is Ramesh.'

'Can I call you Ish? I think that is much easier. Ish, how many wives can an Indian have?'

'What a silly thing to ask?' Gupta smiled, and added,

'A man can have only one wife.'

'Ish, are you married?'

'No, not yet.'

'Are you keen on getting married only to an Indian?'

'No not particularly, I marry a woman whom I love. I don't believe in arranged marriages.'

'Is it possible for an Indian to fall in love with a foreigner?'

Rosie sounded silly again.

'Why not? For instance take our case. We speak the same language, we understand each other. What hinders us from loving each other?'

'Nothing.' She kept quiet.

Gupta paid the bill. She agreed to go with him to a picture the next day. She promised to meet him at the picture house at 4.00 p.m. Gupta bade her good night and reached his room in high spirits.

'That's how the love started' he told Ravi. Ravi understood that Gupta had greater pluck and courage to defy his parents. Gupta was westernised whereas Ravi, coming as he did from a rural set up, was mostly conventional. He could not flout traditional values. At the same time he could not take a bold step in deciding to marry Prem. In that mood of indecision at last he wrote to Prem, but the letter did not refer to their love at all. It was a letter written by a friend to a friend. It surprised her and distressed her.

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A few days later Gupta came again. He told Ravi that he was getting his marriage registered and that Ravi should come as a witness to the Registrar's Office. Ravi saw Rosie for the first time. He thought she was pretty and good looking. She was tallish, slightly taller than Gupta. She had a delicate charm and she was lovely. She was a little non-serious but perhaps in matters of love she could be steady. Her parents were present. Even though they opposed her choice in the beginning gradually they were won over by Gupta's pleasing manners. He cultivated the typical yankee style and his brown complexion was no longer brown to him. In fact he did not see himself as a dark man. Rosie had become dark or he became white. Love transcended the limitations of colour. Human nature was the same, the elemental passions of humanity, the passionate longings, all, all were the same no matter whether one belonged to the white race, brown race or dark race, Gupta thought. He invited his Indian friends for dinner. Ravi was the chief friend for him. He was the second to the groom. At the dinner time there was good fun and Rosie enjoyed herself in the company of the Indians tremendously. She became Indianised. She wore a sari and looked beautiful. Her fair skin looked fairer with the sari on. Gupta felt proud of his choice. He was in a liberal mood. He advised all his Indian friends to get married, preferably to the foreigners, so that international relationships and world citizenship might be established. He did not support, in that mood, any narrow nationalism. He condemned all such petty mindedness. His friends enjoyed the dinner as well as his stimulating talk. They all said 'three cheers to Gupta and his internationalism.' They all parted in good cheer bidding good-bye to Rosie and Gupta.

The marriage of Gupta with Rosie was sensational among his friends. They wondered whether he would be happy with Rosie. The next evening Gupta came to Ravi.

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'Hallo Ravi, how are you?'

'I am all right, thank you.'

'You won't be all right unless you get married to Prem. I tell you, you defy your parents and marry Prem.'

'I lack courage.'

'It only means you are not in love with Prem. Or else how can you be so detached? A true lover brooks no opposition.'

Ravi did not choose to say anything. He was thinking within himself whether there could be any truth in what Gupta said. Perhaps he was not so warm blooded as Gupta.

'Ravi you come with us tomorrow for a picture. Rosie would like to have you for tea. Hope you'll come.'

Ravi agreed to go with them to a picture. Gupta left him.

An hour later Ramesh Babu, Ham and Sundaram came to Ravi's room. Ramesh Babu had nearly finished his work. He was working for a Ph.D. in Food Technology. He had his own serious doubts about the job opportunity for a subject of that type in India. However he was prepared to return to India and try his luck. Sundaram was committed to Space Research. He wanted to be in the States.

'Ravi within a month I'll be going back to India. The prospects of getting a job are dim, but I have decided to go back' Ramesh Babu said.

'I am glad you have taken that decision. Persons like you would be of great help to the country.'

'As if the country needs us' coldly commented Ramesh Babu.

More than anything he had to go and see his parents. His father and mother were pretty old. They were anxious to have him back. He was the only son to them, so he had to go and take care of them in their old age. They were in a small

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village where medical help also was not much. Therefore he too was worried about them. But Sundaram had no such commitments. His elder brother took care of his mother and sisters. He used to send money home regularly. He was helpful to them in that manner. But his return to India was uncertain.

'Ravi I am not going back. I am a dedicated scientist. I want to win international renown. That will not be possible if I come back to India. So I have decided to stay on. As long as I can be of some financial help to my family they may not pressurise me to come back. So far so good. Let us see how things will develop. At least I'll stay as long as I can.'

Ravi saw that Sundaram was committed to scientific research. It was not like the emotional entanglement of Gupta with Rosie that would bind him to the States. He was an Indian in all respects. He was not crazy about western life, nor was he too much sophisticated. Yet his love of research and his aspiration to be renowned left him with no alternative. He had to stay on, it was almost an imperative. He would be a loss to India. Ravi only hoped that one day Sundaram would come back because he was not a slave to western life as Gupta was. So there was hope. Ravi thought that Ham would return to India as he had no definite commitment to stay on. The four reached a Café. They had tea. Ramesh Babu said good-bye to Ravi. Ham and Sundaram said they would meet him again. They had no idea of Ravi's love affair with Prem. So they did not introduce that topic.

That evening Ravi had to go to a picture with Rosie and Gupta. He had to go to their flat and have tea with them. Rosie and Gupta were ready to receive Ravi. He was on time. Rosie served tea. They could help themselves to sandwiches, cakes and biscuits, that were kept on the table. Ravi was a little shy in the company of Rosie. But Gupta made him feel at home.

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' Ravi you are no good. Eat well.'

Then he turned to Rosie and told her,

' Look here Rosie, this man is in love with Prem. He met her while he was on a holiday in Estes Park.'

' O how lovely ! It must be good fun. How romantic and thrilling ! Yes go on, tell me.'

Gupta looked at Ravi wondering whether he would take up the narrative and proceed. Ravi was feeling awkward. He didn't want his love affair to be discussed or talked about. He felt it was sacred, he gave to his relationship a certain solemnity and grace. So he did not like to say anything.

' Prem is now in India. Ravi has a terrible conflict—his loyalty to his father and his love for Prem. His father does not like his choice ' Gupta talked on.

' O what a shame. I am so very sorry for you Ravi. You should get married to the woman you love.'

' Rosie don't you think I am wonderful ? ' Gupta ventured to comment.

' Yes you are wonderful my dear ' she looked lovingly at Gupta.

All this was to a large extent influencing Ravi. He wanted to be firm and to be true to his promise to Prem.

' I think I'll get married to Prem when I go back to India. At present I don't want to be bothered about these problems. I want to work in peace for my degree.'

' But my dear man you are not having peace, even though you try to deceive yourself by saying that you'll have peace ' said Gupta.

They moved on to the picture house. Rosie was all the time leaning on Gupta and was holding his hand. Ravi wondered

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why he had come with them. It looked as though they were unmindful of him. He did not exist for them, nor did others in the picture house. They withdrew into a world of their own. Ravi did not very much enjoy the picture. He was not very keen on seeing pictures. He came only because Gupta invited him. He did not want to displease him. As they came out from the picture house he left them and returned to his room.

The love making of Rosie and Gupta did have a stimulating effect on Ravi. He thought of Prem and the delightful days he spent with her. Even though he was not passionate by nature, in that mood he wrote a warm letter to Prem.

There was no letter from Ravi for a month. Lal took Prem to a picture. Her father also went with them. It was a moving picture with lovers being separated, misunderstandings taking place and ultimately getting reunited. All was well towards the close. Prem hoped and wished that her own love for Ravi should have fruition and there should be a happy ending to her love and romance. The next day Ravi's letter came but it was a formal one, it did not refer to their love. She was a little disappointed. Murthi asked her,

'Is that a letter from Ravi? When is he coming back?'

'Yes it is a letter from Ravi but curiously enough he does not refer to anything that is personal. He talks of weather and studies, a very impersonal letter, I should say.'

'I wonder what he means.'

'I do not know' Prem said evasively.

Lal understood that all was not well in the family. He was trying to impress Murthi as an eligible groom for his daughter. Murthi indirectly encouraged Lal to come and talk to Prem. She too did not object to his visit as they revived her drooping spirits. Moreover Lal was a pleasing companion though he might be an unsteady lover. So she saw no harm in talking to

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him or in going out with him occasionally. She did not have any positive dislike for him even though she wouldn't like to take him as her lover.

Another month rolled on. Ravi's second letter written immediately under the influence of the romantic love making of Rosie and Gupta was more to Prem's satisfaction. He had come up to the standard of a lover with passionate urges and solemn promises of love. He measured up to her imagination of a partner in love. She was happy and elated. She told her father that Ravi would be back within two months. Murthi understood that she was terribly fond of Ravi and that her moods changed depending on the receipt or non-receipt of letters from Ravi. Lal came that evening with gusto imagining himself to be progressing well in his relationship with Prem. She was extremely happy, not so much because of Lal but because of Ravi's letter. It was a curious state indeed.

'Lal I have some good news to tell you.'

'Yes tell me.'

'Ravi has written to me a wonderful letter. I am tremendously happy. I want you to share with me my joy. Shall we walk towards India Gate?'

Prem was so full of energy that she wanted to go out and see others enjoying themselves. On other days she did not very much like the lovers going about hand in hand as though the whole world belonged to them. The letter gave her such a thrill that she wanted to be in the midst of such busy idle people. But Lal was stunned. He never thought that things would take such a turn. It looked as though he was thrown from the summit of a ladder. He wanted to go away immediately. He excused himself. He said he had some other engagement and left the house jaded and disappointed. She did not mind his going away so abruptly as all that. Especially in that mood of

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elation she did not want to disturb herself. Lal meant nothing for her except that she used him as a time server and he flattered himself to be her lover. Prem wrote back to Ravi lovingly and all seemed to be well.

Ramesh Babu came back to India. He had to attend an interview in Delhi. So he came to Delhi. The first interview he had was a poor show. The interviewing committee did not take to him kindly.

It was a motley group. Some were government officials. One was an expert. The Chairman was an elderly type of person. One of them perhaps was a psychiatrist who was silently watching him. So he guessed that he should be of that category. The questions they put had no relevance to his area of specialization. Apparently they seemed to be of the view that narrow specialization was unhelpful in a developing country. One had to possess wide interests and comprehensive knowledge so that one could play different roles on different occasions. He should be a mighty Colossus. They did not very much like the Ph.Ds. They thought that they were of no use in a fast moving society. Perhaps in a developed country they would be all right, they thought. As against Ramesh Babu they preferred an M.Sc. from Delhi who already was working on a temporary basis in the ministry. He had to be pushed up. Ramesh Babu was a foreigner, at least for the time being he was considered to be an alien. The interview gave him a jolt. He understood why so many of his Indian friends were reluctant to come back. It was a sad experience, but he had to put up with it. There was no escape from it. His family circumstances compelled him to come back. He ended up as a pool officer in Hyderabad. His parents stayed with him. He still appeared for the interviews and very patiently, almost stoically, accepted the rejections. But he had an immense faith in himself and he knew he would succeed one day in his endeavours.

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In July Ravi was coming back to India. Rosie and Gupta were with him. They gave him affection and love. Sundaram was with him a day prior to his departure. As he saw Ravi he had nostalgic reminiscences.

'Ravi you are fortunate. You are going back to your parents and to the country you love. The warm climate, the sunshine and the moon light have their own sweetness. I really miss the moonlit nights. I often long to sleep outside facing the stars above.'

'Then what prevents you from going back to India? You have already taken your Ph.D. and you have done good research work. Is there any frustration in love that keeps you away from India?'

Ravi ventured to ask even though it was a purely personal affair.

Sundaram blushed but he answered firmly.

'No such thing for me. I want to be a great scientist. In pursuit of that name and fame I am prepared to forego all the pleasures that are given to ordinary persons. Perhaps mine is a sublimation of desires.'

'Even the aspiration for renown is a desire. It is in fact an obsession with you. It takes you away from your kith and kin and from the land of birth.'

'Ravi we can't help it. We can't have everything in life. There must be some sacrifice somewhere in order to be great. Can you honestly tell me that I'll get opportunities for doing advanced work in our country? You must have heard from Ramesh Babu. Look at his pathetic plight. His specialization is one thing and he lives on dole as a pool officer. How frightfully sad is his state!'

'True, but time should give him the reward. Merit will be recognised, but it's a slow process.'

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'Maybe, but I cannot be reconciled to an abject state of dependence. I should be on my own. I love to be in India. Who does not want to be in one's own country? But then my objective can be fulfilled only if I stay on in this country.'

'You won't have the same attitude after a few years. I think you will change or the country will offer you opportunities to continue your research.'

'That will be a dream, Ravi.'

'Well, sometimes dreams materialise.'

'Let us hope so. Ravi, good luck and bon voyage.'

Sundaram left him. Ravi liked him immensely. He knew he was a brilliant researcher and would bring name to his country.

The next day at the Airport Rosie and Gupta greeted him. She gave him a warm handshake. Gupta embraced him and wished him happiness. Rosie and Gupta sent their good wishes to Prem. Ravi flew to Delhi.

In the last few months Lal stopped coming to Prem but he used to see her father or telephone to him to his office. He did not give up Prem but at the same time he was unwilling to face her. So her father also was non-committal. He was only waiting for Ravi's return and the shape of events that would follow. He felt that Ravi's father might not accept the match. Then there would be an occasion for him to push Lal's case. He was therefore in touch with Lal. Lal too was thinking on the same lines. So he did not break off with her father. On the day Ravi was reaching Delhi he offered to come to the Airport. Prem did not like to offend him, so the three went to receive Ravi.

Ravi had a comfortable journey and he was in good spirits. Prem was silently praying for his safe return. The first one whom Ravi saw and recognised was Prem. He held her hand warmly for a minute. Prem introduced her father.

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' Ravi this is my father.'

Murthi shook hands with Ravi. The next one to be introduced was Lal.

' Ravi I hope you remember Lal. You saw him in Denver.'

Ravi looked at Lal. He was not altogether pleased but politely added.

' Yes of course. Lal, how do you do?' He shook hands with Lal.

Then they all moved on to the car waiting for them. Ravi was invited to stay with Prem and her father in New Delhi for a few days. That was the arrangement. It was lunch time. Lal stayed on for lunch.

' Lal when did you come back to India?'

' Nearly a year ago' Lal said. ' I have my own business, so the hunt for a job is not there for me' he added.

' I am glad to hear that' Ravi said.

He thought of Ramesh Babu and all the interviews he was facing. He too had the same ordeal. But Lal was lucky, he thought. Only a few like him could be self-supporting. It was not always easy to be so rich, he said to himself.

' Ravi did you get your degree?' Lal asked.

He had to ask something, so he put that question. He also thought that in his madness for Prem, Ravi could have come away even before the work was over. Ravi was slightly irritated, but he quietly said,

' Yes, I got my degree, or else I wouldn't have come. It is meaningless to come away without a degree.'

' True, but sometimes it may happen like that.'

' I am glad it didn't happen with me' said Ravi.

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Murthi started on a different note.

'Ravi how is your family? How many brothers and sisters have you?'

'I am the eldest of the lot. I have two brothers and two sisters, all junior to me. My father was a Congressman, a very sincere Gandhian worker. He has done yeoman service to the villagers. They all love him and think of him with gratitude, reverence and affection.'

'A patriot and a leader in the days of the Freedom Movement, I suppose' said Murthi, a little sarcastically.

'Yes he had been to prison. He still commands respect from all the villagers but we have lost much of our property. It was true of all those workers at that time. Those were the days of sacrifice.'

Ravi commented sentimentally as though he would like to have such noble and unselfish men again, working for the good of the country.

'Perhaps you'll have to shoulder the responsibility of your family' Murthi inquired.

'No not that way. Not so bad as that. We still have property, but if I am in a good position naturally I can be of help to my family.'

'Ravi you'll definitely get a good job' Lal added, half satirically, because the reality was different. Lal was proud of himself, of his money. He was sure of himself. He was the master of his own fate. That gave an added dimension to his personality. He was complacent.

'I hope so' Ravi said.

He did not sound very enthusiastic when he said so because Ramesh Babu was too much in his mind. Murthi wondered whether it would be desirable to send his only daughter to a home.

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encumbered by financial stringency and overburdened with family problems. Two brothers to be educated and two sisters to be married would not be an easy job, he thought. His own daughter might not enjoy the comforts of an affluent home. That would be unbearable for him.

Prem wanted to be alone with Ravi. She did not like her father's questions. She was only waiting for the lunch to be over.

She said she would show to Ravi the room in which he would be staying. On that pretext she took him away the moment the lunch was over. Lal fidgeted for sometime and he left the house. Murthi started reading the paper and dozed off.

Prem and Ravi were all by themselves. Ravi said, 'Prem at last we are left free.' She looked at him lovingly and gracefully. It was one of those rare moments for them. Their looks communed with each other. There was joy everywhere, in every gesture, in every movement of theirs. Heaven and earth seemed to be all in one unbounded ecstasy. He only looked at her, he couldn't say anything.

'My dear, how glad I am to be with you' he whispered.

Prem leaned on him. Their warm hearts beat together. They were happy.

'Ravi sometimes when your letters were delayed I used to be miserable.'

'All that is over now. We are together and nothing can separate us' Ravi added.

'Ravi did your father accept your proposal?'

'Not yet, but I am sure I can bring him round to my viewpoint.'

For one moment a shadow flitted through the mind of Prem. Still there was uncertainty, she thought. Ravi understood her mind.

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'Prem don't allow yourself to be depressed. All will be well. I know what I want and what I wish to do. I promise to keep my word.'

Prem looked at him cheerfully and smiled. She wanted a reassurance from him and she got it. The clouds disappeared and she became her usual self. They were in the best of their spirits. They planned to go out in the evening.

Prem and Ravi visited the Red Fort. It was the first time for Ravi to see the Fort. The spacious Durbar Hall, the magnificent lawns, the intricate network of fountains intrigued him, fascinated him. His mind went back to those days of splendour when kings were kings with all pomp and ceremony attached to them. The architecture and the styles of construction—all belonged to an age of spaciousness and luxuriance.

Prem and Ravi sat on one of those lawns. Seasonal flowers were colourful and gave a festive look. Men and women of all ages and of all groups were moving about. Some were inspecting the old dresses and weapons used by the Moghuls, some others watched the Jamuna from the corridors. There was much movement but Prem and Ravi were left to themselves in one corner.

'Prem were you angry with me when I didn't write to you?'

'No, I wasn't angry with you. I was only miserable.'

'I am sorry I gave you cause for misery.'

'Any way all that is over now that you are with me. Ravi do you like crowds? Do you like to lose yourself in the midst of people or do you feel better when you are all by yourself?'

'I feel happy when I am with my near and dear ones.' Ravi smiled and added, 'Once in a while I don't mind a crowd like this. It all depends on our moods, I think. If we are in a happy frame of mind we can enjoy the bliss of life wherever we are.'

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'Perhaps you have those famous lines in mind. We can make a heaven of hell, or a hell of heaven.'

'That's true. I always say to myself that life has surprises for us. They may be heaven sent moments for us. They have a certain predisposition. Our meeting is one of those God given moments.'

Prem was moved. She gently wiped a tear of joy.

'Ravi I am glad you say that and believe in the hand of God in bringing us together. It only confirms the accepted belief that marriages are made in heaven.'

'Or perhaps it is love at first sight which is the most accepted form of love making. Poets seem to be very much in love with this concept.'

'Ravi, do you think that your father will agree to have alliance with us?'

'Of course he will. As soon as I go home I shall talk to him. I very much wish to go back and see him.'

Ravi's attention was immediately drawn towards someone going by their side. It was Lal.

'Hallo Prem it's a surprise to see you here.' He pretended to have seen only Prem in the first instance. Then he added, 'O Ravi is with you. I wondered who it could be' sounding as though she was in the habit of coming out with others for picnics and outings. Prem did not like his comment very much. Ravi never wanted Lal to accost him. Lal was still at a short distance, standing and watching them. They did not invite him to join them. He seemed to be debating within himself whether he should join them. For the sake of courtesy Prem suggested,

'Lal, why don't you come and sit with us? How is it you are here today?'

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'O well it's just by chance that I am here. I had nothing else to do. I just peeped in.'

'I hope you didn't promise to see someone here' Prem said smilingly.

'O no nothing of that sort' replied Lal.

Ravi watched the whole scene with unease. He suspected that Lal deliberately had come to disturb them. Her father would have given him the information, he thought. His guess was correct. Lal rang up Prem's father and was told that she had gone out with Ravi to the Red Fort. So he came in search of them. He loitered about the shops as he entered. He did not find Prem and Ravi there. He was about to go away when he saw them in that corner seated on the lawn.

The conversation went on for some time. Ravi was mostly silent wondering what on earth was the hold of Lal on Prem. He could not understand the relationship between them, but he felt that she was friendly towards Lal. He also realised that Lal was very much liked by Murthi. The three decided to go back to the house. At dinner time also Ravi was not very communicative. Lal stayed on for dinner, uninvited guest though. He was of a non-serious type, so he did not stand on formalities. He was talking to Prem's father till dinner time. Naturally he lingered on. Ravi decided that he should leave Delhi the next day. His original intention was to stay for a week. But now things were different. He did not feel quite at home in Delhi.

The very next day Ravi left Prem. She allowed him to go partly because she thought that it would enable Ravi to see his father and decide quickly about their marriage. Murthi was a little cold towards him. He did not talk to Ravi as warm heartedly as he did to Lal. Ravi was reserved and was of a serious disposition. He moved about as though the weight of

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monarchies was upon him. Murthi liked a young man to be young, non-serious, gay and cheerful. That was his image of a young man. At the back of his mind the coloured picture given by Lal that Ravi was a prig still lingered in his mind. That was only confirmed and not effaced by Ravi's visit to Delhi. Lal seemed to be the gainer at least for the moment in checking the high spirits of Ravi. Also it was true that Murthi loved Lal's wealth even though it meant nothing to Prem.

Two days later Ravi reached his village. It was a slow movement. The train seemed to be going at a snail's speed. His mind darted forward and all the vivid impressions of his boyhood days started coming to him with terrific speed. His village was on the banks of the river Krishna. It was a small village, but historically very significant. It had all the glamour of being the capital of the first Andhra king. The temple by the side of the river Krishna, the fields nearby, the calm, placid life as tranquil as the waters of the river—all these came as a contrast, a vivid contrast to the busy, sophisticated life in the U.S.A. By the time he reached the village the news was spread. The whole village was at their house. The proud father embraced his son. His mother looked at him fondly. His brothers and sisters were wondering what presents he would have brought for them. The whole family was expecting him for the last one week. Any time he could come. He said he was coming, so the village too was excited and was prepared to receive him with warmth and affection. The village elders, his old relatives, all enquired about his health and put a few curious questions about the life in the States. They were glad he had come back. They asked him what sort of job he would get. He gave them some vague answer as he himself did not know what would happen to him. In their world of fanciful imagination he was going to be a big officer and the whole village looked forward towards emancipation and liberation from unemployment and penury. Such mighty hopes were entertained by them. They were

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ambitious for him. He was their idol, their hero. He brought name to their little village. That's how they looked at him and it pleased Ramesam, Ravi's father, immensely to see his son in such a splendid state.

Among those who came to see him were also two or three interested persons specially come from the neighbouring villages for an alliance with Ravi. Ravi's father talked to those prosperous persons with marriageable daughters. Even the dowries were discussed and all matters were prearranged. Only Ravi had to see the girls and choose one of them as his wife. All of them were educated girls coming from good families and their fathers were willing to offer good dowries. The moment most of the villagers went away Ravi's father introduced the august company of prospective fathers-in-law and told them in lavish terms all about Ravi, his innate simplicity, his essential good nature and his typical Indianism despite his stay in a foreign country for three years. Ravi talked to the guests nicely, but when it came to the marriage issue he became silent. His father told them that he would very soon talk to his son and inform them. Ravi's infatuation for Prem was known to his father. Yet he did his duty in bringing all these arranged matches. Ravi carefully analysed the three proposals. In one case the girl was simply a B.A. He said his wife should be at least a post-graduate. The second girl was an M.A., and she was employed. He said he did not like to marry a career girl. The third one was only one year junior to him in age. He said there should be at least five years difference in age between him and his wife. All these exasperated his father, yet he did not give up hope. He thought he could win him round to his viewpoint and make him agree to marry one of those three girls. Ravi invented all these excuses only as the situation demanded, not as though he had any set views about marriage. He flouted all canons of marriage in his love for Prem. So he played a game to upset his father's plans.

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A week passed by. Ravi used to go every evening for long walks all by himself. He would go by the side of their lands. The ancestral property was dwindling away. He loved it, but he did not know whether anything of that property would be with them. They were heavily in debt. There was no way of coming out of that muddle. The only way of helping the family was to get a rich alliance for himself. That was what the father had in mind. But his promise to Prem and his love for her stood in the way of such an arrangement. His independent spirit refused to allow him to be sold to the highest bidder. He said he would not do it. But then he asked himself whether he would be happy with Prem. The figure of Lal floated ghost-like before his mind. That dampened his spirits and ardour for Prem to a certain extent. If he were not sure of Prem and her affection for him he could as well help his family by getting married to one of those rich girls. His mind pleaded that way. But he could not be untrue to Prem. That was his troubled mental state. The long walks gave him peace no doubt. He was far from the madding crowd, from the busy haunts of the city. The rustic simplicity in him acclimatised him very soon to the village life. The loveliness of nature, the rural mirth, the boys playing in the streets, the cattle coming back from the fields, the temple bells, the women carrying water from the wells—all these elemental aspects of rustic life thrilled him to the core. He enjoyed his stay for the week in the village.

The day he was leaving for Hyderabad his father talked to him. He asked him about Prem.

'Ravi are you still keen on getting married to that woman in Delhi?'

'You mean Prem.'

'Yes the woman to whom you referred in your letters. I should know your mind. There is no point in my encouraging some of these persons for marriage alliances.'

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Ravi also felt that it was unfair to keep anyone in hope when his mind was given to someone else. He also realised that his father was a little yielding to him. His mother was responsible for such a change in his father. With her rich common sense she understood that it would be safer to leave Ravi alone in his marriage affair. So Ramesam did not talk with all that assurance. He finally told Ravi,

'Ravi you are free to marry anyone you like. But only choose the right one. That's all I would like to say in this matter.'

This was a surprise to Ravi. He was full of love and affection for his father. He saw his generous father conceding. A day before, he thought it might not be possible, but now the father agreed to his proposal. He was happy, only a few shadows still lingered in his mind. That was his own creation. He had to write to Prem. He was still hesitant to do so. He had to think about it. For the present he told his father that he would inform him about his decision within a week.

Ravi left for Hyderabad. Even while he was in the U.S.A., he applied for the position of a pool officer. He could take it up and stay in Hyderabad waiting for something good to turn up at a later stage. Ramesh Babu was already there in Hyderabad. He was in touch with him. The two friends could recapitulate their old days in Manhattan. At least from that angle his stay in Hyderabad would be tolerable. In fact his family position was slightly better than that of Ramesh Babu and the marriage alliance with Prem would give him a definite advantage. So Ravi could take life with greater ease and comfort.

On reaching Hyderabad Ravi contacted Ramesh Babu. The latter had no luck as yet, but he was not planning to go back to the States. He was still hoping that something would turn up.

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'Ramesh, I admire your pluck and courage in sticking to this place' Ravi said.

'Ravi it's desperation that is keeping me here. I go for all interviews, still no luck. Everywhere someone influential manages the show, I get a regret letter. How long this bad luck goes on, I don't know.'

'Ramesh you don't seem to be blaming anyone.'

'Why should I? If the right time comes no force can stop it. It only means that God's grace has not yet come to me.'

'Sometimes it may be too late also.'

'Anyway it's better to believe in something. Man should live in hope, or else he cannot survive. We have to fight the battle of life boldly. We cannot run away from reality.'

'I am glad you have within you the sterner stuff. You have the necessary mental make up to accept the vicissitudes of life with courage and confidence.'

'Ravi you know full well that when we do not have god-fathers the best thing is to accept the challenges with calmness and composure.'

'Ramesh I wish I had your unperturbed state of mind. I never thought you were such a capable person. I think the best in us comes only when we are exposed to certain situations.'

'So in a way it's good to have a few reverses in life so that one is prepared for the trials and tribulations that may come to him.'

'Ravi how about you? Have you any job?'

'I haven't tried so far seriously. I was interested in coming back to India as early as possible. For the present I'll be a pool officer or try for a lectureship in one of the Institutes of Technology.'

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' Yes I think you can manage that way. As my specialization is Food Technology I would like to go as an Assistant Director in Agriculture. Recently a post in Sikkim has been advertised. I am just wondering whether I should go all the way to Sikkim in search of a job.'

' I hope you have applied for the post.'

' Of course I have.'

' Let us see. I have some friends in Delhi. Perhaps I may be of some use to you.'

' I shall be thankful to you if you can help me.'

Ravi was thinking of Prem's father in Delhi. But he was not sure of his own relationship with Prem. He did not write to her. So that evening he wrote to her giving all sorts of lame excuses for not writing to her earlier. At the root of it all was his uncertain attitude towards her because of her association with Lal. He concluded his letter, 'I really don't see why Lal should hang on wherever we go. I wonder whether you have given any promise to him or your father has done so.' He posted the letter. Prem read it, reread it. She was sure of Ravi, she took him for granted. So the letter gave a jolt to her complacency. She was perturbed. For one moment she hated herself for having allowed some latitude to Lal. But then she was also furious for Ravi had no business to suspect her. She thought he was a barbarian and his veneer of sophistication and study abroad did not in any manner change his rustic crudeness. Or else why should he write that letter and hurt her feelings, she asked herself. She told her father all about Ravi's letter. He was terribly annoyed with Ravi. He saw no harm in Lal coming to their house. In fact it was he who encouraged Lal to be their friend. So it pained him as one who unfortunately had ruined his own daughter's happiness through his inadvertent handling of Lal. Both the father and the daughter were dismayed.

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'But what does Ravi say about his father?' inquired Murthi.

'Peculiarly enough, he does not say anything about him' said Prem.

'Perhaps this is one way of getting out of it by putting the blame on you. His father may have disallowed the proposal. He may be anxious to be free.'

'I don't think he is so clever as all that. He is fond of me. But he wants to be sure of my affection, I think. So he writes like that.'

Murthi was not quite convinced about his daughter's explanation. He thought she was too good to know the minds of men. He shrugged his shoulders and added,

'In that case you'd better write to him that Lal means nothing to us. He is just a casual acquaintance. He can be dropped like the glove.'

Prem smiled for her father's comparison between Lal and the glove. She wrote a passionate letter to Ravi urging him to come back to Delhi. She assured him that Lal was of no consequence to them. She said that she and her father were sincerely sorry for the intrusion of Lal into their affairs. The letter was posted the next day.

Ravi did not respond to that letter. He was still in two minds, his love for Prem and his dislike for Lal. If only he could bring away Prem to Hyderabad and settle down in the South all would be well, he thought. So he wanted to wait for some time before he could send a reply to Prem. She was getting worried and her father too was disconsolate for he took it on himself that he was responsible for the mismanagement of the whole situation. He cut Lal and avoided him. Prem did not show any disposition to be merry especially when Lal was with them. So gradually the visits of Lal became less frequent and after some time he didn't see them at all.

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For nearly two months there was no correspondence between Ravi and Prem. He suffered and allowed Prem to be tortured. His pride was standing in the way. He couldn't go back to Prem. She thought that perhaps his father didn't give him permission to be married. So she did not like to pressurise him into accepting her. At the same time she could not give up Ravi. She was so fond of him that nothing else mattered to her except her affection for him. She was prepared to wait for him patiently. That was her faith in him.

Ravi came to Delhi for an interview. He stayed in a hotel. He did not like to go and see Prem. He was roaming about in Connaught Place. Like all busy strollers he was window gazing and was walking slowly and aimlessly. Suddenly someone accosted him. He looked at him for a minute.

'Hallo Ravi how are you?'

'Hallo Gupta how are you? I am glad to see you. When did you come away from the U.S.A.? How is everything?'

Apparently he meant what had happened to Rosie. Ravi was extremely happy to see Gupta but at the same time he wondered why he was alone. Gupta and Rosie were inseparable, at least that was the impression they gave him. He never thought that Gupta would ever come back to India. So it baffled his imagination to see Gupta in Delhi face to face with him. Gupta did not seem to be very happy. He was not like his usual self, flamboyant and spirited. He was a little tame and less voluble.

Gupta suggested that they should go to a Café and have coffee. Gupta and Ravi entered the nearest coffee house. They sat opposite to each other. They asked for some cakes, sandwiches and coffee. The waiter took his own time to bring them. They were in no hurry. The Café was crowded. So there was time for them to talk to each other gently and slowly.

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'Yes Gupta tell me all about you.'

Gupta smiled but even the smile was a pale, thin one.

'Ravi, life has much to teach us. More than what the universities and teachers can tell us life can give us precious knowledge.'

'Yes I agree with you. Nothing like life, we come into contact with different people. Our associations are sometimes pleasant and on other occasions unpleasant. The stream of life can never be smooth with anyone.'

'The stream of life—what you say is correct, Ravi. Life takes us up. We feel we are the monarchs but very soon the scene changes. We lose everything we have gained.'

'But we cannot help it. We have to accept life in its totality, come what may. We cannot shun the tide. We are on it or we are drowned. It does not matter whether we go up or come down. But we have to get experiences in life.'

'Yes I had my full measure of it. You remember my love affair with Rosie. All seemed to be well. I thought I was settling down. I felt I drank the elixir of life. Of course she gave me the eddying wine of life. She knew all the tricks. She made me a slave to her. I even despised Indian marriages, our customs and manners.'

'You were more inclined towards westernisation. I thought you were too much sophisticated.'

'That was in fact the trouble. I thought while in America I should be an American through and through. I specialized in the art of western life. I got Rosie.'

'She seemed to be fond of you.'

'Ravi, she seemed to love me. But she did not love me.'

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'It's difficult to say whether a person loves you or not.' Ravi thought of his own case and how confounded he was in matters of love. He did not dare to offer any comment on love, a mysterious subject, he thought.

'Whatever it may be, I thought Rosie loved me. She gave me hope. We got married. You know all that. You were one of the witnesses of our marriage.'

'Yes I remember the happy day' Ravi said. Gupta was a little sad. His facial expression changed. The face lost its colour.

'Gupta have I hurt your feelings?'

'No, you didn't. Only thing is, all that happiness is gone. I have lost everything in life, Rosie and all the wealth I had. I have nothing that I can call my own. I am alone in this vast world. I wonder why I live' moodily murmured Gupta. Ravi was upset.

'Gupta I am very sorry for you. Tell me all about you. I am your friend. I have always liked you even though we have had our minor differences in our attitudes towards life.'

'Ravi, life with Rosie was all right for a few months. We went to pictures, for picnics and for parties. I realised that we could not go on like that. I longed for a few peaceful moments with her. She never allowed me that moment of peace. She was all the time hurrying me through the vast panorama of life as though she lost something and was trying to find it. It soon occurred to me that she was not happy with me. Gradually she started coming late and on certain occasions she was drunk and unsure of herself. Then came the breaking point.'

Gupta kept quiet. He did not proceed. He wondered whether he should tell Ravi everything about Rosie.

'Gupta go on, tell me everything. There is some relief in communicating your sad thoughts to others.' I sympathise

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with you. I can understand how miserable you would have felt on such occasions.'

'Ravi I was extremely unhappy. I cursed myself and my fate. I realised my mistake in getting married to Rosie. Rosie was disloyal to me. She started going out with other American young men. I got fed up. I shouted at her. She called me a barbarian, banged the door in my face and left the flat in a wild temper. She sued me in the court for divorce for ill treating her. I had to spend all the money I saved. Everything between me and Rosie was over. I came back to India a week ago penniless and broken hearted. I am setting up practice in Delhi and I wish to recreate my life. From the ashes of my life I have to resuscitate myself and live afresh.'

'I am glad you say that Gupta, you are still young. You can take all that affair with Rosie as a lesson for you. You are back in your country, that should give you the necessary strength to go ahead.'

'Yes I feel I have a long way to go but I am prepared for it. No more love for me.'

'That you cannot say' Ravi smiled.

'I don't think I'll make the same mistake again.'

'It may be a different mistake. If falling in love with a woman is a mistake, by all means, make mistakes' Ravi added.

Gupta and Ravi walked out of the Café. The weather was fine. It was slightly chilly. The evenings were a little cold. It was the first week of March and most of the men and women were wearing woollen clothes. Gupta suddenly turned to Ravi and said,

'Ravi I forgot to ask you, what has happened to your marriage with Prem? I think she lives in Delhi.'

'Yes she lives in Delhi.'

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'Then will it mean that you are staying with her now?'

'No, I have come for an interview. I shall be going away to Hyderabad within two or three days.'

'Any way, why are you still a bachelor? Of course, I have no right to ask you about this having burnt ray boats. I hope you don't mind my asking you.'

'Surely you can ask me. You know Gupta I want to be a little sure of her. So for the last two months I have not written to her. I have not given her any encouragement at all. I saw Lal, the one who was in Denver, with her. I couldn't stomach him. So I am a little detached now.'

'Well Ravi this is your own affair. I don't want to say anything. However I feel you shouldn't leave her in the lurch.'

Ravi kept quiet.

'Ravi why are you silent? Don't you think that it is unkind to keep someone waiting for you?'

'Gupta I have waited too long. Now I feel diffident to go to her. Her father may not like me.'

'Don't bother about her father. He will be all right. What he wants is the happiness of his daughter. If you don't mind, I shall go and talk to them.'

Ravi gave the address of Murthi. They agreed to meet the next day in the same Café at about five in the evening. Ravi had the interview in the U.P.S.C. office in the morning. In the evening they could meet. They bade good-bye for the night and each had his full share of thinking. Ravi could not simply believe that Gupta would come back to India. At least Rosie taught Gupta a lesson. It was difficult for him to imagine that a woman with such sweet disposition could ever be so treacherous. He could only marvel at the intricacies of life and feel sorry for human failings and frailties. He couldn't possibly

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ask for a just world. Good and evil coexist. He had no answer for the cussedness and injustices of life. Nor could he say why man should be so bestial in his actions.

Gupta was too much involved in Ravi's affair. He was determined to get Ravi happily married to Prem. He knew that unlike him Ravi had no weaknesses. He considered Ravi to be a puritan. He did not like him to lose Prem through his foolishness. Prem was going to be an asset to Ravi, coming as she did from a good family. Gupta forgot all about his unfortunate love and marriage with Rosie. The new role pleased him. He was bringing two good people together and God one day would give him the reward in life. Especially having failed in his attempt at establishing peace for himself he wanted others to be contented in marital life. He did not become sour or frustrated because of his misadventure with Rosie. On the other hand he became more determined to reclaim his life and make a success of it. He liked Ravi and he wanted him to be happy. His mind was given to such thoughts of good will for others. The next day he was busy with the affairs of Ravi.

Gupta knocked at the door of Prem at about nine in the morning. She looked at him a little surprised. She did not know who the early caller could be.

Gupta smiled and asked,

'Are you Miss Prem?'

'Yes' she said.

'May I come in?'

'Of course you can. I am sorry I didn't ask you in.'

She blushed gently and opened the door. Gupta seated himself in the drawing-room. He observed her. He thought she was good looking and that Ravi should be congratulated for his choice.

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'Miss Prem, yesterday evening just by chance I met Ravi in Connaught Place.'

'You saw Ravi!' exclaimed Prem. The word 'Ravi' sounded like music to her ears. She had lost all hope of him and she did not know why he was behaving like that. It looked as though Gupta was a good Samaritan for he brought the most pleasant news she could have ever heard. She ran to the next room, her father's room, and told him.

'Dad, it seems Ravi is in Delhi.'

'Then why can't he come back to us? Why should he stay in some other place?' questioned Murthi.

'I don't know. Here is a gentleman in the drawing-room who knows Ravi.'

Murthi came in a great hurry to the drawing-room. He introduced himself as Murthi, the father of Prem. They were all seated, all eager to hear every word from Gupta's mouth with great interest and attention. Gupta enjoyed the situation. He himself had tasted the sweetness, and lately the sourness of love. So he knew what it would be to Prem to hear of Ravi. It was as good as having lost him and found him, like lost gold found.

'Yesterday by accident I bumped into Ravi in Connaught Place. I came to Delhi a week ago. We all used to study in Manhattan, Kansas. Ravi was my good friend. So we started talking. He said he would come and see you this evening.'

'Mr. Gupta, Ravi has no business to stay somewhere else. This is his house. He ought to come to us. Prem is terribly fond of him. She is languishing.'

'I understand. He too is anxious to see you. He has come for an interview. He has a friend with him. So they are staying in a hotel.'

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'That explains why he has not come direct to us. Or else I was wondering why he should cut us.'

'O no he has not done it deliberately. On the other hand he has sent me to inform you. Both he and his friend Ramesh have gone for the interview. Ramesh also used to be with us in Manhattan.'

'I am glad Ravi will come and see me' Prem said. She had a few tears, perhaps tears of joy. But she wiped them and looked cheerfully at Gupta.

'Did he ever tell you anything about me?' Prem asked innocently.

'Of course yes. The moment he came back from holiday from Estes Park he narrated to me all his thrilling experience with you. He loves you.'

'Then why can't he marry her?' asked Murthi.

'Perhaps his father is standing in the way of his marriage' interposed Prem.

Gupta understood that Prem loved Ravi and that Ravi was unnecessarily torturing her. He thought Ravi should no longer postpone the day of marriage. Especially in his present mood of bringing about happiness to others he wanted to bring the issue to a head.

'I don't think Ravi will postpone the marriage day. Perhaps he will come this evening to tell you about it.'

Gupta said that he would see Prem in the evening along with Ravi. Murthi pressed him to stay on for breakfast. At the breakfast table Murthi was a little more communicative,

'Mr. Gupta what do you think of Ravi?'

'O he is fine' said Gupta. 'He is a little reserved. He does not talk much but feels much. So it takes some time for

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others to understand him. One can trust him absolutely,' added Gupta.

Murthi was pleased with the picture Gupta gave of Ravi. The clouds that hovered over the house for the last two months seemed to be clearing up. As the only child for him Prem occupied his mind fully and he could never see her even for a moment in a depressed state. The last two months of stress and strain for her were gloomy months for him also. He lost his zest for life and brooded. This morning with the coming of Gupta everything appeared to be cheerful. He brought a new cheer and a new hope to the house. Prem's happiness was unbounded. She bestowed all her affection and attention on Gupta as though he was Ravi himself.

Gupta stayed with them for an hour and they talked cheerfully. They all looked forward to the happy day of marriage. After that Gupta left them at about ten and walked briskly. He was looking for a suitable place to set up his practice. Someone was retiring. He was anxious to buy his place and settle down as a practising doctor. In treating humanity to better health he thought he could do service. Especially in a developing country there was plenty of opportunity for him to serve the people. He could be generous and humane, tender and charitable. The country needed him. He would have been lost to his country if Rosie did not jilt him. It was a blessing in disguise. It opened his eyes to a sense of obligation he had for his country. The commitment and involvement he had for his country was clear to him. Nothing could shake him in his determination to serve the country. He was a changed man. He entered a new life. Only the name remained, the man in him changed completely.

That evening exactly at five Gupta was in front of the Café. Ravi was coming from the opposite direction. He wore a broad smile as he looked at Gupta.

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'Hallo Gupta you seem to be wonderful. You are exactly on time.'

'Let us have tea' Gupta said.

The two friends entered the Café.

'Ravi how did the interview go?'

'I think I'll get the job. I did very well.'

'Provided they go by merit' cautioned Gupta so that Ravi might not be too sure of getting it.

'These interviews are very funny though. The members really do not know what they are asking. One member asked me about the capitals in the world as if I would be a geography teacher.'

'No, not that way. They just want to test your general knowledge, I suppose. Any way let us not bother about interviews. We have more urgent and pleasant things on our heads. I went and saw Prem and her father. They are real good people. Prem was all smiles the moment I mentioned your name. She blushed sweetly. Ravi you are a cruel man if you are going to torture her any longer, with your blinking suspicions.'

'How is the father?'

'He is a gentleman. Naturally he is anxious that his daughter should be happily married. I have given a good report about you.'

'Thank you Gupta.'

'Truly I say I spoke well of you. I told them that you were a model of a man.'

Ravi smiled.

'Don't tell me all those stories. So what happened?'

'What happened, nothing. We go in the evening to their

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house. You'll yourself see how terribly fond of you Prem is. If you are a gentleman you should get married to her immediately.'

'You seem to be adoring her.'

'Of course you have to. She is so simple and good natured that you have to like her. It is a compulsive course that one adopts as one looks at her.'

'So we have to go' Ravi added.

'Of course we have to go. I have promised them on your behalf. They will be expecting us now any minute.'

Ravi wondered how Prem looked like. He was a little shy to ask Gupta about her. He had seen her two months ago. Now that matters were smooth he was anxious to see her, the sooner the better.

Ravi and Gupta were received by Prem and her father warm heartedly. The attention given to Ravi by Murthi was an indication of his anxiety to have him as his son-in-law. Every movement, every gesture of Ravi was watched by Murthi.

'Hallo Ravi, glad to meet you' Prem offered her hand to him. He touched it gently and the gentle touch kindled old memories. In one minute she forgot all the torture she had undergone for the last two months. Like an innocent child she was smiling all the time.

'Ravi we are indeed happy to see you. We never thought that such good luck would come to us today. We are grateful to God for this auspicious moment' Murthi added.

'I am sorry if I have unwittingly given to you and Prem any cause for anxiety.'

'It's all right. All that is over now. Your friend is the ambassador of good news. He has given a new look to all of us, including the house.' Murthi said.

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'I have done what I could do. There is nothing special about what I have done. Ravi is so dear to me that I cannot see him in dismay over anything. So I have come, even though playing the part of Pandarus is not an honourable one' smiled Gupta.

'We are indebted to you' Prem said.

Gupta controlled himself and the agonising thoughts he had of his association with Rosie. Only Ravi knew of it. But Gupta was determined to obliterate from his memory all that unfortunate episode he had had with Rosie. So he talked on non-seriously as though nothing untoward happened to him. His mind was unfathomable.

Then the conversation turned to Ravi's family. Murthi enquired about them hoping to get some clue as regards his father's view. Ravi understood the implications. He did not want to keep them in suspense. So he told them,

'My parents have given me full freedom to choose my partner.'

'That's fine. That solves our problem.'

The riddle was solved. Murthi was pleased, mightily pleased.

'Gupta we now leave it to you to have the marriage day fixed between Ravi and Prem.'

'Do you think I am so very knowledgeable in these matters? I must talk to Ravi. We'll tell you tomorrow.'

'Yes as you like.'

Gupta and Ravi stayed on for the dinner. Dinner time Prem slowly whispered to Ravi,

'You come here in the morning. Dad will be away in the office. I want to talk to you.'

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Ravi nodded his head as a sign of acceptance. Gupta watched them but left them alone. Murthi left everything to Prem. She should manage Ravi. Ravi was yielding.

Ravi and Gupta left the house promising to come the next evening. In between Ravi would meet Prem. That was their secret assignment. They couldn't talk much in the presence of others. So naturally they needed a session for themselves, all by themselves. Marriage for both of them was a serious matter. It was a turning point in life. It established a fruitful comradeship and partnership. So before they entered that inalienable relationship they should be sure of themselves and their affections. So Prem took the lead in arranging the assignation.

On the way Gupta was silent. He didn't talk much. Ravi observed his silence. He understood that Gupta was reminded of his exciting day of marriage with Rosie. Ravi pitied him, but he knew that Gupta was trying to come out of that doleful state. And Gupta had the nerve to combat successfully the battle of life. Gupta was not unduly sentimental, yet an occasion like Ravi's marriage led to a chain reaction in him. But he firmly told himself that Ravi should not get any rebuffs in life. He prayed for his success in martial life. Gupta left Ravi at his hotel.

Ramesh Babu was waiting for Ravi. He saw Gupta. He jumped with joy.

'Hallo Gupta, what a pleasant surprise. Come in and spend a few minutes with us.'

Gupta entered the room in the Lodi hotel. He did not like to go away. The three friends sat down. They asked for some tea. Gupta joked,

'Ramesh, look at this funny fellow Ravi. He is going to be married to a rich woman and he offers us tea. Can't he give us some drinks?'

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'Of course I can, but you alone should take them. Ramesh is a teetotaler like me. We don't drink.'

'All right man let us have tea. But on the marriage day I'll gather some friends who can drink. We'll have good fun. Be prepared for the expense.'

'Don't you worry. I am not going to pay the bill. Someone else pays for it' Ravi jocularly said.

'Clever fellow' Gupta commented.

'Gupta what a strange coincidence! We all meet here in Delhi. Only two of us, Ham and Sundaram, still remain in the U.S.A. Perhaps they may turn out good work in their fields of specialization.'

'As if we have not done good work in our areas of specialization' Gupta said.

'Of course we have all done good work but we all had our plans to come back. We knew we would come back. Gupta, even though you repeatedly said you would stay on we never believed your words. We knew you too would come back' Ramesh said.

'I have come back because of other circumstances in life. There is a divine dispensation over which we have no control. So we are here all the three recapturing the good old days.'

'It used to be good fun, arguing and arguing. We never thought we would all meet again in Delhi. God's ways are mysterious' Ravi said philosophically.

'We now understand that there is nothing so wonderful as the service we give to our country. Even though we have been politically independent we have not yet developed love for the country, the national spirit. The day we all feel that in our own humble manner we serve the country to the best of our abilities we march towards prosperity. We are not yet free from

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the shackles of self-interest. We have neither the involvement in nor the identification with the well being of the nation. That's the whole trouble with us' Gupta emphatically pleaded.

'Yes we are not putting in the best effort. Each one for himself, that seems to be our motto at present. Grabbing money unscrupulously is the most dominant feature of our society at present' Ravi commented.

'It's surprising that a nation noted for its ethical idealism should renounce all canons of fair play and justice and demoralise itself' Ramesh said.

'The government servants have neither the will nor the capability to serve the nation. The public has no scruples at all. Unashamedly the people offer bribes. We live at a time when much rot has set in every walk of life. Only a Hercules can cleanse the Augean stables' Gupta said.

'But we cannot run away from the country. With all its shortcomings the country is lovable. If people, who have gone abroad, come back and serve the country, a new outlook may prevail. We should all put in a mighty effort for we have seen the best of life. We have seen the other side of the fence, the wealth, and all the material comforts it brings to the people' Ravi commented.

'I wish Sundaram also would come back. We need dedicated scientific researchers like him. We should not lose them' Ramesh pleaded.

'They should be more considerate. They should look homeward and help the nation' Ravi said.

'Yes one day we will attain the pride of place in the comity of nations. We have all the natural resources that other developed countries possess. We have man power and intellect. What we want is a sense of involvement in nation building, dedi-

cation to work and uprightness in our dealings with others' Gupta lectured.

'We have private morality but lack public morality. We are puritans at home, God fearing and religious minded. But the moment we come into the public sector activities we have no scruples. We shirk work. We have a general grouse against humanity. We don't mind subverting public good and negating to fellow men what should belong to them' Ravi analysed the malady.

'Ravi what you say is correct. The crux of the matter is that we are not putting in the maximum effort in our developmental programmes. Therefore we have not made much progress. Democratic choice in a semi-literate country is a costly experiment. We may choose the wrong persons and get into trouble' Ramesh argued.

All the three were vehement in their arguments. They were critical of the situation but they were all great believers in the greater India, an India that would be the leading force in the world. They were optimistic in their faith and their love for the country was unquestioned. They only wished that others of their tribe receiving education and training in foreign countries should come back to India and serve the country. Socially they would be facing privations in a foreign country. They could as well be respected in their motherland by owning it with all its shortcomings. The three thought that they should address Sundaram and ask him to return. They somehow felt that Ham would come back. They were excited. Their meeting in such circumstances was itself a peculiar one. That gave them hope that they could do something useful, and persons who had gone abroad were in a better position to accept the challenges the country posed. Gupta had to go to his house. It was getting late. He agreed to meet them in the evening the next day and all the three wanted to go to Prem's house.

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Ravi and Ramesh were in no hurry to go back to Hyderabad. They wanted a good holiday and in the company of Gupta they knew they would have it. So they planned to meet the next evening, and for the present Ravi and Ramesh said good night to Gupta.

Gupta forgot all about his personal unhappiness. He felt as though he was in Manhattan with his friends. The corroding events of life did not in any manner diminish his zest for life, his capability for being sociable. That was one good thing about him. He reached his place and slept comfortably. Ravi and Ramesh talked for some time before they retired to sleep.

The next morning Ravi went to see Prem. Her father left for the office. She was in the best of her spirits. Ravi too was cheerful and sportive.

'At last we meet' Ravi embraced Prem. It took some time for her to free herself.

She looked at Ravi amusedly and fixedly, and pretending to be cross with him she said,

'Ravi what right have you to embrace me?'

Ravi smiled. 'Of course I have every right to do so. My dear lady, I have waited for two months only to be sure of myself and my emotions. I accept marriage as partnership and unless I have that association I can't be happy. I take you as my partner in life. From now on ours will be one heart, one soul and one mind.'

Prem laughed.

'Don't use poetic language.'

'Your looks inspire me with poetic imagination. Raphael, the painter, wrote a poem to please his lady love. Dante, the poet, painted a picture only to please his Beatrice. Can't I, the Engineer, use poetry to please my lady love?'

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'Ravi I never thought, honestly, that you had any soul movement or creative imagination. I took you to be an Engineer dealing with machines and I thought that perhaps you had a mechanical mind, soulless and unimaginative.'

'Prem you do me injustice by undermining the poetic talent in me. I can write poetry especially when I am moved. Poetry for me is a spontaneous expression of powerful emotions.'

'I am glad you have the finer sentiments of life. Life becomes enjoyable and pleasant with a certain amount of artistic excellence. Or else it becomes monotonous, dreary, stale and unprofitable.'

'The music we hear, the paintings we see, the beautiful scenes of nature, the tall rocks and the streams that flow on them, all these lend charm to life. And woman's love perfects this idyllic vision. The softening touch of a woman, the feminine graces, the soft endearments, make man's life pleasant. Prem you have given me the elixir of life and we are inseparable.'

Prem thought that it would be better to bring Ravi to the plane of reality. It was lovable to see him surrounded by the halo of ethereal clouds. He seemed to be floating in a world of fantastic delight. It would be wiser to pin him down to reality. So she questioned,

'Ravi will it mean that we get married without your father's consent?'

'My father gave me permission long ago. It is for me to choose anyone I like.'

'Then what hindered you from having the marriage earlier?'

'My own mental reservations. I saw Lal hovering about you. I just wondered whether you had any liking for him.'

'Don't be silly Ravi. I never thought you were capable of being jealous.'

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'It only means I am a human being susceptible to all the limitations of the humans.'

'Ravi I tell you I have never encouraged Lal knowingly or unknowingly. He means nothing to me. I love you, love you to madness.'

Ravi kissed her fondly. The suspense was over. They belonged to each other. Their looks communed with each other.

'I promise to be loyal to you, Prem, I love you for ever.'

Ravi echoed the sentiments of Prem. Time moved quickly or perhaps time did not exist for them. They lived in a timeless world. The lovers were lost to a world of eternal sunshine. The roses bloomed in full glory. The garden in front of the house was full of flowers of all hues and scents. Ravi plucked one yellow rose and put it in Prem's lovely locks of hair. She was pleased and happy. She looked at Ravi lovingly. Ravi left Prem after lunch.

In the evening Murthi came from the office. Prem was busy arranging the drawing-room neatly. The whole house had a festive look. Prem and her father were waiting for the young men to arrive. Being an artist herself Prem arranged everything with fastidious care. The flower vases, the table cloths, the sofa covers, all were arranged artistically.

Ravi and Gupta brought with them Ramesh Babu also. He had a vague idea of Ravi's love affair with some lady in Delhi. But he did not have a complete picture of the love affair. He was asked to follow them. He came out but he did not know where they were going. It did not matter, for there was nothing he was doing that evening. So the three young men reached Prem's house in Ferozeshah Road. It was a spacious building with green lawns and rich vegetation all around. The building was literally covered by the trees, the plants and the creepers. The house looked beautiful.

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'It's a fine building' Ramesh commented, as they neared the compound wall of the house.

'This is Prem's house' said Gupta.

'Who is Prem?' asked Ramesh.

'She is Ravi's friend. He met her when he went for a holiday. She used to study in Denver. She comes from a good family. Her father holds an important position in the ministry of education.'

'So Ravi is a lucky fellow. He can get a job any day. I wonder why Ravi came for an interview like me. He could have walked in' Ramesh said half teasingly.

'O no. I don't want to get a job that way. I want to get it through my individual efforts not through the agency of vested interests' Ravi explained.

'Good. I quite appreciate your stand, Ravi' Ramesh said.

They reached the house. Prem was the first one to greet them.

'This is Ramesh Babu my friend' Ravi introduced Ramesh to Murthi. 'He took a Ph.D. in Food Technology. He is looking for a suitable job. He has now come with me for an interview.'

'Pleased to meet you Ramesh' Murthi said. Prem smiled and Ramesh understood that she must be Ravi's lady love.

'I am glad to meet you' Ramesh said, looking at Prem.

They were all seated in the drawing-room. Tea was served to them.

'How did time go with you Gupta? I hope you enjoyed yourself' Murthi questioned.

'Yes I had an agreeable day. We talked of our old student days in Manhattan.'

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'It must be good fun for all of you to be together. These are rare occasions in life. Ramesh Babu this is the first time for you to come to our house. Be comfortable. Feel homely.' Murthy welcomed Ramesh.

'Thank you. I am all right' said Ramesh.

'We were five Indian students studying in Manhattan. Only two more are there. One of them, Sundaram, has no plans of returning to India. He is a dedicated worker in Space Research. He wants to achieve international recognition for his work and he is bound to get it. Researchers of his type are very rare. Sundaram is a good worker. It's a pity we can't have him.' Gupta said.

'The government can offer a lucrative job and get him to the country' Murthi suggested.

'No, he is not that way inclined. He is not job minded, but work minded. He wants facilities for his advanced research work. To him work is the soul of life. He is a queer fellow' Gupta said.

'He ought to get married. Then perhaps he would come down to mundane life. Research is all right but it should not overpower you. In fact nothing should overmaster you, however good it may be' Murthi commented.

'Yea that's true. But one cannot help it. To great thinkers and researchers ordinary pleasures have no meaning' Ravi said.

Murthi realised that they were a set of dreamers, utopians.. They had to go a long way before they could understand the mysteries of life. They were all young and energetic, radiant and cheerful. But then he also realised that if young men and women took it on themselves they could metamorphose the sick social order into something dynamic. They had the energy and the will power.

LOOK HOMEWARD

' Ravi I quite appreciate your ardent enthusiasm for reform, but my own feeling is that nothing positive can take place ' Murthi said.

Gupta immediately took up the thread of the argument, ' Even in a country like England it took hundreds of years before an established political order could be set up. The first Prime Minister Walpole was often quoted as saying with reference to bribes that it was a question of price. The bigger man took the bigger bribe, the smaller one the smaller.'

Murthi smiled. It was true of any country. It would pass through a phase of corruption when the ignorance of the people could be exploited. But as people become more and more educated and develop the right way of thinking the country would prosper.

' Even educated people can go wrong. They may use their intelligence for Machiavellian self-seeking purposes.'

' Ramesh Babu what you say is correct ' agreed Gupta.

They were in a relaxed mood. They had a colourful vision of the country and its resplendent glory. They thought they were the knights of a new order believing in service and in the love of the country. In that mood Gupta added,

' If every Indian serves the country whole heartedly then all the ills would disappear. Ravi and Ramesh, you'll get jobs in Delhi. I shall be practising in Delhi nourishing the sick to health. We all stand committed to social welfare and we'll enlist like minded young men and women who have gone abroad and come back. Prem will be with us.'

' Excellent ' Ravi said.

A seasoned administrator as Murthi was, he smiled, suggesting that the red tape and the deep rooted mal-administration could not be so easily wiped out. But he liked the group, their youthful enthusiasm. So he suggested,

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'Why not make my house the centre of your activity? Until you get a building of your own you can assemble here and chalk out your programmes for social amelioration and clean administration. I shall be with you as an observer.'

'Wonderful' Gupta said.

Some more tea and cakes were brought. Immediately Gupta said,

'This looks like celebration. Perhaps this is the betrothal ceremony. Ravi, you write to your parents and get the marriage day fixed as early as possible. We cannot wait any longer, man. You have delayed already.'

Ravi smiled and Prem blushed sweetly. She looked more than beautiful. Ravi held her hand as a promise to her. Prem looked at Ravi. Ravi smiled. Their souls mixed as mists would. It was a moment 'one and infinite'.