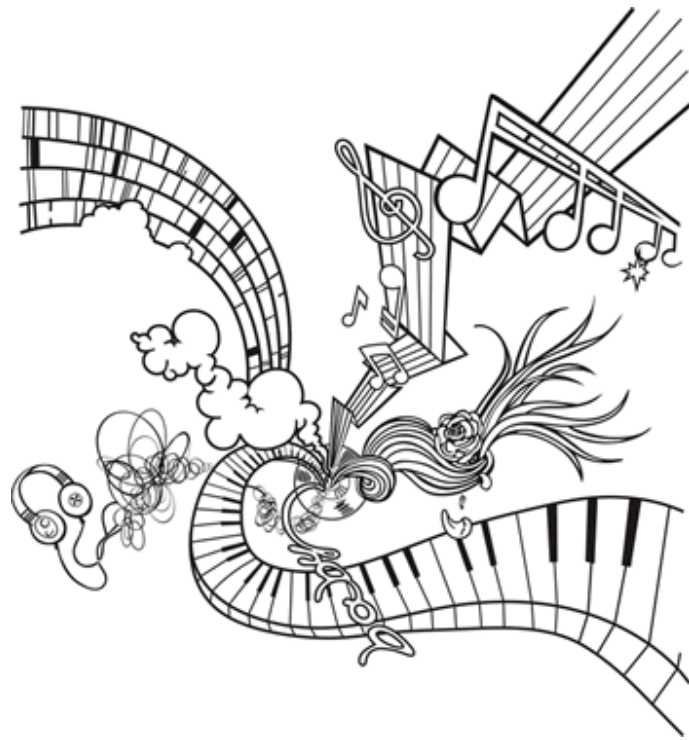


HOLY INNOCENTS

PREMI



Presented by

My poetic Side **P**

Dedication

To Angel

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I AM YOURS

A CHRISTMAS CAROL (Short story)

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

'Premji, I should go home today afternoon,' my friend Suman informed me over mobile phone, somewhere around eleven O'clock in the morning.

'What's the matter?'

'My wife is not feeling well... It seems, she has vomiting sensations'

'Is she pregnant?'

'She supposes so,'

'God bless you...Suman... Congratulations...'

'Thanks... Premji... Mostly, I will be back by tomorrow morning.'

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"Making an urban girl pregnant is not an easy task now-a-days! The pizzas, burgers and all sort of junk food she eats, can easily decay her ovum like pumpkins in a compost pit; where sperms, move around like earth worms, can only accelerate the disintegration!" Suman used to repeat this line almost on daily basis.

Suman and I, we shared a small rented house in the outskirts of that town.

It was nearing seven O'clock in the evening. The chillness of December started her silent torment and it was really boring to go out, all alone, for food. Luckily I could locate some semi-ripe bananas, kept in a container away from hungry rats. I chopped them into small pieces and kept for boiling.

'Boiled bananas will be fantastic with black tea,' I told myself.

The induction cooker started making noise and I switched off the power.

'Shit..,' two or three fire-flies were lying above the water surface, well cooked, along with boiled bananas! 'What to do?'

It was pitch-dark outside and the petrol tank of my Yamaha bike remained empty like the breasts of a hunger-struck third-world country mother! And to add more darkness to the situation, pen torch batteries were also drained out!

'Premji... in China, sports-men eat insect fries... you know... they are protein enriched food!' someone told from memories.

'Is it?' the literary sportsman in me doubted!

'Yes'

'Here we go..,' I threw the fire-flies away. 'nhum... bananas, boiled in fire-fly stock, is a variety food during Christmas...'

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I closed all the doors and settled with my laptop to write another episode of autobiographical fiction. But, I was interrupted by a mobile ring. Poetess Angelina was on the line.

'Hi Angel... Happy Christmas in advance'

'O! Hi Premji... Thank you... Same to you'

'Then?'

'I got in contact with a key person from Mac-Millan publishing company... She told me to submit the manuscript named 'Universal call for peace'... with an introduction'

'Sounds great!'

'I have selected one poem each, of our poet friends and mailed to her'

'Let's hope for the best... None is there to publish poetry now-a-days...!'

'So true... I will let you know if there is any improvement... Bye...Premji... Good night'

'Bye Angel... Good night'

Poetry! The crest jewel of art is left unread and unsold! A deep melancholy started encompassing my soul.

?

Solitude is the best friend of an artist! I reserved a bullet for that bastard who told it! I started reading a PDF book... 'Celestine Prophecy'... I fell in love is his philosophy and critical mass theory. Again my mobile started ringing.

'Premji, tomorrow is declared as a holiday,' Suman was on the line.

'You are lucky, my friend!'

'Happy Christmas'

'Happy New Year too... we won't be meeting again till Jan 2nd.'

'Yes... same to you'

'Suman, how is your wife? Is she?'

'No... it was due to some dirty junk food,' his voice became pale.

?

'It's nine O'clock,' the display of the mobile phone informed me. Suddenly, the songs and drum beats of a Carol group fell on my ears, approaching, and its intensity kept on increasing.

Our house was located at the dead end of that narrow lane and fortunately we didn't have any neighbors nearby. The sounds were approaching closer. I then checked my wallet. Fortunately or unfortunately, one and only 'five hundred rupee' was left with.

'This is going to be a problem,' I told myself.

'Christmas Carol is a money making business now-a-days...Premji,' our 'local Santa Clause' Lonappan Chettan told me yesterday, while having break-fast at Sam's restaurant. 'Twenty five

years... for twenty five years... I was the Santa of this small town... You see my long white beard... It's my commitment to Santa... But'

'But?'

'I was kicked out last year... when people started paying cash as gifts to Santa!'

'Cash gifts to Santa!'

'Yes... to make him also greedy!'

'Really sad'

'I know... but...,' Lonappan Chettan stopped for some seconds. 'Premji... one should give a chance for the gangsters too... to repent!' He started laughing.

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'Tomorrow is going to be a holiday... Nobody will be there in my office... My ATM account is already empty... I got an e-mail yesterday... New generation banks are so cunning! If I give the Carol guys this five hundred rupees note... that's all! My entire programs will collapse! How can I go home? From whom I can borrow some money from this city quite new to me?' Millions of thoughts started evolving from my tormented soul! Is there a way out?

Yes!

I switched off all the lights and sat there silently in the darkness. The lights, the drum beats were approaching. I watched them diverting their journey to the cross-lanes through the key hole. Gradually the drum beats nullified and I switched on the room light.

What to do now? Shall I watch a comedy movie?

'Life is beautiful,' that Oscar winning Italian comedy movie failed bitterly to make me laugh.

Jesus, where did I lose my laughter?

Jesus, where did I lose my happiness?

?

It was nearing eleven in the night and the drum beats started approaching again.

I stood out, wearing the best clothes of mine, waiting for the jingle bells... that five hundred rupees note was there in my shirt pocket, so close to my heart.

Why should I worry when you are with me...Jesus!

Why should I be afraid!

Yes... I could see the red cloak and white beard of Santa... I could see the gas lights... the drums... and the tall boys... singing and rejoicing...

"Come... come... come to my house... Let's sing and rejoice..."

But, they took a sudden turn to other cross-road and walked away.

?

PREMJI

A LIFE WORTH LIVING! (Short story)

A LIFE WORTH LIVING!

"You have a call," my wife woke me up early in the morning, mercilessly. I wanted to throw out that electronic beast as I had been sleeping, so weightless like a feather, for many hours, that too on a lazy Sunday.

"Premji... Saraswati Amma is no more," Father Zachariah was on the end. A great sadness doomed his ever-pleasant voice.

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Clad in white cloths, Saraswati Amma slept peacefully on the cold floor of Gandhi Bhavan orphanage. So peaceful and contented was her face. Ajayan, her 'little boy' of twenty five years, sat next to her quite impatiently as his lower belly was burning with hunger. Little girls and aged women among the inmates were chanting hymns. Father Zachariah stood beside her as if he was deep buried in a trance. My wife touched her feet and offered her respects. She looked into my eyes before keeping a couple of fresh flowers plucked from our home garden.

Who is this woman to me?

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One year back...

"A poor woman came to meet me today," I told my wife while having a cup of coffee in the evening.

"Every woman you meet is a poor woman," she laughed. 'except me! '

"But... her life is the bitter most one that I had ever seen... I gave her a hundred rupees..."

"This is why I keep your purse almost empty every-time..." She was not ready to leave me. "House owner called me twice in the morning... We didn't pay him the house rent so far... How come that's possible for you haven't claimed your salaries for the past two months..." she began firing cannonballs again and again to my tormented heart.

"But, she is no ordinary woman..."

"There are many people who even come to my college in search of some financial assistance from staff and students. But, most of them are frauds," she said.

"But..."

"But, if are so sure, then I have no complaints for it is the duty of a human being to support his brother and sister, in what-so-ever possible ways."

"You are great! " I hugged her tightly...

"Leave her... naughty old man!" my younger son started shouting from somewhere...

"You... little idiot..."

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I was sitting all alone in my office room, surfing through the latest issues posted in www.mygov.in ? the crowd-sourcing portal of our honourable Prime Minister. He is a visionary to collect the opinion from people before deciding policy matters. Democracy is meaningless without the participation of

people in governance.

"Good Morning Sir, may I come in?"

A lean woman, in the fag-end of her fifties, showed her head through the half door. Some portion of her pale face was covered by the long end of her old Sari*

"Please come in," I showed her the seat in front of me.

"Thank you Sir," she sank into the chair carefully.

"What shall I do for you?" I asked her calmly.

"Sir, I came in search of a boy who makes arrangements for fund-raising for poor folk like me. It seems, he is from your department."

"Praveen?"

"I think... yes..."

"I am afraid, he is absent today..."

And the poor woman frowned like a water-plant transplanted into a desert....

"Sir, then I will come some other day," before getting up from the seat, she tried to rearrange the long end of her sari as a scarf.

"Please follow me..." I told her calmly and started walking towards the classroom.

*a five meter long traditional drape used by Indian women

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Saraswati Amma stood before fifty students like an embodiment of pain. Most of them stared at her as if she was coming from the moon or so.

"You are free to talk with them," I told her.

"Sir, I haven't faced even a single gathering in my life," she said. "You...please inform them about my problems..." She tried to avoid that situation.

"They are not a strange gathering... They are your children... Will any mother ever hesitate to talk with her children?" I tried to impart her some courage.

"Dear children..." she looked into her eyes. "My name is Saraswati Amma. And I am a cancer patient. My husband is no more... All I have is a son... But, he is a delinquent..." Tears began to roll down from her eyes. "I have no relatives... We are staying in a rented house and I am not sure when will they kick us out," she took a deep breath. "I am incapable of doing anything... I visit educational institutions and ask them for some financial aid... I am not afraid of death... But, what shall I do with my son?" she asked us. "All I can ask you is this... please help me as much as you can..."

Most of the students sat quite lazily as if nothing had happened. Poor woman lost the rest of hope in her life.

"Will you please explain, what really had happened in your life?" I asked her.

"Sir... Earlier, we used to run a small vegetable shop. Whenever I was hungry, I used to eat a raw vegetable... something like a tomato which was about to ruin... or a raw cucumber... or a carrot... Since we were very poor, we couldn't even waste a piece of cabbage. Our daily food was made from all these leftovers. Later, we began to sell fresh fruits too...My son used to consume the leftovers... He is a delinquent now... and I am suffering from brain tumour." She wiped her heavy eyes, unkissed by sleep for many years, while watching the painful faces of my students.

Absolutely silent, they were listening to each and every word uttered by her.

"Whenever you eat a banana, remember that it contains 'Furidan'- the deadliest of all chemicals... Whenever you eat a grape, remember that it is coated with endosulfan... Whenever you eat a mango bought from the open market, remember that it is coated with many pesticides and beyond all... it is quick-ripened by using carbide... a dangerous chemical... Whenever you eat a pineapple, remember that it is flowered with the aid of chemical hormones... You are what you eat... I can say this openly, because I am a living example..." She lifted the scarf a little and showed her head to all. Unfortunately, it was as bald as the baldest of all in the world.

"At least grow some curry leaves in your home garden... you know, they contain the maximum pesticide."

The children shelled out even the last penny from their pockets, and handed over to her. Anuja, the one and only girl student in the class, approached her with a small packet.

"Please have it..." Anuja told the old woman. Her voice was writhing in pain.

"What is it, dear?" asked the old woman.

"It's my lunch... I have no money to share with you..."

"O! my little one, " the old woman hugged her tightly and kissed her head.

I couldn't stand there as my lungs began to chock.... But, my legs didn't allow me...

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"Sir... will you please upload this video in your youtube account?" Sunil, one of my 'violent' students asked me. He was a 'real nut' in the entire college till he had developed a great friendship with me. Every student needs some recognition in this world... some sort of consideration... some sort of special care...

"You do it... Sunil... I will share it in facebook," I replied.

"Thank you Sir," he began to walk away. "I will send you the link."

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It was one the most touching videos I had ever seen in my life. Sunil shot the whole Saraswati Amma episode in the classroom in his mobile phone and edited it neatly. Millions of shares made her so popular all over the world and she was invited to many places for giving lectures. Many people helped her financially and her family was adopted finally by Gandhi Bhavan, an orphanage for poor and destitute.

"Sunil, what made you think so differently like this? I asked him one day.

"Every problem is associated with a possibility. If you are capable of finding out that possibility, you can get out of every problem. You taught me this simple concept during your classes on life-skills. And it was the only possibility left with her," Sunil smiled with confidence.

"You are simply great!" I couldn't stop congratulating him.

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I stood beside her dead-body like a burning wick... Many important personalities visited the orphanage to pay her last respects... Soon, I saw him getting out an old Maruti car... Swami Satynanda Giri Maharaj

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Satynanda Giri Maharaj, a Sanyasin, noted orator, scholar and an Ayurvedic medicinal expert, was about to begin his daily evening discourse in his ashram. I was sitting there in the third row along with my wife. I like his discourses as he is capable of enlightening my soul even with a single word!

"Dear all, Greetings..." he began the spiritual discourse in his firm but kind voice. "Yesterday, I went to meet a great woman... You know, she is suffering from brain tumour... I know, that the disease can be cured easily... I am capable of doing it by his grace... I had to prepare a special medicine using the brain of a black goat, " he stopped for a moment. "Usually people come to me for medicines. But, I went to her as I felt she is so important to me. But, do you know, what did she say?"

"What did she say?" my wife asked me out of curiosity.

"Please listen to him," I pinched on her left thigh.

"She said... All my life, I had been a strict vegetarian," Satynanda Giri Maharaj began to speak again. "Why should you waste another precious life for a worthless life like me?" He closed his eyes for some time.

"This is what is called true spirituality... It is a solitary journey from virtue through virtue to higher form of virtue... It is beyond the limits of religions.... It is beyond the limits dharma..."

?

Premji

ART IS CRUEL (Short story)

ART IS CRUEL

Before joining into Government service, I was working as an associate director. Cinema is a field of cut throat completion and cheating in every form. Mostly, manipulators only can survive there. That's why I decided to join as a low profile creative director of Kalaivani Studios in Trivandrum City.

Kalaivani Studios is owned by a non-resident Indian, named Mr. Ulpalakshan Nair. He started his life as a hotel bearer in deserts of UAE (United Arab Emirates). He now owns 'East End Retail,' one of the largest retail chains there. Even though he is a multimillionaire, inferiority complex ruled his life almost every moment due to his poor educational backgrounds. Naturally, he used every possible means to blow up his ego. He used to appear on every advertisement of his company and people used to spit on TV when his dirty face was shown!

The third phase of his life started inside of an air craft, when he met a famous Malayalam playback singer named Sagar as his co-passenger. Sagar was getting older and older and there were patches on his voice. And above all, young boys are ready to pay any amount to the producers of movies just for a chance. Technology made every other boy a singer and it rules the music industry now! Sagar planned to change his forte as that of a Music Director based on the above revelations! Filthy rich man Ulpalakshan Nair was an easy prey for him!

'Ulpalakshan Sir, I know... you are a very creative person,' Sagar started pouring out the sugar coated words of flattery immediately after the cordial introductions.

'Not exactly... I don't agree with you,' Ulpalakshan Nair said politely, even-though his mind touched the peaks of happiness.

'Please don't underestimate yourself Sir... You have great capacity for creative imagination... See Sir, without imagination how can you accumulate this much riches!'

'What do you mean?'

'Sir, you are capable of doing anything... writing songs... composing music... singing... directing movies... anything... everything is there deep within your mind!'

'Directing movies... No... No... That's not possible'

'That's possible...Sir... After all direction is nothing but people management... If you can easily manage thousands of workers, it is very very easy for you to manage some hundred member crew... It's nothing before your caliber..!'

'Is it true?'

'Yes... absolutely'

Thus Ulpalakshan Nair became the producer of the first music video album of Sagar.

Sagar knew how to play his cards very well to safeguard his career,... like the lyrics were written one of the leading veteran poets.... Music videos were shot by noted film makers at superb locations... especially with very sexy models... flesh... flesh... everywhere! Posters... posters everywhere... Finally it was well distributed by a leading marketing group. And beyond all, he redesigned the name of the producer to 'ULPAL,'The music video was a super hit and the success provided him immense self-confidence. Just through the first venture, Ulpal became a celebrity Music Video producer! What recognition for a man of extreme inferiority complex!

Who said that this world is made of Brahmn? It is made of pure ego!

?

Ulpal is a quick learner and he picked up the entire techniques of Music video production through his first venture. And naturally the businessman in him planned to cut short of the expenses, that ended up in the inauguration of Kalivani studios. Fortunately or unfortunately, I was the first customer who utilized the complete facilities of his studio. I completed the sound recording, mixing and editing of an advertisement of twenty seconds time span. Ulpal was standing near me all the time watching me working carefully and at the end, he requested me to become his creative director. I readily accepted the offer, a permanent income is better than piecemeal like small ads! But, I was not all aware that my worst times had started already! Ulpal returned to Dubai on the next day.

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Two months passed. Ulpal landed with several cases of expensive liquor. There were very long discussions followed by drinking session almost every day. And on one such day, he opened up his 'long cherished' dream.

'Premji, I want to produce a new music album'

'Superb idea Sir! What is the theme?'

'Why doubt? As usual... Love only,' Ulpal laughed.

'Who is writing the lyrics?'

'Me,' Ulpal said proudly.

'That's great again. Then, composing of music and direction?'

'This video is 'my personal video'... Premji... you know something like personal film... Director Priyadarshan had come with an award winning personal film... what's its name?'

'Kancheevaram'

'Yes... yes... something like that... everything should have an Ulpal touch'

'What?'

'Ulpal touch!'

?

It was a pleasant Sunday and I was busy with the installation of some new editing software. Nobody was there in the office and Venpakal Surendran, an emerging revolutionary poet, entered into my chamber.

'Good Morning Sir... Can I meet Mr. Ulpal?'

'Tell me... What is the matter?'

'Ulpalji asked me to meet him today... He needs some lyrics to be written for his new album.'

'Mr. Surendran... He is not going to produce a revolutionary album... Anyway, best of luck'

I pointed towards Ulpal's personal room.

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'Sojaa... Rajkumari... Soja....',..Ulpal was busy listening to the everlasting songs of Kundan LaL Sehgal.

'Good Morning Sir,' pleasing words from Venpakal Surendran brought him back to the present moment. Soon, they were immersed in great discussions about poetry, music and all other forms of art. Surendran was a talkative and Ulpal a keen listener! What else a numbskull can do, other than

that!

'O.K. Mr. Surendran... Let's come to the point... I need some seven songs,' Ulpal told while handing over double large Royal Salute and a bundle of imported executive bond sheets. 'Love... Birth... Rebirth... Love at first sight... sleepless nights... endless love... thorns of love... passion.. These words should appear in the lyrics... So, get me one sample lyric,'

Ulpal was literally shocked to see the empty glass before Surendran. He poured another double large and it also vanished into the revolutionary poetry!

Poetry was flowing out like a torrent from his soul. Ulpal was very keen on supplying Royal Salute in regular intervals. Surendran wrote seven lyrics in three hours and handed them over to Ulpal.

'When I could listen

Your heartbeats on mine,

Call it love'

'Wonderful lines... Venpakal Surendran, you are a superstar...,' Ulpal told him while putting his signature under those lines.

'Saaaar,'.... Venpakal Surendran was literally shocked to see that and he cried out literally. His poetic world was broken into zillion fragments.... Exploitation... Exploitation... his conscience cried out...

Ulpal poured the last large of Royal Salute also into Surendran's glass to cool down his burning soul. Surendran didn't touch it. How can he? 'Am I a surrogate pen?' Ulpal kept a cheque worth rupees fifty thousand also on the table.

'Mr. Surendran... fame or money... you can opt for any one,' Ulpal played his cut throat business tactics. 'If you need fame, money will not follow... and vice-versa,'

'Is it a permanent contract?'

'Yes... you can remain as my 'ghost' forever.,'

'O.K. Done...,' Revolutionary poet Venpakal Surendran grabbed the cheque while consuming the remaining liquor in a single gulp. He had just one and only permanent picture nailed on his mind's wall... the picture of his deaf daughter.... 'Yes, I can buy her a world-class hearing aid,'

Ulpal presented him a VAT69 bottle too... No more Royal Salutes friend... Once your work is over, you will be treated with only cheap quality things!

'Exploiters of the world had reunited...

They call it Globalization...

O! The Exploited hearts! Let's unite...

Let's throw away the hopeless fucking revolution!

Venpakal Surendran walked away with 'baby-like' legs, singing his own 'modified' revolutionary song...

'Art is cruel,' Ulpal told himself and closed his eyes victoriously. In his dark mind-scape, he saw Director John Abraham* shouting the same dialogue! 'O, the matter is not yet over,'

'Hello... Is it Music Director Sunnikutty?'

Sunnikkutty, music maestro of yester-years' picked up the phone with his shivering fingers.... Ulpal started spreading his cards again on his ancient Harmonium, along with Chivas Regal! Poor man was fed up of fame... All he needed was bundles of lengthy red notes with grand old-man Gandhi!

?

Seven wonderful songs were ready for shoot. Auditions for Music Video also started and of course It was a hectic process. Twelve boys and seventeen girls were shortlisted by me. The final choice was left with Ulpal as it was his personal video!

'Premji, I will shoot the first song at Munnar,' Ulpal said.

'That's fine Sir... It's a wonderful location... Anyway, let's start the homework'

'What?'

'Homework... Like... finding out exact locations... preparing story-boards,'

'What a pity! Premji... You have seen only very cheap directors... See... there are two types of directors... One.. Those directors who make their movies with proper screenplays... two... directors who take movies straight from their heart... talented people like them never need any screenplay or storyboard... understand... I fall in the second category,'

'Venpakal Surendran,... I will pulverize your balls someday.....,' I cursed.

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We planned for the shoot of the first song in the midst of March. (Ulpal was free only at that time!) And at last the shooting party reached at 'Kallivayalil,' a three star hotel at Marayoor town. Marayoor is a superb location near Munnar, very famous for Sandal wood plantations. Ulpal, heroine and her mother, hero and I, we stayed there and the rest of the team had to stay in a cheap lodge to 'cut-short' the expenses!

'Sir, please come to the location as early as possible... Some scenes has to be shot in mist as background,' I reminded Ulpal in the early morning and left for the shooting location along with our team. Manik, the Hero of the album also accompanied us.

Eight O'clock... Nine O'clock... Ten O'clock...

'Where the fuck is that bastard?' I asked the hero.

'Let's wait for him... Sir,'

'Every new hero will tell like this... later his tone changes,' I told out of frustration.

'Sir, there he is...,' Manik pointed towards the white Mercedes Caravan approaching us.

White cap, goggles with white frame, white shirt, white banyan, white pants, white belt, white socks, white shoes, white watch, white pen, white mobile phone and possibly white underwear with holes... He came out like man of white! I was literally shocked to see the metamorphosis of Ulpal.

'Everything is white...except his fuckin dark mind,' Venpakal Surendran murmured...

Pappan Chettan, the caravan driver, pulled out a white chair from the caravan and Ulpal sat on it peacefully.

'O.K... Premji... Let's shoot,' Ulpal said.

'Sir, what to shoot?'

'Shoot the first two lines of the lyric'

'O.K. Now please tell me the camera position,'

'That... you decide,'

'Sir, you are the director,'

'O.K.... Then keep it there,'

'O.K... Then action?'

Ulpal was really confused... George Padamugal, Cameraman, threw away his cap out of disgust.

'Hero runs towards that direction... heroine runs towards this direction... they both collide... fall... roll... kiss...,' ('And sex in the middle,' the hero told himself while eying at the beautiful heroine.)...

'Mist is there in the back ground,' Ulpal uttered like a child.

Were he imitating actor Srinivasan of Malayalam Cinema?

'Sir, it's already 11'O clock... Mist is a costly affair!' I said.

'No dry ice and all... Burn some old car tyres...You will get enough mist...,' Ulpal announced his new invention. The heroine felt like vomiting thinking of facing that dirty smell... 'Now, go shoot it... We have to complete it today itself...,' Ulpal shouted while jumping back into the pleasure of the Caravan.

'Deadline... Bastard, I will burn you alive someday,' I told myself.

Suddenly my mobile phone started ringing. Raj, my cousin, and his newly wed wife had checked in at hotel Kallivayalil for honeymoon...

?

'Sir, Ulpalakshan Sir... Sorry Ulpal... will give you directions from his caravan through mobile phone. You shoot the visuals based on that,' Pappan Chettan, the Caravan driver told me.

'Dirty bastard... Such remote control sons of bitches are spoiling Malayalam Cinema... sitting inside A/C caravans and fucking up of the movies,' I was burning with anger...

'Sir, please don't be angry... Convert this situation as an opportunity.... You shoot this video just by thinking that... 'I am the director,'.. Sir, everybody in the industry knows who he is and what is his capacity! It's an opportunity to pour out your real talent... Sir, please remember this: an opportunity never knocks twice at the same door. Take it as an advice from an old man,' Pappan Chettan told very calmly.

Pappan Chettan... what a man he is... how powerful are his words....It will work for ever... The heroine jumped out of the caravan and beautiful lines of the song started reverberating in the air, from huge loud speakers....

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We completed shooting of the whole song that day itself... edited up to almost complete version of the Music video. When we were about to show it to Mr.Ulpal, he was snoring like a pig inside a swamp!

'Bastard... A dog will remain as a dog even on the top of Mt.Everest!'

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The shooting party was about to leave from 'Hotel Kallivayalil.' I introduced Manik to my cousin Raj and his wife. They both said 'hello' to him.

'Manik, where is your heroine?'

'She will come along with the producer... in his caravan,' Manik told while running towards the Toyota Innova Car.

'I am sorry Raj... I have to leave now... Some other commitments,'

'No problem... Premji... Your music video is superb... He might be paying you well..'

'My music video! Nothing like that... He might pay Rupees five thousand for Manik and me,'

'So sad! Then, what about the heroine?' his beautiful wife, a software engineer, asked quite innocently.

'He has already paid her around Rupees hundred thousand,'

'Hundred thousand! That's a huge sum...But, why? So much?' she asked again

'Because.... Because, he has to shoot his 'hottest video' tonight....,'

?

'Silly girl,' the Mercedes caravan, parked outside, started laughing.

*John Abraham was a noted director from Malayalam. 'Art is cruel' is a noted quote by him.

PREMJI

BLOSSOMS OF LIFE (Short story)

BLOSSOMS OF LIFE

"Premji, Anita is admitted in PRS hospital," Sunil, one of my colleagues, informed me through phone.

"Any complications?" I asked him as she was in the advanced stages of pregnancy, that too after ten long years of waiting.

"I think so. It seems, she has excessive bleeding caused by hypertension."

"O God!"

?

Almost everyone among our colleagues were standing there in the hospital lobby. Since ours is a small government office with minimum staff, we lived like a family. Rajeev, her beloved husband was my colleague and best pal. He was sitting on a metal chair as if he had lost everything.

"Rajeev," I touched his shoulders.

But, unfortunately he couldn't sense my touch! Poor man was buried in the unfathomable depths of pain. He was a very happy man since the very day he came to know his wife was pregnant.

"I am sorry Rajeev. We couldn't..." Dr Sasha, who came out from the operation theater, told.

He cried out like a little boy who had lost his toy for amusement. And since that day, he resembled a corpse picked up from the ice after many centuries.

?

One week passed after Anita's discharge from the hospital. Rajeev was on leave.

"You have a call," said my wife while handing over the mobile phone in that pale morning.

Anita was on the line: "Premji... he is acting like a mad man who has lost his senses. Please do something." She could complete only a sentence in tears.

Poor woman was in dare-strights!

?

We were there in his within next twenty minutes. Rajeev was walking here and there like a totally unsettled man. Anita started crying again when she saw us.

"Please do something," she begged my wife, hugging her tightly.

"Rajeev, calm down man," I tried to console him.

"I lost my child... I lost my child..." he kept on repeating the same as if he was in an advanced stage

of depression.

"I am not worried of losing my child. But, I am most worried about Rajeev. He hasn't slept even a single second since that day," Anita said.

?

"You are alright Rajeev," said Dr Sudhakaran, a seasoned psychiatrist and my long-time friend. "All you need is some sleep."

"But?" Rajeev was again getting doubtful.

"Once you get well, she will conceive again. And you will be blessed with a little one," Dr Sudhakaran tried to build more confidence.

"Are you sure?" Rajeev asked him.

"Yes... I have seen many wonders in my life!" Dr Sudhakaran laughed loudly. "I will prescribe some medicines now, which we can gradually reduce. What do you say?"

"As you like doctor," Rajeev replied.

?

One week passed and he was recovering very fast. We visited them again in that weekend. Sunil's widowed mother also started living with them. She was a very healthy woman, who was staying with her elder daughter.

Their house stood inside a large compound with lot of trees and flowering plants. There was a huge shed, with lot of open windows, which stood amidst the garden like an uninvited guest. It remained closed for many years.

"Why don't you demolish it? It looks so awkward," my wife asked Rajeev.

"No... no... it was the same place where my father used to teach many students for free of cost. We just maintain it like a temple," he replied.

We spent almost an hour with them. My wife was a bit uneasy as our little boys were alone at home.

"Why did you ask Anita to open a day-care there? After all, she is from a rich family?" I asked my wife while returning.

"Many of my friends are in search of a good place to entrust their little ones during day time. Many of the day care owners give milk added with sleeping pills to the little ones. Are you aware of such things?," she was getting angry. "I know, she will never do that... After all, she is an unemployed woman."

?

Within a week, twenty little ones started making furor in her day-care. The little ones used to demand in their homes to leave them in the care of their "other mother" during the weekly holidays of their parents too.

Rajeev helped her in every possible way as he could. He reappeared in our office after one month leave as if nothing had happened. He was very happy to speak about the little ones in their daycare. And within two months, he got transformed to one of the finest pediatricians, without any medical degree, in the city.

"Premji, once the children are around, you never feel the least amount of loneliness," he said happily.

"Rajeev, do you take medicines now-a-days?"

"Medicines? What medicines? I disposed them on the very first week of opening the daycare center!" he laughed loudly.

?

Six month passed without much important happenings.

It was a fine weekend. Anita stepped into our home with huge bag full of something. My wife was busy cleaning the house as our little ones are true scoundrels. She followed my wife to the kitchen.

Anita took my wife's right hand and pressed against her tummy.

"Congratulations Anita," my wife hugged her.

"Thanks Chechee," she wiped her tears. "I didn't even tell my husband. You are the one to know it first!"

Anita walked away as children were about to come.

"You do miracles, honey," I couldn't stop hugging my wife. "How could you think of such a wonderful idea?"

"Just think... you silly writer... just think like a psychologist!"

"It could bring them a lot of happiness like true parents."

"And happiness could bring a lot of hormonal changes in their bodies."

"And the hormonal changes could generate the finest sperms and ovums."

"And her delicate womb was well prepared to accept them with utmost happiness. This is a special sort of psychological treatment. Can you name it?"

?

PREMJI

CALIPH AND THE MAID (Short story)

CALIPH AND THE MAID

Baghdad

Long back, it was the city of gardens, riches and peace.

The reign of Caliph Harun al Rashid, they say, it was the golden times of Iraq...

A beautiful maid was recruited for housekeeping in the Royal Palace. She was from a very poor family, and her only asset was her stunning beauty. She knew that better than anyone. One day, around noon, she entered into the King's chamber. For the first time in her life, she watched the most expensive things in the world. Deep in her mind, she made a quick comparison between the King and her.

'Sad, I am just a broom stick,' she sighed and started cleaning everything. At last, she was busy replacing the silk bed covers.

'O! God! How smooth is this bed!'

That bed was made up of the feathers of Royal Swans.

But, she had an uncontrollable wish... just to lie on that... only for a couple of seconds...

Poor girl looked around...

'O, nobody is there in the vicinity!'

?

The Caliph, returned, very tired, after a long session in the court, was shocked to see his maid in deep slumber, that too on his expensive royal bed. He slapped on her face in uncontrollable anger.

She cried aloud in pain... Her red cheek began to swell... She then started laughing madly in an uncontrollable manner!

'Strange woman,' the King thought...

'Why did you laugh? If you don't answer, I will cut your throat right now,' he pulled out his blood thirsty sword.

'Pardon me... Your Majesty...' she knealt before the Caliph. 'You have punished me with such a slap, just for sleeping 'only once' on this bed. But, every-day you sleep on the same bed... I couldn't control my laughter, by thinking how many more slaps would be reserved for you by Allah!'

King Harun al Rashid left the Royal palace on the very moment, and later he became a great Sufi. She too had accompanied him.

?

Abdul, a boy of seventeen, was busy reading the story from the Arabic text book of a school girl sitting next to him, in that crowded bus.

'Stop the bus...' he cried out loud...

Somehow, he managed to alight from the bus amidst that wide expanse of that lonely desert.

?

He sat under the cool shade of a date-palm tree...

One ripe date fell on his lap...

'Grace of Allah!' He put that date in his mouth.

The timer on his belt bomb was busy running down 60...59...58...57...56...55...

'You are that eternal sweetness,' the desert breeze murmured in his ears.

Premji

CANDLES NEVER WORRY ABOUT THEIR LIVES (Short story)

CANDLES NEVER WORRY ABOUT THEIR LIVES

"Tell me, and I'll forget.

Show me, and I may not remember.

Involve me, and I'll understand." ? Tribe Unknown

?

"Tell me, which is the most powerful intoxicant?" Prof. Sulabha asked my students, who were gathered in our spacious seminar hall.

Unfortunately, none of them opened up their mouth as I was sitting in the back row, listening to her wonderful presentation. Being a very intelligent teacher, having thirty two years of meritorious experience, she could easily sense what could be the possible reason.

"Premji, will you please leave the hall..." she asked me mercilessly.

Students started laughing as they never miss a chance to laugh at their teachers, especially their Head of department!

"OK Madam... I will listen to you from outside," I walked out swiftly, otherwise she would have asked me to get out!

?

We had a very special visitor last fortnight. Prof. Sulabha stepped into our house quite unexpected. I was quite busy with the finishing touches of an oil painting, depicting the darker aspects of Russian revolution.

"Premji... It is impossible to find, at least, a good brush stroke in your work. Any fool can become a painter now-a-days," she passed a harmless comment while judging my painting.

"A poet too!" I replied calmly as she is a quite known figure in modern Malayalam poetry. "Now, anyone can tamper with the crest jewel of art!"

"You are right... One must say a 'big thanks' to Lenin... Though he didn't write poetry, he was the man who liberated poetry from the upper class or aristocracy... The same holds good with painting too... otherwise who would consider your painting as an art work?" She began to laugh loudly. "He made everyone a poet, painter, actor, so and so... Anyone can write poetry! Is that not something progressive?"

"Unfortunately, that's the easiest way to murder true poetry! If you are able to pin-point at least one writer having the same grandeur as that of Dostoevsky, I am ready to agree with you."

"No!"

"That's why Lenin called him an 'evil genius.' And systematically, he got rid of all such creative vermins!"

"People should never be over-informed... If so, they will raise unnecessary questions or demands!"

"That's what our humanist philosophy teaches!" she laughed again.

"At first, they force them to raise questions... and later, they apply force to silence them! History of every revolution is one and the same," I said.

"Premji... You speak like a right wing member!"

"Of course 'not!' I speak like a humanist and I can speak only like that!"

"Aunty, will you please leave him and come with me?" my wife began to pull her hands.

"Baby, it's not gossip time. It's the time for some creative discussion. Now, get me some coffee," Prof. Sulabha told my wife as she was not ready to leave me alone.

"So, how are things after your retirement?" I asked her.

"To be very frank... boring! Children are staying abroad...and I am here..."

"Sad," I said while applying some more black paint.

"I have joined a civil service academy as faculty for ancient Malayalam literature. Sad, none of the students are really interested in literature. What they miss is passion! Very sad state of affairs..." soon, uneasiness made dark circles around her deep eyes.

"They have another passionate dream... an IAS degree..." I said.

"Why don't you ask her to conduct a lecture for your students?" my wife interrupted in the middle.

"She will do it on free of cost."

"Literature has nothing do with Automobile Engineering," I tried to ignore her suggestion.

"You are wrong. Fyodor Dostoevsky too was a Military engineer," my wife was not ready to leave me.

"She is right... You too are a writer!" Prof. Sulabha laughed loudly.

?

"Rotation and reciprocation... they are two important basic forms of motion... equally relevant, both in science and life..." Prof. Sulabha began to deliver the keynote address during the inaugural function of our Automobile Association. She did a lot of home work to adsorb the basics of Automobile Engineering. That was a very commendable approach from her end. True professionals are always like that! She is quite beautiful, even in the fag-end of fifties. Though she is bit dark in complexion, her face has an unusual aura. The keynote address lasted only for five minutes as she had a lot to share with the teenage boys.

?

"Sir, you must be there in the seminar hall while she is taking the seminar," Mr Saji Kumar, my bosom friend and lecturer in Automobile Engineering Department, reminded me when the felicitations by distinguished teachers were over. "She may not be able to manage one hundred and twenty students. You know them better than anyone."

"Surely," I grinned.

"What's her topic?"

"Who knows!"

"You are the real HOD!" Saji Kumar smiled.

"Real teachers don't teach, my friend... They pour out their heart..."

?

The toughest task on earth is to manage teens... Luckily, my sons are little boys. The diploma

students were all set to eat her brains. She switched off her mobile phone and kept it on the table. Saji Kumar placed a netbook on the table and switched on the LCD projector.

"Madam... you can have your power-point presentation," Saji told her while trying to hand over the remote control.

"My friend... I haven't used any power-points so far," she replied smiling while fixing a collar-mike. "I strongly believe that it is not at all needed in actual teaching-learning sessions. A true teacher must be able to create all these images in their minds without any such technological aid."

"As you like, Madam," he walked away.

"Welcome friends.... What shall we discuss today? The choice is yours," she began to address the diploma students. None of them replied her as there was an initial hesitation among students. "I would like to have a very good interactive session with you."

My students are notorious for their non-cooperation, especially for matters outside of their interest. She touched the touch-pad of the netbook and the cursor started moving on the brightened screen.

"OK... Let's begin our discussion with the role of ICT facilities in education," she continued her lecture with great patience. "Do you know what is ICT?"

Unfortunately, none of them replied!

"OK... They are nothing but LCD projectors, power-points etc... Do you think that they are most needed for education?" Prof. Sulabha tried to ignore the same question put forth by her!

Soon, she could sort out the problem... I was the real culprit and the misfit! Within no time, the seminar hall turned out to be the epicenter of heated up discussions.

I was sitting in the very next room, listening to her wonderful speech. She touched almost every subject under the Sun, flavored with lot of jokes. Laughter was accompanied by laughter...

?

"What is our next topic?" Prof. Sulabha asked the boys and girls. "OK... Let's discuss the need of road safety. What do you say?" She asked one of the girl students sitting in the second row.

Unfortunately, she was a bit shy to answer her question.

"What is your name?"

"Shilpa," replied one of her friends.

"How come you are so shy, Shilpa?"

"She has some sort of inferiority complex," replied one of the boys and the whole seminar hall was filled with laughter. "She thinks, she is really dark!"

"Is it Shilpa?"

A meek smile appeared on her face.

"Can you see your face without the help of a mirror or something like that?" She asked the all.

"No..." the boys cried out.

"Then why do you worry about your complexion? It is a waste of time. Lord Krishna himself was dark in complexion," Prof. Sulabha told them. "Shilpa... You would like to ask me something..." she grinned.

"Yes Madam," a naughty smile appeared on Shilpa's face.

"Then, why don't you ask me?"

"Madam... do you use any cosmetics?"

"No, my dear Shilpa."

"No?" Shilpa couldn't believe her ears. "What about in your youth?" She was not ready to leave her as she was able to inject some sort of extra confidence in her.

"Like every woman in her youth, even I was addicted to cosmetics."

"Inferiority complex?" asked Shilpa.

"I think so," Prof. Sulabha replied with a cute smile.

"Madam... Our next topic is road safety," shouted one of the naughty boys.

?

Almost two hours passed and the seminar hall was still reverberating with laughter.

"Madam, shall I get you some coffee?" I showed my head.

"Not needed... I will wind up with a story," she smiled.

"As you like," I walked away.

"Dear children, I started my career as a lecturer in English when I just twenty three. And I got married to one of my seniors in college in the very next year. He is ten thousand times handsomer than me," she stopped for a moment.

"That's why you were behind those cosmetics," boys laughed loudly. "Were it a love marriage?"

"Might be or might not be! My husband hated all sort of cosmetics. But, I was not ready to leave those precious companions."

"How many children you have?" asked a girl.

"We have two children... a son and a daughter. You know, managing two kids in the morning is a tough task. My son liked chapatis with potato stew and my daughter liked Dosai and Chutney for break-fast. They liked different items for lunch too. Unfortunately, there was nothing in common among them. I had to prepare all these for them. And the same continued even in the night."

"Madam, you could have kept a servant!" said Shilpa.

"I don't have a servant even now. And beyond all these, I had to take classes for Master's degree too," Prof. Sulabha told them with a smile.

"And you had to find time for your make-up too," Shilpa laughed loudly.

"You are absolutely right, Shilpa," she replied as if she was congratulating her. "When my son had turned just twelve, Raj, my husband, got a transfer nearby to our house. You know, my college was just three kilometers away from our home. That was the only solace. Still, I was late almost every day at my college!"

"How did you manage to sign being regularly late?" asked one of the boys.

"Madam... Premji Sir has introduced academic monitoring system to nail us all!" shouted the back-benchers.

"Our principal was a soft-hearted man... and I misused that opportunity the most, even-though my husband used to drop me many times. Still, I used to be late... Our HOD never allotted first hour to me. What could be the possible reason? Can anyone tell me?" Prof. Suabha asked them.

"What else, other than your make up!" The students were enjoying the session as if someone among them was conducting the seminar.

"And my children left for school... I had a quick bath... I was trapped by make-up!"

?

"Raj... I am already late"

"So what? You are late every day..."

"Raaj... please drop me... please..."

"OK... Let me take the car keys..."

"Let's go by your bike," I tossed him the keys.

"OK... where is my helmet?"

"I don't know... Why do you need a helmet for such a short distance?" I was getting angry. "O... I am already late..."

And we headed to my college.

"Raj... please ride faster... Our new principal is a real nut... and I am sure, he will score at my column today, if I don't reach there in time..." I was taunting him in his ears.

?

"I don't want to remember any further.... More than twenty years passed... All I know is, I am alone from that day, though I feel his presence always..." Prof. Sulabha removed her spectacles to wipe tears, rolling down. A massive silence encompassed the seminar hall. Even the boys couldn't control their tears.

"Children, whenever you think of buying a cosmetic, think of me... They all contain chemicals... They never brighten your skin... True beauty is your inner-beauty, that only you can feel it the most. Look deep into your mind, yourself, than looking into the painted faces of others," she stopped for a moment. "Whenever you think of over-speeding, think of me... Speed kills life... Whenever you fail in time management, think of me... You will never be a loser in life! Whenever you feel like drinking a little, think of me... Life is the best intoxicant! Without life, how can you enjoy anything?"

All were crying while smiling... Candles never worry about their life!

Premji

CHILD IS THE FATHER OF MAN (Short story)

CHILD IS THE FATHER OF MAN

Transfers are real headaches for all employees, irrespective of where they work.... in government or private sector. What all new expenses, my God! From finding a good, affordable house, to a School for children... My best pal Sabu helped me in finding out both. Later, Father Nicholas gave me 'handwritten' receipt for rupees sixty thousand as donations, for my two children in that prestigious School.

'My provident fund is almost empty now,' I told Sabu.

'Don't blame him... For quality education, you have to pay,' he said while laughing

'What quality, man? An 'A' is an 'A' even in Greece... everything is one and the same.'

'No... It is quite different here, Premji... Management pays their teachers as per government pay scale. Whenever there is an increase in dearness allowance, Father Nicholas will send you another letter informing the increase in School fees... So, naturally the teachers give their best support'

'Another hike!... my God!'

'Only Christians know how to run good schools... Premji, they are dedicated people... You know... that's why even prominent Hindu politicians also let their children study here.'

'That's great... Unity in diversity...!' I laughed.

?

Mrs&Mr. Ramnath are my next door neighbors and they live in a palatial building of their own. He is a high profile IAS officer (Indian Administrative Service), a superb writer and wonderful man. Mrs. Ramnath is the only daughter of a multimillionaire and naturally a snob herself, due to lack of proper education. Meera is their only daughter who is a very attractive, little stout, bright girl. She is more attached to her Dad, may be due to his down to earth approach... no... beyond all he loves her the most... Meera and Abhi, my elder son are classmates

I used to collect our children, back from School, in my old Maruti car. Sometimes, when Mr. Ramnath was away on official tours or Mrs. Ramnath was busy with her beauty care, Meera used to join us in the evenings. But, Meera never used to invite my sons to get into her car when I couldn't reach there in time in the evenings.

'Uncle... How come you are so late?', she asked without any humbleness..

'My car is a pensioner...Meera,' I told.

'Better buy a new one.'

'I am not all rich as your Grand Pa'

'Grand Pa...whose Grand Pa... who wants his money?'there was contempt in her voice.

?

Everything was going fairly well until the quarterly examination results got published. Meera used to

adjust the first rank from first standard onward. Fortunately or unfortunately, my elder son Abhi was declared as the class topper. It was the biggest shock of her life and of course, her mother's too! Mr. Ramnath congratulated him wholeheartedly in front of Meera and Mrs. Ramnath tried to avoid every contact my family! Poor man...Mr. Ramnath had to use all his administrative powers to find out some new tuition teachers and Mrs. Ramnath was overseeing everything like a ruthless supervisor of old slave farms in America!

?

After two days, our telephone started ringing somewhere around ten'o clock in the night. Late calls in the night are symbols of danger...terror... bad news... I picked up the phone.

'Hello'

'Hi Uncle, Meera here... Can I speak to Abhi? I have to clear some doubts'

'Sure... one minute.... Abhi... a Call for you.'

He kept the phone after sometime.

'What did she say?, my wife asked him.

'Nothing Mom... She was asking like.. 'did you study this... did you study that... then... it is already 10PM... why don't you go to sleep?'... and you know her advice... ' If you don't sleep early, you cannot concentrate in class'... strange girl..'

'Idiot... She told you to sleep early...You know... what will she do?'

'What will she do?'

'She will learn till 12'O clock...Poor boy... he is yet to understand a girl!'

'None can understand a woman!' I teased her.

?

That day, I had to travel to Kochi for an official training program and to my surprise Mr. Ramnath was my co-passenger. He started talking about his literary life and real life. And at last the discussions reached the saturation point: the studies of his daughter.

'Premji... I am not getting enough time to spend with my daughter because of her stupid tuitions...'

'I am sorry... Sir'

'Why do you say Sorry? You must be proud of him,' he said calmly

?

Days went on.. And one day, Meera was returning home with us. I stopped the car in front of an Ice-Cream parlor. My sons jumped out in uncontrollable joy as it was the first occasion in their life, eating an Ice-cream form outside! Meera was sitting there in the car itself.

'Meera, please come with us,' Abhi requested.

'No... Abhi.. I don't like ice-creams... They contain Gelatin, made from hoof of dead animals,' she said while rejecting his plea.

'That's an interesting piece of information... Anyway... Please join us...At least for a company,' I told and she she followed us... 'That's a good move... listening to elders,' I told her while getting into the parlor.

'I want Butter scotch,' my younger son shouted...

'I like to have Vanilla,' Abhi said...

Waiter returned with Ice-Creams and boys started eating in big scoops thinking: 'Dad... today, we

are going to drain out your pocket!'

'Uncle... why don't you have something?' Meera asked.

'Because, you are not having anything.'

'Waiter, give me one Strawberry... One for Uncle too,' she shouted...

'One for me too,' my younger son too joined her!

The children had a nice time there. I felt the radiance of happiness on their faces.

'Kids, this is the spirit of sharing and caring,' I said.

'It's really interesting, Uncle,' Meera told.

'Then why don't you avoid your tuition teachers? You and Abhi, just share your knowledge each other, then you will become the best students in Kerala State! Do you know that? How much time can you save?'

'That seems interesting,' Abhi and Meera, they told together.

'Then you can teach him too,' I showed them my younger son. 'Meera, not even a single time in life, you father had taken any tuitions! And he has achieved the finest post position an individual can achieve in this nation.. Indian Administrative Service... Keep that always in mind... You know he is missing you a lot because of your tuitions'

'Uncle... how do you know all these?'

'He told me'. She kept quiet. 'Meera, how many Ice-Creams do you eat everyday?'

'Three or four'

'That's why you are getting stout... reduce the numbers... check the ill-effects of Ice-creams in the internet... Never forget this Meera... your Dad used to study under lamp posts, even during rain... He was not rich enough... Have you ever seen him wasting a single paisa for luxuries?'

'No'

'That is called thriftiness... Meera... you have the best role model ever in your home itself... Your Dad... He is a living example of hard work.'

'Yes...Uncle... I love him... Respect him... I follow his footsteps,' clouds of tears were forming in her eyes.

'The purpose of education is not good grades... or getting a good job...it's beyond all these... it's a highway to a better individual... a refined human being! Competition should be there, only healthy competition... Beyond every competition, there is humanity...Meera.'

'Thanks...Uncle... you have opened my eyes,' Meera wiped her tears.

'Not me... Your Dad!'

'Thanks Dad'... They all said together....

'From tomorrow onwards, we all will travel by our School Bus. What do you say, Uncle?' Meera asked.

'That's a great development... go forward...'

'Hoooooooooooo... Done,' they laughed.

?

Ramanth had to cut every Tuition Master, though his wife was shouting like anything. Meera was very happy that day as could spent a lot of time with her father. She asked him a lot of questions so

that she can share her additional knowledge with Abhi. He inspired her quest for more and more knowledge. She used to spend a lot of time with Abhi. Naturally my wife was suspicious.

'Will anything go wrong between them?' she asked.

'You were behind me even from School days... Did anything go wrong?'

'Nothing... But times are changing,' some elements of anxiety was there in her voice.

'India is emerging very fast... God knows... will there be marriages after ten years?' we laughed
?

Meera was busy reading 'Stigma,' the new poetry collection by her Dad. She loved the fresh smell of that book like the freshness of those poems. Beyond that, the book cover was one of her paintings. 'If you commit a mistake in selecting the right soul mate... your life will be nothing but another hell'... She underlined that line with a rose pencil and slept off while reading. And she woke up little late next day.

'Ktnin..'

Mrs. Ramnath ran towards Meera's room. She was shocked to see her daughter shivering with anger, with that 'Stigma' in her left hand. The large mirror fixed on the cupboard was missing... Broken glass pieces were scattered all over the room.

'Meera... Have you gone mad?' she shouted...

'Get lost....'

'What did you say?'

'Bloody hell... just get lost from my room.'

'What the hell did I do to hurt you to shout on me like this?'

'What is this? See what have you done to this book?'

'What have I done?'

'What have I done? You... you had used... the first copy of my Dad's book to cover that large tumbler with steaming milk... See every page is wet... You spoiled it and talking shamelessly'

'Who cares your Dad's stupidities?'

'Stupid, illiterate, rich woman like you, doesn't care the merits of her husband... How can a donkey understand that world is not flat! The social status you enjoy everyday is the reward of his stupidities... Not of your Dad's filthy money, accumulated through corruption...'

'Youuu...'

'Get lost from my sight... Wait... I will not talk to you any more in my life,' Meera shouted aloud and started crying...

Her mother walked away quite confused...

?

Meera and her parents visited my house to attend our younger son's birthday after one month.

'Congrats Meera... I am going to recommend your parents for the best couple award of the year!' I told her while serving her another cup of Ice-cream.

Premji

CHRISTMAS GREETINGS (Short story)

CHRISTMAS GREETINGS

Christmas was only two weeks away. And I was wandering through the newly opened shopping mall in the city, to purchase some inexpensive gifts for friends and relatives, along with my younger son.

'Dad, please get me also a greeting card... for a very special friend of mine,' my seven year old lad demanded coolly.

Christmas is a nightmare for parents, poor, like me.

'Very special friend? Is it for your girlfriend?'

'Daaaaaaaaaad,' poor boy was getting angry.

'Sorry young-man... I was just kidding you,' I tried to calm him down. 'O.K... Do you want an expensive card or so?'

'No... He doesn't like expensive things... I need a simple one,' he stopped in the middle.

'But, elegant?'

'Yes'

?

Christmas was over and so the holidays.

Continuous ringing bicycle bells, woke me up from deep slumber at around three'o clock, in the evening.

'Unfortunately, the postal department couldn't locate the addressee,' postman told while returning the greeting card. 'We are extremely sorry,' the old man pedaled away with a naughty smile on his pale face.

Tears blinded my eyes, while going through the unfamiliar 'address'.

JESUS

VATICAN

Premji

CITIZEN 'CANE'

CITIZEN 'CANE'

The huge buildings of that engineering college stood on steel and concrete in the University Campus. The newly constructed Auto-CAD Lab was situated in an empty corner. And we, Ravi and me, took three days to install 'Auto-CAD 2010,' design drafting software, in the newly allotted lot of 60 brand new computers.

On the third day evening, our department head and College Principal visited the well-arranged lab and that time I was busy surfing through the internet... Poetfreak... my madness... Ravi was snoring like a Spanish bull retired from fighting arena! I woke him up in a quick move without their notice.

'Premji, this is not a good habit,' HOD told jestingly...

'Sorry... Sir'

'The youth should come out of this virtual world.... You see...Premji... University has 100 hectares of land... what all different types of plants, flowers, birds and butterflies... what all interesting things are here to watch... You people are not at all interested on any of them... very sad indeed,'our Principal said with deep anguish.

'You are right, Sir,' I said.

'You write poetry?'

'Not exactly... Sometimes... Sir'

'That's good... So, the software installation is over?'

'Yes... Sir'

'Very good,' he congratulated us. 'These guys deserve something, what shall we give them Mr. HOD?'

'Anything you like... Sir,' HOD had no hesitation.

'Premji... What do you want?'

'If you don't mind, please grant me three days off!' (Today is Wednesday, so four days with her! Ooolalalah...)

'Bit greedy you are... anyway granted,' he said.

?

I was busy preparing my bag for leaving home when Ravi returned, that too after keeping the Auto-CAD lab key in the Principal's chamber. 'Please don't torment her too much,' Ravi made fun of me... 'You are living like a bachelor here!'

My sons were eating my brains till late night... tiny monsters, were not at all sleeping! Separation makes husband and wife great lovers again and again! A mobile-ring can spoil a precious, passionate night! Passion, what a sweet and lovely word it is!

'Dear, don't wake me up till 9'O clock, tomorrow.'

'O.K... ,' she told while switching off the lights...

'Who grows the fruits of passion in darker nights?'I started singing an old melody in her ears.

'Hungry lion!'... She said and we ended the laughter in a tight lip-lock!

?

'Get up please,' she made me wake up early in the morning, 'here is an urgent call for you'

'Where is my phone?'

'That's switched off... now please talk with Ravi'

'Bastard... from where did he get your number?' I collected the phone. 'Hello Ravi, is there anything really important?'

'Yes... Please come back before 12'O clock... today'

'What? Are you joking?'

'No'...

'O.K.'

?

When I reached near the University campus, several Police jeeps were moving in an out.

'Kunjikka... Anything serious?' I enquired the watcher in the main gate.

'Sir... some new computers were stolen from your engineering college'

'My God!' I felt a shiver-wave on my spine.

?

'You know... they didn't break the lock... just opened it with its own key.... Tell me, where did you keep the key immediately after closing the lab, yesterday evening?' Rahim, the Circle Inspector asked me.

'As usual... Ravi kept it there in the Principal's room... Rahim... Sorry.... Sir,' I told him without any tension because he was my classmate. 'Every key is kept there exactly on the peg with label referring to which room; it belongs to, on a big plywood board on the wall.'

'That means, Premji, they might have picked up the key from the Principal's office earlier... and made a duplicate... The original key is still hanging there on that board....,' he started breaking his head analyzing the crime. 'That means that the thief is from within'

?

The enquiry was going on in faster pace and I tried to collect maximum details of the notorious guys in the vicinity. One day, some of my colleagues were busy discussing about a new second computer shop in Kochi, where almost new computers were available at cheaper rate. I collected their address and reached there in that evening. The sales department people were very happy to deal with me and they offered the best price. I checked the machines.

And on the very next day, the most popular (notorious) gang in the University Campus were arrested by Rahim, based on the information transferred by me. They had opened a second hand Computer shop in the city just to dispose the sixty computers with the help of their friends who were in computer business! What an idea!

?

The students... totally six members... they were standing in a row, heads down, in the Police station. Rahim and I, we were busy discussing something inside his chamber. Suddenly, he was summoned by DGP and before leaving he called the Asst. Sub-Inspector (ASI). A tough old man in uniform, nearing the age of pension, appeared there in no time. He was notorious for his skill for

'interrogation'! Wonderful muscles he had even in the fag-end of his service.

'Samuel... see, I have to go out now.... You just... bring out the truth,' Rahim said.

'Understood Sir'

'Good,' they laughed. 'Premji... you can see the whole episode from here,' Rahim told me while leaving.

'OK Rahim'. When he left the chamber, I repositioned the chair.

?

'Bastards... lift your heads up,' Samuel started his specialization: 'bloodless psychic surgery' with a long cane in hand. He was a notorious 'intelligent torturer' during the period of emergency in the seventies. How many youth were crushed under his boots! He started asking their whereabouts...all were from very rich families and at last Samuel located him, Anzil.

'Bastard... your father is a personal friend of mine... What a nice man he is... and you son of a bitch... He has money even for another five more generations... you steal things instead of studies... Bastard... you better kill your Dad.'

Anzil stood like rock, looking downward, without any change of expression on his face... no matter of repentance!

'Why did you commit a crime like this?

'Crime? I was totally helpless Sir... You know... Sir, I have a 1000 CC imported Kawasaki Ninja bike,'he opened his mouth and started talking as if nothing had happened or he was totally innocent! 'it has a very poor mileage of just 10 km/ litre... Dad gives just Rs. 500/- as daily allowance... Sir, please tell me, how can a youth like me survive on that meagre sum? Just one round inside our Campus, Rs. 500/- petrol will be over... Sir, I have to give treats to my girlfriends... Now-a-days girls are very cunning... Sir... they eat only expensive Ice-creams... watch movies only in multiplexes.... even though they drink porridge at home... then I have drop them in their homes... then I have to have snacks, beer, cigarettes with my gang... I like to eat royally from outside... life is hectic Sir... you know it is very expensive... Sir, petrol is my worst enemy... without money, you are absolutely waste...Sir,' he was narrating as if he was talking with a long-time friend.

'So...Anzil...Tell me your daily expense? Samuel asked quite coolly... after all he is the friend of the boy's father!

'Sir, petrol expenses is of around rupees one thousand... maintaining my girlfriends another thousand... for friends another thousand... and another five hundred for my food and personal health-care... Sir, I love to spend three hours in Gym... I have to find out some three thousand five hundred rupees daily decent living in my college...Sir... but... you know... I go there only six or seven days in a month...Sir,' he kept on talking.

'So, what is your monthly expense?'

'Not up to your imagination, Sir... approximately some twenty five thousand... that's not enough... and other expenses extra... that's all,' he said, living out his tension...

'Pataarrrr'... ASI Samuel slapped on his left cheek... He saw almost all stars in the Universe! The first and finest slap ever in his life! Poor guy, he lost all the confidence that his father would come and save him! Jail...jail... everywhere!

'You... Son of a bitch... I have 32 years of service in Police.... and my salary is less than half of your monthly expenses... You know, I can collect only ten thousand rupees as net income after all sort of deductions... And with those ten thousands, I meet all the expenses of... mine... my wife ... my aged mother ... and three grown up daughters.... Bastard... and you are saying... twenty five thousand

PREMI

DESTINED TO WIN (Short story)

DESTINED TO WIN

Kochi... People call her 'The Queen of Arabian Sea' and a part of my life belongs to her. During my vibrant youth, I was working for a corporate firm in Kochi, dealing with all kind of Automobiles. I had to sell all types of capital equipment, for a living, with a price tag starting from rupees one million to hundred millions! Imagine, just one man to manage the entire sales in Kerala and that too he had to achieve the target! Otherwise, incentives would remain as a dream! What a hectic life!

I was staying in a lodge, that too in the heart of Kochi, with so many dignified drunkards and I used to go home only once in a month, even though the distance is less than two hundred kilometers. On one Sunday, we were watching a live Cricket match on Television...A match between India and Pakistan and tension among spectators were growing up in geometric progression per every ball! Suddenly, Saji announced sad news.

'Princess Diana is no more'

'How do you know that?' I asked.

'From BBC... Princess and her boyfriend Dodi-al-Fiad...they both got killed in a fatal accident... somewhere in France'

'Sure...it could be a well-planned murder,' I told my opinion.... 'a secret plot'

'May be,' Sethuvettan announced his support for my argument.

'Were she pregnant?' Saji asked.

'God knows.'

'Her numbers were totally against her. Unlucky 12... and she was victimized,' I told.

The arguments heated up, Cricket too... O.'a lightening four' by Yuvraj Singh... We won the match... it was a day of great loss for the world and great victory for India. Suddenly telephone started ringing and Saji ran to his room.

'Please don't do that...please don't commit suicide...your life is so precious...you have no right to kill it,' same stereotype dialogues of a counselor; Saji was desperately trying to save a life... Always, I respected his integrity.

I used to help him to stick posters in public places and place stickers in transport buses during free time. He was a member of some Charismatic group and had been running a twenty four hour free counseling center for years. We friends helped him to manage it without any break. Saji was such a nice guy that he was not having any bad habits...

'Smoking, drinking and masturbation... I will not commit all these sins during my life,' he told me once.

'Better, you commit suicide! Idiot... a life, not worth living!' I laughed aloud.

?

That day, we had an official party... Expensive liquor was flooding in the party! A Keralite will drink even acid, if it is given for 'free'! I was totally out of senses when someone dropped me back! I slept off immediately, not even aware of the cloud of mosquitoes which were ready to lift and leave me on 'her' lap! My sweet.....!

Somebody knocked on my door at around midnight. I wanted to kill that bastard... just one unexpected stab will be enough to...

'Who the fuck is that?'

'It's me... Saji'

'You... senseless bastard... What the hell do you want?'

'Premji... Just open the door...man...,' he kept on knocking.

Rusty hinges... The door creaked, just like my mind, while opening. Saji was standing there in the darkness, only his teeth were visible...

'You... soul of darkness... What do you want?'

'Lock the door and come with me.'

I followed him to his room. Suddenly he started wearing fresh clothes...

'Where the hell are you going?'

'Now, listen Premji... My girlfriend's brother... he had met with an accident.... Drunken driving... He is the only earning member of her family... careless idiot.'

'Every idiot has a girlfriend! Calling a drunkard 'an idiot' is a sin... Indirectly, you are calling me an idiot! You... 'tea-bag'... how can you understand the pleasure of drinking?'

'O...please don't eat my brains.'

'So, you want my blood?'

'No, Man... If I take you for blood donation, you know, what will they say? 'There is only meager amount of blood in 'alcohol'... and that too inseparable, even by God!' we laughed.

'Good assessment! Now, what should I do?' I was feeling more and more sleepy.

'Give me your Bike key... and tonight you are sleeping here...If anyone calls, please attend'

'OK. Done... if I vomit here?'

'You can clean that in the morning,' he vanished in the dark.

'Your Dad will clean.'

?

I thought of removing the receiver from the cradle so that I could get some sleep without any interference.... But, who prevented me from doing that?

I slept off again. When the telephone started ringing frantically, I was floating over a dream... acting as hero in a love song with my office receptionist... We were not at all in good terms as we had a fight earlier! I was not at all interested to blow up her ego...

'O! God! Which bastard is that? Not even allowing me to enjoy an impossible dream,' I started grunting while getting up.

'Hello,' my voice was not clear...

'Hello...Is it 'flame of hope' counseling center?' (Flame... what a name for a counseling center!)

'Yes, May I help you?'

'No... I got your number from a local bus'

'So? What is your problem?' I was getting irritated.

'I am going to commit suicide,' he told in a tired voice. 'right now'

'Brother... Your decision is wrong... Life is the gift of God, and you have no right to kill it,' I started counseling him like a parrot, that too in drunken voice.

'I have taken the right decision... I will die within ten minutes... Cyanide is ready... Now, I will not listen to anybody's advice,' he started laughing. Idiot... spoiled my dearest dream...

'You, son of a bitch... go and get fucked up somewhere in the hell,' I slammed the phone, raging with anger... A drunken night had become sinking night ... 'Saji, I will show you my charisma, if you won't get me another full bottle tomorrow...'

Within five minutes, telephone started ringing again.

'Hello,' he was on the line.

'Bastard... Are you still alive?'

'I have dropped the plan to kill myself.'

'Why? Bastards like you are burden to any family... And to the Earth also... Better revoke your decision'

'When a stupid counselor like you, doesn't even value my precious life, why should I commit suicide? I know how to lead a life of honour... Understand Mr. Counselor.'

'Counselor? Who is your counselor? Me? Ha...ha...Ha... Bastard, I am just a drunkard! Now, leave me alone and go to sleep.'

'Sorry Boss... I will give you a treat, tomorrow... You taught me a simple lesson...'

'What is that?'

'Man is destined to win... Thank You... Good night Boss....,' he laughed from the other end.

Premji

EVERY CHILD IS A WONDER (Short story)

EVERY CHILD IS A WONDER

"Uncle... It's for you..." Twelve year old Ajith presented me a gold-plated metal-plaque, upon which some wordings were inscribed... Glowing with extreme happiness, he opened the glass-door of the show-case in our drawing room and placed it inside. "There is no other place more apt than this..."

?

Four years back....

Whether blue or white-collar, transfers play an unavoidable role in the career of any employee and I am no exception. What I had lost, during the last transfer, was the great many discussions during the long train journeys with eminent co-passengers who could fill my literary life with immense experiences. The new college, where I work now, is just 40 km away my rented house where I live with my wife and children and the only mode of conveyance is the Red Bus. Rash driving of the state owned bus drivers and the numerous peeping-toms prevented me from opening up my laptop, while travelling, almost permanently. At last, poetry appeared again as my last refuge.

It was clumsy evening as the temperature inside our house reached an all-time high of infinite degrees. Boys were still quite busy with cartoons on television.

"Amar, show me your notebooks," my wife began her daily ritual of teaching our younger son, who is in fourth standard.

Soon, she started taking high resolution pictures of the current lessons in his notebook using an expensive mobile phone which was gifted by Anitha, one of her long-term friends.

"What are you doing?" I couldn't stop asking.

Unfortunately, she was not at all listening at all!

?

"When did you install 'WhatsApp' in your mobile?"

"It was installed by Anitha," replied my wife. "Just tell me, how to remove the old chats?" she asked innocently while handing over her mobile phone to me.

Fortunately, all the chats, to be removed, were between Anita and her. And they contained nothing but the photographs of the class-notes of my younger son.

"What's happening in between you all?" I was getting puzzled. "Why do you send all these to her?"

"It's for Ajith..."

Ajith... When did I meet him for the first time?

?

Three months back...

Being the only invited guests, we reached Anita's well-furnished flat at around seven in the evening. Ajith, the eight year old birthday-boy, was wearing some expensive sparkling dress. Though Anita

was a long term friend of my wife, I hadn't met her since that day. She is a tall, blonde woman. Gifts were exchanged, birthday-cake was cut. Soon, the little boys made a wonderful friendship and they started playing and discussing many things. Ajith disliked speaking in Malayalam, his mother-tongue.

Suman, the husband of Anita, was very happy to speak me in Tamil ? his mother-tongue and he spoke to Anita only in English. Suman and Anita were two highly-paid employees working for an international hotel chain when they had met for the first time. He is a Roman Catholic and she is a Brahmin, an upper-caste Hindu clan.

Superb food was served as Suman was working as an executive chef in a seven-star hotel in the city. Knives and forks were quite new to my sons and they kept them aside like unwanted or useless things. Both the women were discussing hell a lot of things, right from their school days to the mighty present, and laughing loudly. Memories, and being the part of memories, are the greatest treasures of anyone who live upon earth.

Unfortunately, Suman had to go out for some urgent assignment and I was left alone in the drawing room.

"This is a Ferrari... one of the fastest cars in the world," Ajith began to explain even the minute details of his expensive toy collection to my sons. And fortunately, it was a brand new experience to them. My sons seemed like so tiny before the obese figure of Ajith. He had the size of an eleven or twelve year old boy. Soon, he left them alone with the replicas of modern cars and sat beside me.

"Hello Uncle... I think, you feel bored...," Ajith said in English.

"Not exactly..."

"Don't worry... I will give you company."

"You are welcome...Young man..."

"Thank you."

"By the way, in which standard are you studying?"

"I will have to join in fourth standard... in a new school... But, there is a problem..."

"What's that?"

"I don't know how to read, write and speak in Malayalam..."

"Is that a big problem?"

"Yes... Mommy is trying to teach me... But, it's really boring... All the letters have the shape of Jilebi... (Indian sweet)..."

"You have no choice other than learning this language, if you wish to survive in Kerala," I told coldly.

"Why should I learn Malayalam when think in English, speak in English and write in English? I don't think a local language is so important in life." Ajith left me as he got angry.

He started changing TV channels... Soon, he got bored and switched it off the TV. Unfortunately, he was the only disorganized being in that house.

"Guys, how is my car collection?" Ajith asked my kids. Quite unsettled, Ajith was back to me in ten minutes.

"Uncle, please give me your mobile phone... I want to take some snaps..."

?

Ajith joined the same class where my younger son was studying and he was the only friend he had.

Two months passed without any important happenings. But, Anitha was forced to take leave on that day as she was summoned to the school by Mr Pushkar Nath, the executive officer.

"Madam... Unfortunately, I am forced to inform that Master Ajith is a real problem kid to most of the teachers as well as his classmates..." he informed her like corpse just got up from the morgue.

"Is it?"

"Do you know what happened yesterday? Someone called him 'Thadiyaa*.' Luckily, he didn't understand the meaning." (*fat boy)

"Then?"

"Then what? We had to shift him to some other division..." old man was getting angry... "Your son doesn't take down class notes... He doesn't give any care to language classes... Quite unsettled and switches too quickly from one activity to the next... Very impulsive and get distracted easily... Talks nonstop and interrupt people, even including teachers and seniors... He is very poor in controlling emotions... We cannot tolerate such disorganized kids..."

Anitha didn't even speak a single word in support of her son and the old man was getting perplexed.

?

Usually, I don't check the workbooks of my sons. I never liked to interfere in their thought process. Unfortunately, it used to create a lot of in-home fights with my wife. A piece of paper, lying on his study table, with very strange, but a peculiar handwriting created a fatal attraction in my mind.

"It's not mine," my younger son shouted loudly. "Dad... It's a class assignment written by Ajith... You know... Our class teacher Miss asked us to write a simple essay on a visit to park..."

Park

'I see an old bench where an aged couple is sitting. Two small girls are sitting on the see-saw. Rocking horse is left alone. Ice-cream vendor sits alone as nobody is interested in his cheap products. Some bugs are moving around yellow flowers. Three boys are harassing a dragonfly by clipping its transparent wings. Its multifaceted eyes glitter in fear. Two crows, sitting on a large tree, watch the small food packet in my hand.'

"It's amazing... Ajith is so creative..." I couldn't hide my feelings.

"Our class Miss gave him just two out of ten," my younger son laughed.

"Why?"

"She says, it doesn't have the structure of an essay..."

"What did you write?"

"Yesterday, I and Ajith went on a short picnic to a city park. Park is a place where children and elder people come to spend their leisure time..." words began to shower as if some torrential rain was going on.

"Enough..."

"Dad... he sleeps too much now-a-days in class..."

"What?"

?

It was a Friday evening... I was wandering through the empty space between huge racks in city super-market. I had to find more than twenty grocery items with the help of a long message on my smartphone.

"Where the hell is salt?" I was forced to ask impatiently.

Someone handed over a cover of iodized salt, with a cute smile upon her face. It was Sheeja, my school-day's sweetheart. Love is one-sided most of the times.

"I heard, you were there in Dubai..."

"I came back three months ago," she replied calmly.

"So... what are you doing now?"

"I am working as a teacher... to be very precise, I am the class teacher of your younger son," she laughed.

"I didn't know that! That's great!"

"You are the same lazy guy! The friendship between Ajith and your little boy is quite notorious in our school. Do you have any idea about that?"

"I know, they are very close... Let me ask you a very simple question, how come Ajith sleep during class hours?"

"Don't you know that Master Ajith is hyperactive...?"

"Is that not a form of intelligence?"

"Yes... You were the most hyperactive kid I have ever seen in my life!"

"Then, what is wrong with him?"

"Premji... I think he is under medication... Poor boy has been identified with ADHD... that means attention deficit hyperactivity disorder... He is under treatment for ADHD and other kinds of behavior problems... His parents don't have quality time to spare for him..."

"I read a short essay written by him... Why did you give him two out of ten for his short essay?"

"I am sorry Premji... Creative kids are misfits in most of the traditional schools!" She remained silent for a moment... "More than medicines, Ajith needs quality time and care from his parents." She wiped her eyes. "He needs help in learning how to change the way he acts... He needs help in dealing with his feelings like anger, sadness and worries... You know, his IQ is more than all other students..."

?

"What are you giving him?" my wife asked Anita quite furiously.

"Ritalin," she replied sadly.

"It's a central nervous system stimulant which affects the chemicals in the brain and nerves that contribute to hyperactivity and impulse control... Are you not aware that these medicines are quite addictive?"

"But... I am helpless..." Anitha replied painfully. "How can I sacrifice my career?"

"You may be... But, I cannot leave a helpless child like that..." my wife replied stubbornly. "I will pick him from the school along with my boys in the evening... and he will study in company of them. But, no more medicines from today onwards..."

?

"Play Football for the next twenty minutes," my wife told the three boys while serving them hot steam-cakes in the evening.

"Auntie... What is this?" Ajith asked while pointing towards it.

"You have to eat some good food... You won't get any junk food from here... Is that clear?"

"As you like," he had a bite. "Tastes good..."

"You all need some exercise... some studies and some time for creativity....," I said calmly.

"Is that really needed?" Ajith had a doubt.

"Yes Ajith... and you are responsible of making sure all these getting done..." replied my wife while handing them over an expensive football. "If anyone provokes you, what will you do?"

"What will I do?"

"Just ignore them!"

?

Either Anitha or Suman used to pick him around nine pm in the evening. Days went on like this... Ajith began to learn Malayalam alphabets quite faster... He started teaching my son all his expertise like mental mathematics... We used to appreciate all of them in open, especially Ajith. Anitha and her husband were also very happy to appreciate the children.

Ajith became a wonderful football player within a short span of time and his plumb body attained natural fitness in the cost of cutting down his excess energy. Our elder son helped the little ones in their studies with a lot of enthusiasm.

"I am going to give you a small test.... Can you sit calm for ten minutes?" my wife told them one evening. "Are you ready?"

"Yes..." they replied together...

"Now... Close your eyes and sit relaxed for ten minutes... Do not open your eyes at any cost..."

Unfortunately, Ajith couldn't close his eyes and sit idle not more than three minutes... He closed his eyes again and tried to sit calm for the next seven minutes... Our sons also opened their eyes after five or six minutes... She gave some chocolates to all as a simple reward.

"Ajith... you know, there is a shortcut to win this game," I told Ajith secretly.

"What's that uncle?"

"Which is your favourite fragrance?"

"I like the fragrance of mangoes!"

"Good... Whenever you sit for relaxation game, just think of the fragrance of mangos... When you take a deep breath, just feel the smell of ripe mangos entering your nostrils. Just feel it for ten minutes... I bet, nobody can beat you..."

"That's great uncle..." Ajith replied happily...

?

"Memory is running out of space," my elder son read out a short message in my smart phone. Soon, he connected the same to the computer. I kept on removing all unwanted pictures and other downloads and at last, I could found out a hidden folder containing some stunning photographs and well-taken videos. All of them were taken by Ajith during his birthday party, some months back.

"Ajith, you are simply brilliant... You can use this whenever you feel like taking some videos," I told him while handing over my Sony Handicam.

"Thanks uncle... I have used this HDR-C190 Handicam camcorder many times earlier..."

"You are a wonderful photographer... Why don't you take some short movies?" I asked.

"To become a good movie-maker, Ajit, you have to read a lot," my wife advised him.

"I will read some books in English..."

"You will have to read many books in Malayalam too... Will you?"

"Surely... Auntie..."

"You will have to watch movies right from starting to end..."

"Surely..."

"Very good... Young man..." She congratulated him loudly.

?

Years went by happily... And our eyes fell on the beautiful letters inscribed on that gold plated metal-plaque....

"Best short-film maker of 2015...." My wife read it out....

Yes... we were the only actors in his debut short-movie called 'normal life!'

?

Premji

EVERYTHING HAS A PRICE (Short story)

EVERYTHING HAS A PRICE

'The toughest task on earth is to manage a child,' my colleague Sheela Thomas declared in the staff room that afternoon.

'I don't think your younger son is a problem kid... May be you have to change your hostile approach toward him,' I objected her argument, even-though I knew she was right.

'Premji... I bet... you can't even spend a single day with him... he is so naughty,' she couldn't continue the conversation as some Students Union leaders entered in.

'Sir... We need your permission to decorate our college auditorium,' Arun requested me.

'What's the matter?'

'Sir... We are planning to release our college magazine tomorrow afternoon... Just now only we could confirm our chief guest'

'Who is our chief guest?'

'Subhash... The new hero of Malayalam Cinema'

'Who is he?'

'Sir... Don't you know him? He is the hero of one recent hit film... A remake movie... 'Stone-lotus'... Superb actor, he is!' The boys kept on praising him while I was unsuccessfully wrestling with my mind to remember his face.

'O.K... Will he come for the function tomorrow? We can't completely believe these film actors'

'Sure, Sir... he will come... His house is here only... and he will be coming to take his parents to Kochi, where he stays now,' another boy said.

'So, he is a local boy! That's a wonderful piece of information... Anyway, is your magazine ready to distribute among students?'

'Yes Sir... We have to release it soon... You know... students union election date will be announced soon... If we can't do that in time, we won't be able to secure enough votes... These things are common in student politics'; current lady vice chairman of our college shared her anxiety.

'If that's the case... O.K... You can proceed'

'Sir, one more thing... You will have to deliver the presidential address... Our Principal will on leave tomorrow'

They walked away coolly putting me in dare straights!

'The toughest task on earth is to manage our students... Tomorrow, you are going to know that,' Sheela Thomas laughed loudly and my other colleagues also joined with her.

'Why do you threaten me like this?'

'Premji... You are a fresher to our college... You know... Not even a single function had been completed without a clash between students so far... And one more funny thing, they didn't print even a single copy at all!'

'How do you know that?'

'I am the magazine advisor!' She laughed again. 'Tomorrow, they are going to release a fake magazine with white paper inside a Magazine cover... Twenty rupees is more than enough to take a colour laser print! Then, do you think that the other Unions will act like mere spectators? No way... So, better inform Police today itself.'

?

The chief guest arrived exactly at two'o clock in the afternoon and magazine release function started with a prayer. Sheela prayed almost every God along with those girls! Subhash sat next to me proudly and the young girls told silly sweet nothings about him in between. Arun delivered the welcome speech and later invited me for the presidential address. What to say about him? I stood before them quite nervously.

'Dignitaries on the dais,' I couldn't remember even the names of my colleagues on the dais, 'Mr. Subhash, the new hero of Malayalam Cinema, colleagues and dear students. What is a magazine? It's a vault of memories... that you won't know now... You will feel it so dear after some time... when you might have left this institution... within a flash of a second, it can bring you back here... to this moment... Mr. Subhash... he is a hero now... But, he had also a bitter past, like you all, roaming around in this small village... What made him to reach here? A burning desire... to become a hero... He lived to it and that's why he is here with you today as our chief guest... The secret of success is constancy of purpose... It's time for you all to discover what your life's purpose is... Do it today and live up to it... Invent the dream in you... If a local boy can do that, why can't you?'

Subhash was listening to my words carefully and later I invited him to release the magazine. His father was sitting in the back row on the dais. Were there tears in his eyes?

After the magazine release, Subhash picked up the microphone and started sharing his wonderful experiences. He quoted some of my dialogues to motivate the students and within no time, he conquered their mind too!

Felicitations by other colleagues were also over and I announced for an open-forum with Subhash. Young boys and girls, they asked him wonderful questions and he too gave wonderful replies.

'You told... it was shot in forty days... Did you not fall in love with the heroine in the meantime?' one of my naughty students asked.

'Acting and love... they both are different,' Subhash laughed.

In the meantime, I made a wonderful friendship with his Dad. The function ended smoothly and Sheela Thomas felt very happy as the expected tension vanished in his divine bliss!

?

The boys ran to us immediately after the Chief Guest and team had left.

'Sir... Please sanction for an immediate advance of Rs.5000/-,' Arun requested me.

'But, why?'

'We had to pay him Rs.5000/- for putting diesel in his car'

'You told me that he was coming to meet his parents? Then, why should we pay him? Impossible... You people are lying ,' I got angry.

'No... Sir... We are telling the truth... Sir, this is the darker side of popularity... We had to pay for that!' they pleaded again.

'They may be right Premji,' Sheela Thomas supported them

'None can understand the Tinsel world!

?

One week later, I met his Dad, drunk, in a bar hotel. I wanted to avoid him, but he didn't leave me.

'Hello Sir'

'Hello'

'Please join me,' poor man invited.

'O.K... But, the expense is mine... Is that O.K?'

'Double O.K.'

We had around two rounds of 'Mansion House' brandy in no time, and the intimacy got multiplied in unknown counts.

'Sir, if you don't mind, I would like to have a clarification?'

'Tell me'

'Did those boys pay Rs.5000/- to Subhash?'

'Yes... You are right... Everything has a price... this brandy... this chicken... his stardom... everything has a price.'

'Sorry... I couldn't get you?'

'Journalists... all magazine people... they can write anything on him... like... he was picked up by noted director Jose Samuel from thousands of applicants for audition... They can write anything they want... But, the documents of my house are still there, safe, in the state bank.'

'Sorry?'

'Premji... I had to pump Rupees one million to his throat to select him as the hero of his movie! Director! Thooo....,' he spat on the granite floor, 'That producer didn't even pay a single rupee even-though the movie was a super hit... Bastards,' poor man started crying

'So sad'

'Subhash is a careless lad... See, how he spoiled his career by accepting all filthy roles in the name of commitments? Idiot! Now also, I have to pay him to for everything... from his expensive jeans... sexy T-shirts to diesel... His stupid burning desire,' he drank another double large without water. (This man is going to empty your ten day's salary, my inner conscious warned me!)

'Don't worry Sir... Everything will be alright... Anyway, he is a wonderful actor,' I tried to console him even-though I hadn't watched a single scene by him!

'That's O.K... But, what bothers me is... How can I be able to get my two daughters married... when every boy's parent is asking for 250 sovereigns of Gold... BMW 3 series car... Luxury flats in Kochi City... five acres of Rubber plantation as dowry! After all they are the sisters of Subhash... the hero! Everything has a price... everything.... Every.'

Premji

FATHER (Short story)

FATHER

Now-a-days, I love Fridays very much! Because, it is on Fridays we reunite as a family again, that too after four days of separation! Our children live with their grandma. Wife and I, we work at different places, some two hundred kilometers apart from them. Life is like that! And if you wish to be happy in life, accept it as it is!

It was again a Friday, nearly one month back ... I had been waiting for my wife at Trivandrum Railway station since around six thirty in the evening. Three evening tabloids made the 'waiting' joyful. I love to read tabloids as they give wonderful ideas for any writer! I settled on to one of the long chairs in the platform. Nobody dared to sit near me as my mustache and body language resembles to that of a high ranking Police official, except mosquitoes and bugs! A boon in disguise!

Sometimes, reading is a very dirty habit! Her train arrived and people scattered away like waves receding to the sea after a Tsunami. And the funniest thing was... I was not all aware of the surroundings, except an article written by my friend, about increasing rate of alcoholic addiction among call girls! Customers seemed to be crazy of making them being drunk and having violent sex with 'sweat smelling' night Jasmines! What an extensive research he had done for that report!

'Great!'

'Really great!' my wife shook me back to senses. 'If I was there in the position of his wife, I would have registered a petition for divorce by now'

'I am sorry... Come... Shall we have a cup of coffee?' (Crazy girl was not all caring for me!) 'What shall we get for the children?' I tried to change the subject.

'Let's go home as early as possible... Kids might sleep off,' the deep longing of a mother to hug her kids was clear in her voice.

'I won't get even a hug tonight... you bastard!' I cursed the tabloid reporter.

?

Usually, I used to listen to her wonderful stories during those one hour long bus journeys. Writers are crazy people, they may find a poem or a story even when their dear and near are in death bed! She was totally silent on that Friday, just by burying herself deep into those three tabloids.

'Tonight is going to be another fasting night!' I cursed the woman from whom I purchased those tabloids and closed my eyes. I was not blessed with sleep, how could I? The scent of a 'dear woman' can throw any man to sweet madness, that too after some days of separation!

'Premji... did you see this?'

'What?'

'A teenage girl died, on the spot, hit by a car.... Very near to our house... You know her family very well'

'No... I didn't'

'How will you see that... when doing research on call girls?' her temper was not going to subside!

?

I was standing in front of that vegetable shop, immediately opposite to my friend's Photostat shop, on the next day morning. The steel pipes which supported his veranda were bent and the compound wall of the house, next to his shop looked demolished by a massive impact!

'Hi... Premji,' Sam touched my shoulders.

'Hi... Sam'

Every shop remained closed that day in honour of the departed girl. Sam rolled up the shutters and started taking some photocopies, paying homage to her.

'Premji... usually, she comes inside when she accompanied her friends to take photocopies of class notes... but... yesterday, she just waited outside... and that bastard rammed his car on to her... poor girl was crushed in between the car and that wall..., ' he pointed toward the broken wall where red ants were still moving around her semi-dried blood... blue in colour... 'Luckily, I was saved as we used to stand there during free time'

'Was he drunk?'

'That bastard... was full tight! Heavily drunk... you know... he lost control while preparing a drink... that too while driving! And that son of a bitch, escaped during that confusion,'

'Sam... One of his relatives... a policeman... tried to remove alcohol bottles from the car, it seems..., ' I tried to share a piece of information.

'He tried... but... he was caught ready-handed by our youngsters... they bashed him to pulp! Bastard! Lawmakers are bloody lawbreakers most of the times...'

?

Sam was busy sticking those photocopies on walls. Her spotless innocent face on them remains as an everlasting scar in my mind.

'Premji... I couldn't sleep a single moment yesterday... Whenever I tried to close my eyes, I could see her vomiting blood by calling 'Achchaaa... (faaather....)'... Just three times... she vomited blood and closed her eyes... she was only...just fifteen... My hands still smell her blood..., ' Sam smelled the gum-clad right hand.

'Such bastards have to be thrown behind the bars for a minimum of fourteen years... rigorous imprisonment'

'Yes... bastards have to sweat out even their bones!' Sam told out his solidarity.

Suddenly an ambulance appeared on the main road.

'She is back,' Sam told painfully.

?

Forty five year old Sugathan and his wife cried aloud as their one and only child Meena slept forever, on a narrow desk, decorated with expensive flowers which she couldn't even have imagined when she was alive. Her face, unharmed, resembled another red Rose and her crushed bosom remained like a trough where her pains were deep buried!

'Madam, where shall I dig the grave?' Johnson, the gravedigger, asked our local body member politely.

That simple question pierced everyone's mind like a harpoon! She walked around the shack, two or three times, to find a suitable place. But, unfortunately she was not successful in that attempt as Sugathan had only seven hundred square-feet of land as that of his own! That too, land without any document!

'There is no space at all... So... shall we bury her inside the house,' she asked us, totally confused.

'Madam... we can bury her, here,' gravedigger Johnson suggested, pointing towards the door-steps in front of that thatched shack. 'But, it won't be possible to get out of the house without crossing her grave!' he felt so sad as if someone had punctured his heart forever.

Boys from the local Arts and Sports Club distributed bread and black coffee to people when burial was over. Sam vomited violently as if he had drunk blood! Blue blood! All I could do was just rubbing his back!

Our local body member tried to give a five hundred rupee note to gravedigger Johnson.

'Madam... I too am a father... of two girls... please,' he denied that with honour.

?

Untimely rains are the harbingers of danger! A rootless, dried up tree fell on the compound wall of our home and stray dogs started entering in from the nearby beach.

'European tourists are really crazy... they feed all stray dogs...,' my wife told out of anger while pelting a stone.

Sugathan was also among the masons as a helper. His bearded face resembled that of a ghost, but his lifeless eyes were burning with anger... Where did his lust for life vanish?

?

Five months back... It a fine morning in April and I was busy surfing through poetfreak, reading the poems of Nimal. Nearly two thousand poems...O! This man is a thought-battery! I was fluttering like a thirsty butterfly through the untouched flowers!

'Papa... somebody is out there to meet you,' my younger son announced.

Sugathan and his beautiful daughter Meena were standing at the doorstep.

'Come in,' I welcomed them.

'No need Sir... We will stand here,' the poor man in Sugathan desperately trying to satisfy his ego!

'That, I will decide... come inside'

'As you wish,' he told while entering in. 'Sir, I need your valuable advice'

'O.K. What's the matter?'

'Sir... Immediately after the completion of SSLC, my daughter Meena plans to join a Polytechnic College for technical education,' Sugathan said politely. 'Someone told her that you work in a polytechnic... Sir, can I afford it?'

'Her decision is right... She can learn engineering, absolutely free of cost... under fee waiver schemes,' I told confidently.

Meena smiled happily as someone in the world had accepted her decision. Acceptance, that's the only thing the whole world is longing for!

'Will she get a job after that?' Sugathan asked innocently as every father's mind is like an open hearth, where fire kindles mercilessly... especially parents of poor young girls!

'That depends on the course she selects and her academic excellence later,' I replied. 'Meena, which branch would you like to learn?'

'Automobile Engineering,' she said boldly.

'Meena... it's a branch meant for boys! Why do you want to learn it?' I couldn't hide my anxieties.

'Sir, that doesn't matter... I know that you can easily put me inside of some huge vehicle dealerships

as a front office executive or as a service advisor,' she replied confidently. 'Moreover, I can clear my doubts when you are at home'

'Can you speak in English fluently?'

'Why not! It takes just two months to learn English for anybody who knows his or her mother-tongue better!' Meena replied with enthusiasm. Such a confident girl is a real blessing to any father!

?

Sugathan was making cement mortar, all alone, and the spade vanished inside the sand heap as if he was digging a grave! So powerful were the strokes!

'Eyy... Sugathan... what are you doing? We have to stand here... don't you see Cement fly up?' Chandran, the chief mason shouted.

Sugathan was not even aware of that and he continued the mixing. At last, the masons washed their hands and legs as it was nearing lunch time.

'Sugathan, come let's go,' the chief mason said.

'You please proceed... I am not feeling hungry'

'O.K... but, don't spoil your health'

'No problem... hunger is nothing new to me,' Sugathan lit a Beedi. (locally made cigarette)

It's burning end brightened like the morning sun... So Red in colour... like his peace-less mind... While he was taking the nicotine smoke inside with enormous passion, I walked near to him.

'Sugathan... Come... let's have something from my home,' I invited him for food.

'Premji Sir... I am not feeling hungry at all... You know... He started driving Cars again,'

'Who?'

'That bastard, who killed my daughter... He crippled three others earlier because of his drunken driving... but, my... one and only daughter,' poor man started crying. 'I could have looked after... if at least, some life was left on her body... Sir, we have no point in continuing this life,'

'I know... Didn't they cancel his driving license?' I asked.

'License... for him? Authorities are heartless bastards! He has many driving licenses in different names! Money can do wonders! Money!'

'You are right... These bastards have to be put behind the bars for life imprisonment,' I told out of anger.

'That's not enough... Sir, do you know something... yesterday night, they bashed up those boys who hit that policeman who tried to remove liquor bottles from that car,'

'Who did that?'

'Policemen... it seems... it's a warning... none should touch a Policeman though his doings are wrong!'

'Are we going through another emergency?'

'I don't know... But... He should never be allowed to touch the steering wheel again... I have to make five thousand rupees as early as possible,'

'You skip meals for that?'

'Yes... I have nothing to sell... All I know is... I need that much money immediately... I have some twenty thousand rupees with me... given by her friends... And they have agreed to do that, for rupees twenty five thousand though their rate is fifty thousand... They also gave me a discount of

twenty five thousands... they too have sisters,' Sugathan said boisterously.

'Who are they?'

'The gangsters form Fort Cochin... They have undertaken a 'quotation work' for me to crush his hands with iron bars... that he should beg for a living... they will powder his finger bones... It should be a lesson to the world....,' his eyes started glowing like a red-hot Beedi tip!

'Papa... are you not coming for food?' my elder son came near running and asked.

'I am coming,' he ran back contended. 'It should be a lesson... it should be,' I told myself.

'My wife is suffering from heavy depression now... I am not sure whether she would be alive when I return home... who knows whether she might recover just by seeing him begging....,' poor man started crying silently.

'Papa,' the boy started shouting again.

'Sugathan, I will pay the rest,' I told him calmly...

'Papa... Are you not coming for food?' I heard a girl child calling aloud!

?

PREMJI

FISSION, FUSION AND ELIMINATION (Short story)

FISSION, FUSION AND ELIMINATION

Thiruvananthapuram Railway Station...

Like a huge fortress made of rock and concrete, she has been protecting the fast moving steel beasts for the last 150 years! It was the early hours of the day, and I had been waiting there as a worn out bogie of an endless "human-train," starting from the ticket issuing window... Thirty five minutes had already been gone!

Five guys, stood ahead of me and the ticket issuing clerk, a woman in her fifties, desperately tried to locate the keys on the worn-out keyboard. The black and white computer screen resembled her event-less life.

"The train will depart within two minutes," an aged man cried out from behind. "Please speed up... Madam"

She didn't care that at all, as she had been there behind the window for more than ten hours, that too as the continuation of previous day's night shift. If her parents could have got a chance to rename her, sure, they would have called her "Ms Sleep!"

Five windows, for issuing tickets, remained closed.

"Indian Railways is running under huge profits now... just by downsizing its employees!" she murmured out of anger. "They are exploiting us like slaves."

"Why employees alone? They are exploiting us too... And what kind of profit? They make profit just by cutting down the expenses for passenger safety, from 30% to 11% of total revenue!" a noted activist shouted from rear.

"Friend... we live in a liberalized world... what counts here is profit!" she said calmly.

"Sir... will you please get me a ticket to Kottayam?" a forty year old country guy requested the man who stood ahead of me.

"Hey... you... move back..." a policeman shouted from the other end and the he moved away desperately.

"Here is your ticket"

"Thank you Sir... thanks a lot," he collected the ticket happily.

"Please collect the money..."

"No thanks... Pinku"

"Pinku! Sorry Sir... I cannot reco....."

"Can't you recognize me? O.K... now, look at my eyes"

"Premji...O! My God!" Pinku shouted aloud.

Fortunately, we got two seats, immediately opposite to each other and the metal wheels of Venad Express started rolling swiftly.

"Twenty years... we haven't met... at least even once... for the past twenty years," Pinku started talking aloud, in a language: neither Tamil nor Malayalam.

Innocent men always talk aloud!

"The innocence in your eyes... that's your biggest asset...dear Pinku"

"Thanks... So, what are you doing now?"

"Teaching numbskulls"

"Great... do you write stories now-a-days?"

"Not much..."

?

Thirty years back... a Sunday...

It was around noon and the burning Sun was at the peak of his glory. We had been playing football at the beach since morning. Another Sun was burning with maximum intensity, deep inside my stomach.

"Premji, let's go home," Pinku told.

His home... it resembled the shack of the old man, portrayed by Hemingway! His father owned a Catamaran and Mom made a living as a fish vendor.

"We don't get very tasty fishes like this," I told his Mom.

"We don't sell tasty fishes outside, you silly fool," Pinku told while putting a huge piece of fish in his mouth.

A huge heap of fish bones piled up before us.

"Premji... which material is the "whitest" on earth?"

"Titanium dioxide."

"That's science," Pinku registered his protest with a smile.

"I don't know"

"These fish bones!"

"No... Your eye-white!" I couldn't ignore the sea of innocence in his eyes.

?

Pinku was marginalized to the outskirts of my life later when he was forced to elope with a wonderful girl from some other caste, at the very beginning of his twenties.

"Pinku, where do you live now?"

"Somewhere near Tirunelveli... I too have two sons, like you... the elder one is doing degree course in Computer Engineering and the other guy is still in school."

"That's really great!"

"I didn't get a chance for higher studies... that's why; I still have to wrestle with the Sea!" he remained silent for a moment. "Premji, do you still have those softwoods in your farm?"

"Yes... Do you need them?"

"Yes... I like to own a Catamaran. I will pay you..."

"O.K... we will do barter business... Come with those rare fishes... with the whitest of all bones," I laughed.

"Impossible... my friend," his face turned gray... and he remained silent for some time.

?

"Premji... Do you know the place where I reside now? My son is being kicked out from the Engineering College where he was studying... Do you know: why?"

"Is it?"

"Because we reside at Koodankulam"

"Near the Nuclear Power Plant under construction?"

"Yes... My son... he was leading a very powerful group of bloggers against the nuclear lobby... He was thrown out from attaining higher education... He was getting foreign aid; it seems, to undermine national interests..."

"How sad! What a silly argument... "

"Don't worry boy... We have the Sea... our Mother Goddess -- I told him..."

"Then?"

"Sorry Dad... They will kill her too... The coolant water and low-grade waste from the Koodankulam Nuclear Plant are going to be dumped in to the sea which will have a severe impact on fish production and catch. We have nowhere to go... deeper poverty and misery... they will be our future assets... It will affect the food security of two states too... Kerala and Tamilnadu --- Premji... That was his reply"

"I am sorry Pinku... Every democracy fights a shadow war against her own people... May be, it is more direct now..."

"Every fish, you are going to eat in future, will have black bones... there are chances, you may get boneless fishes too!"

"Like boneless politicians..."

"Premji... You reside here in Thiruvananthapuram... just seventy kilometers away from Koodankulam... If anything happens, we people are going to die like dogs... including you!" His words slammed upon my soul like a thunderbolt.

?

Marie Salisbury, a pretty woman in the beginning of her twenties, got up bit late on that day as her White-house internship was over by the previous night. Being the one and only daughter of wealthy parents, she had been living in an expensive apartment near to the White-house from the very beginning of her internship. She was welcomed by a short message on facebook, that too from her former boyfriend.

"Hi Marie... please check this link..."

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=30372>

She clicked on it, lazily as wealth and laziness are eternal twins! The new tab was opened swiftly.

AMERICA's FALLUJAH LEGACY: WHITE PHOSPHOROUS, DEPLETED URANIUM: THE FATE OF IRAQ's CHILDREN... Those Laboratory Mice Were Children... by Karlos Zurutuza

Unfortunately, Marie could see only monsters, made of thousands of tons of depleted Uranium and White Phosphorous, wandering through the BUSHES of Whitehouse.

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Postscript:

Fallujah was one of the least affected areas of Iraq immediately after the 2003 invasion by the US-led Coalition. The U.S. military first denied that it has used white phosphorus as an anti-personnel weapon in Fallujah, but later retracted that denial, and admitted to using the incendiary in the city as an offensive weapon. Reports following the events of November 2004 have alleged war crimes, human rights abuses, and a massacre by U.S. personnel, including indiscriminate violence against civilians and children. This point of view is presented in the 2005 documentary film, Fallujah, The Hidden Massacre.

Kudankulam Atomic Power Project is a nuclear power station under construction (when I wrote this story!) in Koodankulam in the Tirunelveli district of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Construction has been delayed due to anti-nuclear protests by the locals and People's Movement against Nuclear Energy. Now, the plant is fully functional.

June 2012

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FOR YOUR EYES ONLY! (Short story)

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

'Surumi turned eighteen today,' the care-taker of that poor home told herself while closing her old diary, which contained every detail of the inmates there. The old woman tried to recollect her innocent face, deep buried in memories... the cute little angelic face of an infant girl... with dark eyebrows, carefully drawn with the worn out stub of an eyebrow pencil... might be the last artwork of a helpless mother on life's canvas, that too before abandoning her fruit of passion! And that's why she kept her name as 'Surumi'.

The financial back up of that poor home was getting deteriorated every day and the caretaker thought of finding a suitable job for her. And at last she succeeded in her endeavor and Surumi was appointed as a sales girl in a huge shopping mall, owned by a wonderful lady who admired the caretaker even from her younger days.

Surumi had to work from morning nine to evening six'o clock and instantly she fell in love with the fresh smell of expensive clothes. The caretaker was quite happy as the Mall owner provided 'pick and drop' facilities for their lady staff. After the evening prayers, Surumi used to tell every day's funny happenings, that too in detail, to her care-taker with childlike innocence.

Later, Surumi was shifted to Children's section as small kids liked her charm very much. 'Beauty with innocence' - that was her plus point according the experienced floor manager. Gradually, Surumi stopped sharing funny stories with the caretaker. She was bit worried at first and her experienced eyes caught Surumi ready-handed, saying 'bye' to the pick and drop cab driver through her beautiful eyes. The old woman was a bit worried, but she didn't say anything. Within a week, one her well-wishers informed her that he had seen Surumi with a blond guy in a nearby Theater. That day she returned back in in the evening by an auto-rickshaw.

'What happened to your pick and drop cab?' the caretaker asked.

'One of its tyres got punctured in the middle... Madam,' Surumi replied so innocently.

'And how was the movie? Is that a love story?'

'Movie? I don't understand what you really mean!'

'I was also there... Now, do you have anything more to say?'

'Madam... I am so sorry... Sooraj is in love with me... He promised to marry me at the end of this year,' Surumi apologized painfully.

'If he won't?'

'No Madam... he won't betray me.'

'If 'not'... well and good... Falling in love with someone is not at all a sin... dear kid... I know, you had to live all these days in short of love... And naturally you crave for love... When you are in love, the whole world shrinks into two pair of eyes... Am I correct?'

'You are right... Madam'

'Just look into his eyes for some time, tomorrow,' the care taker told calmly while returning to her other duties. 'Orphans are so dear to God... But, creating orphans knowingly, is the deadliest of all

sins,' she told herself with unending pain.

?

I was standing on the ground floor, busy negotiating the prices of uniforms with the floor manager for my little boys. School opening is a nightmare for every poor parent!

Surumi was the last one who got out of the cab on the very next day. She went inside and pressed her index finger on the punching machine.

'Excuse me, Madam... I forgot to take my purse from the cab... May I?' she pleaded for permission from the floor manager.

'O.K... But, return fast... See... customers are there.'

Surumi walked away like a mild breeze...

'She is our finest sales girl... Mr.Premji,' said the floor manager.

Sooraj was standing near the cab, smoking a cigarette, when she approached.

'Smoking is injurious to health,' Surumi spelled out her protest.

'I will stop it on the very day of our marriage,' he promised while looking into her eyes. 'Surumi... You look so beautiful today!'

'Sooraj... Will you love me all life?' she kept on looking, so deep into his eyes, though she was blushing to the core...

?

'Are his eyes so beautiful?' the caretaker asked calmly, immediately after the evening prayers.

'Yes Madam,' Surumi replied.

'How long could he maintain eye contact with you?'

'Just... a couple of seconds...'

'Just a couple of seconds?' she stopped a second... 'And what did you see in his eyes?'

'Lust... pure lust!' her eyes couldn't hide self-contempt... 'Only true lovers can maintain eye-contact for long.'

'Eyes will never lie... my kid!'

The old woman embraced her with the strength of her strengths! Sometimes, a touch is more powerful than millions of words!

Premji

GAME THEORY (Short story)

GAME THEORY

"What is life? Is it only the short span of time in between birth and death?" Sumangala was deep buried in thoughts, trying to analyze her life based on some interesting happenings of that day. Every day, I get up at four... Cook for my small family... Iron clothes for my husband and children... Wash the boys and get them ready for school... Serve food for my husband and get his bag ready for office... While sipping hot coffee while lying lazy on easy chair, he reads newspaper up to "printed and published"... That is the only duty of my sweet hubby in the morning! Hubby!

Even I too have to go for job... but, not even a single day; I get time to wash myself. I can go to my college by train... but, not even a single day, I can catch it... Then traveling by bus through the guttery roads... O... my poor backbone disks... In college... there, I have to fight with the numb-skulls destined to become future engineers!

Again back in home... my husband eats only Chapattis... younger son Dosais with Kuruma and elder son rice and S?mbhar... Is it a house or star hotel? Then, it's the time for teaching the boys and helping them to complete their home works... finishing their stupid projects... When they sleep, I try to prepare something for my next day's class...

'Sumangalaa....' Then, the invitation for his "rollercoaster ride" through the bumpy roads of passion!

"Beauty and the beast," the same movie is running in the life's theater of almost every woman! Woman is the derivative of "woes" from man and her life is its integration! What a strange revelation!

?

Even-though Sumangala is a very beautiful woman, she didn't give any care for neat dressing. She has expensive Saris, but where is the time? She is notorious among colleagues and students for her absentmindedness. How can one blame her being so? Her true friend is her expensive Nokia mobile phone, always hanging around her neck. She purchased that particular model, with large keys, only to concentrate in playing SUDOKU while traveling by Bus and during free time...

Satheesh, her husband, used to get her a lot of Gold ornaments. As a ritual, she used to keep her heavy, long gold chain inside her purse before getting into any bus because she had a bitter experience of losing one during her college days. Then a black pearl chain appears... She didn't have many friends in our college. The reason is quite simple: only very few people matched her wavelength: she is a super-brain! Luckily, I am one among them.

"Sumangala... Why do you waste so much time for this silly game? Please register for a PhD program," I suggested.

"Premji... SUDOKU is not a silly game... those who find it silly are numb-skulls... understand... See... the vertical lines... horizontal lines... and the 3x3 matrices....," she started educating me showing the photocopies of SUDOKU puzzles taken from the newspapers of that day.

Earlier, she used to tear them off from every newspaper in the library. Principal warned her not to

and from then onwards "the specially paid" peon gets her those photocopies every day!

"Suma... enough... I had to stop that discussion there... "But, life is not SUDOKU," we laughed.

?

Sumangala repeated her ritual before entering into the bus in that afternoon. It was a straight bus to her home town and luckily she got a side seat too. She opened a puzzle of SUDOKU in her Nokia Mobile Phone. It was a tough one and she got deeply immersed in the permutations and combinations of numbers. Only ten members remained in her tiny world... nine numbers and the game... her soul was fused into them and they became one... absolute concentration... She was not at all aware of things happening around her... The private bus was running very fast through the guttery roads. "If your backbone is broken, then it is your personal problem," this is the basic attitude of every private bus driver. Sumnagala had disk complaints, but who cares!

"I lost my gold chain," a woman around forty cried aloud she fainted down suddenly. Her bare neck proved it right. There was a huge confusion inside the Bus and the driver decided to take it to the Police station.

"Bastards, we may lose one trip... that too in this festival season," he murmured while driving very fast Sumangala completed the SUDOKU puzzle and by that time the bus crossed through her stop.

"Stop...Stop... I have to get down," Sumangala started shouting. Who cares! People started staring at her. She didn't understand, why?

?

The complainant rested unconscious on a table in that Police Station. Sumangala watched the men and women leaving the Police station after the completion of checking by Police. The thief might be very cunning, Sumangala thought, he or she would have escaped earlier with the mother of all quarrels... Gold... At last her turn appeared and she was very confident enough to face the Litmus test. The Police woman started checking her handbag.

"Are you a College lecturer?" she asked.

"Not exactly... I am an Assistant professor," Sumangala smiled while reading the name of the Policewoman in her nameplate. Maya, the Policewoman didn't like her sense of humour and she continued her search.

?

"Sir... we got the culprit," Maya told the Circle Inspector while handing over a purse with humble pride. "Sir... unfortunately, she is a college lecturer..."

"Call her now..."

Sumangala appeared before him as if nothing had happened. She didn't have even the least element of doubt or fear.

"Sir, Is there anything important? You know, it's already getting late," Sumangala asked the Circle Inspector quite coolly.

"Yes," he said while taking out the chain from her purse.

"That's my chain"

"Everybody will say that dialogue only... Madam... Your problem is called kleptomania... Some rich

women have this sort of disorder... But, you are caught ready handed... We are helpless... Are you not ashamed of yourself?"

"Mind your words Mr. Officer... This is my chain... I can prove it anywhere," Sumangala got angry and that anger transferred to him also.

"OK... You will leave here only after proving that," he challenged her arrogantly.

She tried to take her mobile phone kept on his table along with her bag. He stopped her from that move.

"No..."

"I have to call my attorney," she said. "I think... you know, better than anyone, about the rights of women in this nation". Her anger would not quench soon.

?

I was standing there, in front of that huge jewellery shop, along with my brother-in-law. Our wives were grazing inside... Golden leaves... Platinum also Ok!

"These jewelry owner bastards are inventing newer and newer auspicious days... See... today is "Akshaya tritiya".... If you buy Gold today, more and more gold would be accumulated into your house, it seems! Stupid!"

"Yes... Stupid husbands we are! Sure, they will advertise about "Panchama tritiya" soon..."

"What is that?"

"If you buy diamonds on that day," he started laughing, "we can eat them and end up our plight named married life!"

Suddenly my mobile started ringing.

"Premji... Where are you?" I could hear the panicked voice of Sumangala.

"I am in Trivandrum city. Why?"

"In which Police station is Vinod, your brother-in-law, working?"

"He is on leave today... Why?"

?

She was standing there as the center of attraction, in horrible tension and insult, when we reached there after a long drive. Maya, the Policewoman, didn't allow me to talk with her. Vinod went straight into the Circle Inspector's office. He gave a quick salute and discussed the matter with him. Vinod started laughing after listening to the whole story and he told some other stories of insults caused by her absentmindedness.

"OK... Vinod... Whatever it is, she has to prove it as early as possible... Then only, I will allow her to leave," the Circle Inspector was adamant on his stand.

"OK... Sir," Vinod said.

?

The other woman was sleeping peacefully on the long table. If I had knife, I would have made

different types pickles with her brains... Sumangala thought...

"Where is your husband?" Vinod asked her.

"Attending a writer's workshop," she said in a passive mood.

"Did you call him?"

"What is the point in calling him... his mobile phone is always switched off... Let him try to get a Nobel Prize!" she was so desperate.

Vinod walked near to the unconscious woman and whispered something in her ear... And on the third attempt, she came back to her senses.

"Is this your chain?" he asked her showing the one he collected from the Circle Inspector.

"No... This is not my chain," she fainted again.

?

"Problem is solved... What did you understand from all these?" I asked her while getting out of the police station.

"Life is not SUDOKU," Sumangala replied happily. "I will be on indirect kitchen-strike from today onwards."

"Great! You too deserve a decent life!" we laughed.

?

Premji

HOLY BROTHERS (Short Story)

HOLY BROTHERS

As a part of my career, we were forced to live in that small town in central Kerala for some time. Our house owner Johnychayan was quite a simple man, working as military nurse in Oman. When I met him for the first time, he was really happy to rent out his house to me. I was a Government employee and that time we didn't have any kids. What a funny reason to select a tenant!

'Premji, all I need from you both... just keep my house neat and tidy,' he told.

'Sir, what about rent?'

'Actually, I have to pay you something to keep my house tidy!' he said jovially. 'Here is my account number,' he handed over a small piece of paper. 'Whatever amount is affordable by you, put it in my account... monthly... bimonthly or as you like.'

What an offer... God!

'Sir... When shall we write the agreement?'

'No need of an agreement, Premji... I know ...you are a gentleman. See, I am not going to cut my telephone land-line. You can use that too,' he told while laughing. '

He was waiting for someone whom he could believe to the core and of course, we were the chosen people. He and his family went back on the very next week. They would be back only after five years... five years... We were very happy to live in such a gentleman's house.

?

There was a huge picture of Jesus in the drawing room and I used to light candles on important occasions like Christmas, Easter etc. My wife used to keep candles there whenever there was a power-cut! She kept her personal deities inside another room... Hindu Gods and Goddesses...

My wife was all alone in day time, watching TV while knitting something. That was her daily routine except on holidays. Then one day, Thresya Chechi around 55, our next door neighbor and elder sister of our house owner Johnychayan, visited her. She was warmly welcomed by my wife.

'Daughter, this is really nice,' Thresya Chechi congratulated my wife after inspecting the small sweater my wife had knitted. 'Expecting someone?' she started kidding.

'No'

'Now-a-days, every girl has infertility problems... Why girls alone? Boys too... Dirty food habits... You don't worry daughter... He will bless you soon'... Jesus smiled at them from the picture on the wall. They talked about everything under the Sun and at last they became very close friends.

?

My wife told me the entire episode in the evening.

'That's a good development... Thresya Chechi has nothing to do in day time'

'Even I too think so, Premji'

?

Thresya Chechi became a frequent visitor and everyday the conversation used to end up in Jesus. She had more than a million tongues to talk about Jesus and his miracles. One evening, my wife showed me a fresh copy of Bible.

'Who gave it?'

'Thresya Chechi presented this to me'

'This is an expensive copy. Keep it with care.'

?

Ours is a small family and we used to complete all cooking jobs before 8'O clock. She used to make boiled rice and break-fast and I, all curries. On the very next day, when I had left for office, Thresya Chechi appeared with a pleasant smile. They both started talking casually.

'Daughter, did you start reading Bible?'

'I went through proverbs... read one or two pages.'

'Praise the Lord... That's interesting... First of all... you have to complete New Testament... That tells the life and miracles of my Lord... Jesus'

'I will do it... Chechi'

?

Thresya Chechi again appeared on the same time next day and she started asking objective questions based on new testament. My wife answered all as she read it the last day afternoon by

sacrificing her afternoon sleep.

'Great improvement... Congratulations my daughter,' Thresya Chechi was contented. 'Tomorrow Psalms'. She then gave her new home works based on Bible and my wife was fed of Thresya Chechi's Bible home tuition!

?

'Premji, tell me a way out.'

'Simple... You read 'Song of songs' tonight... I too want to listen.'

?

Thresya Chechi was very uneasy on the next day.

'Who told you read that?'Thresya Chechi asked.

'My husband... He says ... Song of Songs is the spiritual communion of the human soul and Holy Spirit'

Thresya Chechi became quite very unhappy!

?

Three days later, our telephone started ringing in the night. Our house owner Johnychayan was on the other end, from Oman. It seems, he got a call from Thresya Chechi to vacate us as early as possible from his house. She won't be able to tolerate two infidels staying in her brother's house!

'Premji, what happened? Did she start playing her cards on your wife?' Johnychayan asked.

'Yes, Bible tuitions were going on!'

'Then how did it come to an abrupt end?'

'Johnychaya...What to say? My wife was really fed of her Bible tuition... So, one day, she visited Thresya Chechi's home and presented her a copy of Hindu Scripture: Bhagavad Gita (Song divine)... A small copy worth just ten rupees! She asked Thresya Chechi to read the first chapter that day... so that they could discuss that chapter on the very next day.'

'Premji... Your wife is an intelligent girl... please tell her my congratulations... ,' Johnychayan couldn't control his laughing. 'From the past five years, my house has been closed... Only because of her tuitions... She is a member of some local Ministry now... Only one Jesus...countless Ministries! She keeps on fishing and I keep on suffering,'he laughed again.

'Johnychaya, are you not worried?'

'Premji... Why should I worry when Jesus protects me? In Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna says... perform your Karma... never think of the reward... My Lord Jesus says: 'sacrifice!' Premji... you know... 'Good Karma and sacrifice,' these words are synonymous! And the reward is eternal happiness! Peace! Unfortunately, my sister doesn't understand this simple truth. Why, my sister alone?... almost everyone, irrespective of religions!'

I could feel the pain of Jesus and Krishna in his voice... Holy brothers....

Premji

HOLY INNOCENTS (Short story)

HOLY INNOCENTS

It was a pleasant morning with a lot of sunshine...

Simon Sir was having a cup of tea at my home in Kollam city. He used to stay with my family whenever he visited the city. Mine is an old house, might be around fifty years, without any modern sort of amenities. There is a huge mango tree in front of the house which served us like a live air-cooler. Plenty of creepers adorn our little palace, which is very close to the railway station, and there ends the list of merits. It belonged to one of the oldest professors in the city. I wouldn't have purchased it unless Simon Sir didn't force me to do so!

Though Simon Sir is in the beginning of sixties, his body remained as strong as an athlete. His face was so calm and graceful like some holy saint. When my niece was about to collect the empty Coffee cup, he asked her name.

"Ananya," she replied.

"Good name... It means 'matchless'... Of-course you are!" he said.

"Thank you," she walked away with the empty cup.

"What is she doing now?" he asked me.

"She is learning English, in the same department which you were heading earlier."

"That's great!"

Simon Sir runs a retirement home in his ancestral village, which spans in a huge seven acre plot beside a small lake in Kandanchira, '*Shalom*' - it is the name of that retreat, hardly around sixty kilometers away from my house.

'Someday, you shall call it *Om*...' he used to joke.

Most of the houses there, are simple in design, eco-friendly and very tidy. The inmates are aged between sixty and ninety, and most of them are retired teachers, some were his colleagues. Dr. Rini Simon, his young daughter, takes care of the health issues of all inmates. She offers almost all the latest technologies so that their children across the globe could regularly monitor their parents. They are constantly in digital communion with their parents!

Simon Sir conducts regular intellectual meetings, literary festivals etc., since most of the inmates are noted intellectuals. Most importance is given to happiness, and the least for religion! He ignored most of the religious festivals. As far as you happy with the least element of self-contempt, there ends the whole burden of life!

When Simon Sir was about to leave in the evening, he asked me a simple question. "Prem, can you tell me the importance of today?"

"Sir, I am afraid, no..."

What could be the importance of today? Unfortunately, I stopped reading almost all dailies as they spew most dangerous venom than anything truly important, on a regular basis.

"Human memory is temporary, my friend... It was on the same day, Shirin was introduced to our lives... It has been nine years since then..." he told. "And, I have come all the way to invite you all to 'Shalom' for a couple of days. Claramma is very anxious to see your little boys..."

???

Ten years back ...

Quite unexpected, my wife got her first transfer, immediately followed by my promotion transfer. It's really funny, every promotion is accompanied by a compulsory transfer. And our little boys, hardly three and five, were entrusted to the safe custody of their grandmother. Both of them used to stay awake till mid-night to receive us on Fridays and were very keen to sleep in between us! Somehow, by the end of one year 'out-station service', she managed to get a transfer to a college in Kollam city.

"What next?" she asked.

"Let's find a small home for rent..."

"I prefer an independent house, than living on someone's upstairs..."

"Why?"

"House-owner will kick us out because of naughty sons... and the house must be very near to my college..."

"Anything more?"

"We must enroll the boys in a school near to my college..."

I could manage everything except her dream for an independent house. And the 'house-hunt' ended up with the spacious upstairs of Simon Sir's house.

It was a beautiful house located in the heart of Kollam city, with a lot of trees in the compound. Mrs. Claramma Simon was a very devout woman with a strange passion for farming. Soon, my wife became her closest friend and associate, since she is having a doctorate in Botany. Together, they used to plant a lot of flowering plants.

She taught the middle-aged woman the art of layering, budding and grafting technics. They grafted tomato on egg-plants, which resulted in amazing yield. My sons were happy to move around the large compound like free-birds as it resembled their ancestral home. They became the key-assistants of Claramma aunty in almost all her agro-innovations. The little boys even designed some crude version of 'drip irrigation' using discarded soft-drink bottles.

Mr. Rinku Simon, the elder son, was doing final year Mechanical Engineering at TKM College of Engineering and Miss Rini Simon, the younger daughter, was about to join for MBBS at Christian Medical College, Vellur. And that was the only reason to rent out the upstairs for some decent family.

My sons were so fond of Rinku because of his engineering skills. Soon they became his supporting team for each and every new project. He was very close to me because of my engineering background. And his father was even closer because of my passion for literature.

Rinku was very popular among students and teachers, since he was a man of ideas. He had been working on some innovative idea on his personal 'tinkering lab', which was nothing but a covered area on the first floor open terrace. I too joined him wherever I had some free time. He was a fantastic fitness freak too, which ended up in frequent combined jogging sessions along with him. Even, I too lost six or seven kilograms under his inspiration and instruction.

???

It was a Saturday afternoon.

"Is Preetha Miss staying here?" I heard a beautiful girl enquiring about the whereabouts of my wife to Rinku, who was busy speaking with someone on mobile phone near the front gate.

"Excuse me... What did you ask?" he asked her after a couple of seconds.

"Is Preetha Miss staying here?"

"Preetha Miss is not staying here... But, Mrs. Preetha is staying here..." he replied her coolly.

"What do you mean?" she was getting irritated...

"Even I am asking the same thing..."

"We add 'Miss' along with the name of our lady teachers... I have come all the way to clear some doubts..."

"Good... But, we add 'Miss' along with the names of beautiful girls like you you..." he said calmly with a naughty smile on his eyes. "By the way, you are Miss?"

"Miss Shirin... and you are Mr.?"

"Mr. Rinku Simon 'the Great'..." and the conversation ended up in a big laughter.

I was the only witness of the whole episode from our balcony. He started walking towards the external stairs, closely followed by her.

"Put your right foot first..." he told the young girl.

"What?" she didn't understand what he had in his mind.

???

Shirin used to visit us at least once in every two or three weeks since her favorite most teacher was my beloved wife! And her ambition was to become a Botany professor, preferably like her mentor and role-model. Whenever she used to come, she had a chit-chat with the handsome boy.

"How did the movie 'Titanic' emerge as a global hit?" I asked my wife one night.

"Because, it was directed by James Cameron, ace Hollywood director..."

"No... There were many movies based on the sinking of 'Titanic' and none of them became so popular like the recent one... You know, it was a love story... Love sells..."

"What has 'Titanic' to do with our lives?" she asked me.

"Nothing important... another love story is going on right behind your doubt-clearing sessions... Claramma aunty will kick us out very soon..."

"You are simply crazy... Her marriage has already been fixed... and her final year exams commence from next week onwards..." she switched off the light with a lot of anger...

Sad! Husbands are destined to be holy-fools...

???

"There is absolutely no need for any new agreement," Simon Sir told me when I approached him for the renewal of the rental agreement after a year. "Rinku is almost settled in Cochin City along with

his new start-up business... My daughter needs another four more years to complete her medical degree... We need a family like yours be with us... It's not a matter of an income or safety or something else... People with same wavelength always move in harmony..."

But, nightmares began to appear from next month onwards.

???

Claramma aunty paid an unusual visit to our place in the evening. Though it was her own house, she valued our privacy more than anything.

"Something, quite unusual, happened today..." Claramma aunty said. We both were eagerly waiting for her words. "Rinku came along with Shirin, immediately after you both had left for job..."

"Rinku and Shirin?" my wife couldn't believe her ears...

"Yes... It seems, they got legally married today morning..." she wiped her eyes.

"Are they here now?" I asked...

"No... I told him to stay away from our lives..." she replied firmly... "We are devout Christians... But, he got married to a Muslim girl..."

"We are very sorry for what all had happened... It could have been avoided, if we were not allowed to stay here..." I tried to console her.

"You are not at all responsible, Prem... Everything is written... Let 'Him' decide their fate..." Claramma aunty wiped her tears.

"Please forgive them, aunty..." my wife requested calmly.

"You know, I have a young daughter too... Tell me, how do we get a good marital alliance for her with such a family history?"

We didn't have an answer...

And in the evening, a violent group of people from the Shirin's family, tried to storm into our house compound. They were all set to take her back home. But, they were immediately confronted by a group of tough men who belonged to the progressive youth organization, in which Rinku was also a prominent member.

Rinku and Shirin settled in Cochin. Claramma aunty spent her time, carefully divided for prayers, household works and gardening. None of my wife's students were ever allowed to enter our rental portion after that incident. Simon Sir was not at all worried about the happenings, for him the world is a family! Whenever he had a chance, he visited his daughter-in-law and son. But, he was very careful not to mention it to his wife. She knew it, but, not even once she asked about it...

???

Cochin is a lovely city where I spent the peak of my careless youth. I am a frequent visitor to the city even today. I happened to be there in Cochin on the very day Shirin delivered twin boys. None of the relatives were with them except a house-maid in her early sixties. The little ones looked like cherubs! Their lovely eyes began to speak with me in the most-known alphabet-less language of love.

"He is Ian and this naughty one is Ryan..." Shirin told me.

"Names with Scottish- Irish origin?" I asked.

"At least, let them have some progressive names, free from the overburden of religion..." Rinku said.

"Beautiful names..." I took some snaps of their little family on my phone which was 'not that smart' that time... "I will show them to my wife..."

"And?" Shirin asked.

"She might show to it to Claramma aunty..."

"Will she curse us, Sir?" She asked me while patting the curly hairs of the little ones resting beside her...

"Never... All she knows, is to love every-one... You will come to know about it someday..." I saw a large drop of tear flowing down to her ears.

???

"Have you seen this?" Claramma woke her husband early in the morning, with Manorama daily in her hand.

"What is there so important?" old man got angry as he was playing with his grandsons in a beautiful dream.

"Now, read the latest adventure of your beloved son!" she showed him the news on the front page of that daily with more than a million in subscription...

"Please don't irritate me... Just tell me the content..."

"Your six year old grand-children, became the first in South India to get NCNR certificate..."

"What the hell is that?"

"NCNR means 'No Caste, No Religion' identity certificate..."

"Thanks Jesus... at least, they can be peaceful at least at their homes..." he said passively while getting up from bed.

"How can you say that? They should also believe in Jesus... That's our right to religion..." cried out the zealot in her...

"Right to religion means, right not to have any religion also..." he replied before closing the bathroom door...

"You will never change..." she threw away the daily and walked to the kitchen swiftly...

But, the poor woman fell down with a thud....

???

We were sitting in the large bedroom of Simon Sir...

"You are very lucky..." my wife told Claramma aunty while sitting beside her bed.

"Why?"

"You fell over a couple of pillows and a torn bed kept in the doorway..." she replied while applying some pain-balm on her pale hands...

"Is it? Now-a-days, I suffer from low BP..." Claramma aunty said.

"Your grandsons are very cute..." my wife said while glancing through the daily.

"Have you seen them in person?"

"Several times... We even stayed several days with them, without your knowledge..." she smiled...

"Is it?"

"Shirin sends their videos regularly to us... Would you like to see them? They resemble you a lot..."

Claramma aunty closed her eyes for some time... She then went through their WhatsApp videos several times... Every-time, her face was glowing with immense happiness...

"You are right, they resemble me a lot! You know, my daughter is coming back tomorrow..."

"After the completion of her MD course?" I asked.

"Yes! Actually, she doesn't like to stay with us. She never misses even the slightest chance to blame me... I am going to give her the greatest surprise of her life this time... Do you have her number?"

"Rini?"

"No... I would like to speak with Shirin..." a cute smile appeared on Claramma aunt's face... "Please get her on phone... Will she speak with me?"

My wife did, what exactly was asked... Shirin couldn't believe her ears... All she could remember was... "Welcome home..."

Suddenly, my mobile phone began to vibrate... Rinku was crying on the other end... His words were choked with happiness... "We are coming... we are coming...Mom..."

But, only four coffins reached home at the early hours of nightfall...

???

It was one of the saddest days in my life. Four coffins rested on the elevated platform in the living room. Nobody had the courage to open them as they were nothing but a small pile of flesh and broken bones brutally crushed in a fatal car accident.

Whose flesh?

Whose bone?

God only knows!

Claramma aunty was even denied to give them a last kiss. Each and every friend of Rinku were there in and around the house.

"Shirin's father has come," my wife came near and told. "to take her away..."

"What?"

"Yes... Please come with me..."

We took him to Simon Sir, who was sitting alone in our balcony.

All of us were standing on the crossroads of life unaware of which direction to take!

"I have no objections my friend... You are free to take her away..." Simon Sir wiped his eyes... "But... I have one and only request... Please take the bodies of her husband and children along with... They were together till the last breath of their lives... Let them be together even in their last sleep..."

But, in a quick move, Shirin's father hugged Simon Sir tightly...

"I am sorry, Sir... Islam permits only those who have constant faith in Allah, to be buried inside our common graves...Sir, I shouldn't have come here to claim my daughter... I know it's totally against her will...and personally, I am not all interested to separate them... Beyond everything, I too am a human-being... But..." he began to weep uncontrollably... "Can't you see a group of young people standing near the gate? Raging with anger, they are all set to snatch her dead-body away... They are waiting for a word from you... Irrespective of consent or dissent, they will take her away even on

the cost of their lives... I am helpless, brother...Forgive me, please..." he hugged Simon Sir again...

"Who are they?" Simon Sir asked.

"Unfortunately... such 'intolerance' is called 'religion' today... Sir, will you please show me her coffin?"

"I am afraid, I don't know..."

"What do you mean?" Shirin's father could not believe his ears.

"Even I don't know..." I told the old man...

"Forgive me... Allah!" poor man knelt on the balcony floor...

We took him down... A few drops of blood from Shirin's body, spilled over the small coffins when they lifted her for the last journey in another ambulance...

"Don't worry boys... Mama is with you always..." the yellow garland placed on the coffin began to wave in air...

Soon, it began to pour cats and dogs. We were plunged in huge trouble as the dead-bodies began to deteriorate. Simon Sir finally decided to bury their bodies in their family grave situated in their ancestral village, next day morning. Simon Sir sat with his blood inside the moving ambulance. Claramma aunty rested on the shoulder of my wife in our car. Our boys began to sleep in the front seat. I drove the car like a zombie.

???

Kandanchira was one of the most beautiful places I had ever visited. Simon Sir's family were the most revered people in that parish. Their ancestral home, stood very close to the small lake, was one of the largest houses in that village till recently. Many people visited them and paid respects early in the morning. A lot of incense sticks were burnt to overcome to the smell coming out of the coffins. But, dark clouds were forming in forefront.

The ancient Church which stood amidst a huge area was constructed by his great-great grandfather. A legal battle between two fractions of Christians in Kerala that lasted over a century came to close in 2017 when the Supreme Court of India delivered their final order. The clashes were even brought down to the streets for the control of thousands of parishes, Churches and their innumerable properties.

Kandanchira Church had been closed for several months after violent clashes had erupted between feuding rival Christian fractions over its ownership. Finally, the Church was handed over to rival fraction of Simon Sir's family under Supreme Court order. But, it remained closed to avoid further violence.

Unfortunately, the new Church authorities denied burial rights for Rinku and sons mercilessly. Many heated discussions were going on in front of the house.

"What is their decision?" Claramma aunty asked my wife.

"Finally, the new Church authorities allotted to burial space for Rinku alone..." she replied in tears...

"What about the little ones?"

"Both the feuding groups are so adamant, not to bury them inside the Church's cemetery... They are highly united since the boys belong to 'No Caste, No Religion'"

Claramma aunty got up from bed and opened the Bible... *Jeremiah 6:16, the Lord instructs us to ask for direction, walk in the good way, and find rest.*

On firm steps, she walked to the living room. Clergy from both the feuding fractions well still continuing their heated up discussions. There was pin-drop silence when she began to speak...

"I am a devout Christian till this moment... and I am throwing a simple question before you all, including the all-powerful Clergy and the believers... Can any of you find Lord Jesus in places under disputes?"

Unfortunately, there was a great silence. People were eagerly looking on each-other's dead eyes.

"The little ones can be treated as 'Holy innocents...' " the senior priest told his opinion.

"But, they are more than seven years old..." a voice of dissent raised from somewhere.

"These little ones were among the babies who were massacred by King Herod the Great in his attempt to kill the Infant Jesus... Do you have any doubt?" an old priest raised from his seat and shouted. "Are you human-beings or devil incarnate?"

"Now, let's take them to Church for the burial service..." Finally, the parish members unanimously decided to bury them in their family grave.

"With due respect to all, I decline it..." Claramma aunty said.

"What do you mean?" Simon Sir was thrown in deep confusion.

"They will sleep here... in our own land..." she said firmly while pointing towards a most beautiful place beside the lake... "I will grow flowering trees and plants around them... Even, I and my husband will sleep beside them like their guardian angels..."

My lungs began to crave for more air... I was about to faint...

People began to cry as if they were thrown in a state of frenzy! Some knelt before her as if they were in the living presence of the 'Mother of All Sorrows'...

"World is a family, my husband used to say always... And I never understood the true meaning of it, till today morning... And I would like to remind you all... World is the largest graveyard! The most coveted Cemetery of the Church, and Khabaristan of the Mosque, are a mere dot on it... Now, you may please leave..." she said firmly.

But, not even a single parish member left the house compound till the burial was complete. They dug the pit, placed the little boys on both the sides of their father. Everyone tossed a handful of soil on the coffins.

"Ashes to ashes... dust to dust... Amen..."

The burial service was over...

"Those who believe in our Lord Jesus, please follow me..." the senior priest announced loudly and started walking away from the fresh grave. Everyone followed his feeble, but firm steps, like sheep following the good shepherd. He stopped before the closed gate of the ancient Church. Policemen guarding the closed gate on day and night basis didn't even try to stop him. He broke open the 'sealed' locks with a stone and walked inside the Church compound where he had spent the lion-share of his life in prayers and in service of people. People followed him through the open gate like the most disciplined men of God. With shivering hands, he push-opened the ancient door of the Church. The unlubricated hinges cried out in pain...

"Those, who still believe in feuds and fractions, money and muzzle power, please stay away from the Church of God... No space is reserved for you..." he warned them and started walking towards the altar covered with dust and cobwebs and buried himself in deep prayer.

And the huge bronze Church-bell continued ringing for almost two days to drive out the demons from the dark corners of their mind...

???

Premji

8/3/2021

INTERNAL COMBUSTION (Short story)

INTERNAL COMBUSTION

It was the first Friday of October and the morning sky was quite clear. I was sitting alone in the staff room, watching the hills, diminishing fast, just opposite of our College. Yes, sand mining kills our mother Earth.... We offer slow death to her!

I was in charge of the Head of Automobile Engineering Department. It was a crown of thorns! Attender Sajeev came in search of me with a note from our Principal... 'A meeting with all HODs,'. He was dragging me into more problems! I could hear Lecturer Suja conducting a power-point presentation for the second semester students in the next room.

"What is an Automobile?" she asked them.

"An Automobile is self-propelled vehicle moving on ground," one the boys answered aloud.

"Power is developed inside the engine due to?"

"Internal combustion"

Being a very dedicated teacher, she used to be very strict and we were very proud of her. It was nearing 11'O clock and I thought of having a cup of tea and an omelet from college canteen. Canteen owner Sasi might be waiting for me because I was one of his precious customers! When I was about to leave, two women appeared... clad in traditional Sari and in black Purdah, the attire for Muslim women.

"Sir... Can we meet Automobile HOD?"

"Sure... I am in charge of HOD... Please take your seat"

"Sir, I am Suma... working as a last grade servant..."

"Where?"

"At Regional Transport Office, Trivandrum... and she is my neighbor. My son Nikhil is studying in 4th semester Automobile Engineering. Sir, does he attend the classes regularly?"

More than 180 students were studying in our department and it was virtually impossible to tell the details of a student without referring to documents. Interval bell rang aloud and students rushed out of their classes. Suja returned to the staff room with some text books.

"Suja... She is Nikhil's mother... Please furnish her the relevant details," I told.

"O...Nikhil..., he didn't even attend a single class during this semester. To be very precise, he discontinued his studies almost in the midst of 3rd semester. We tried to contact you on your mobile. But, it was dead and later we recommended removing him from the roll. A registered letter was sent to your home address last week. Did you get that?" Suja asked his mother..

Tears began to roll down from her eyes.... Tears are never-ending, flowing pain... Soon silence encompassed us. Her friend was quite embarrassed as Nikhil used to leave for college every morning and returned in the evening, along with her son Arshad.

"Sir... that mobile phone was stolen from my bag... I had to purchase another SIM card"

"You could have informed us, Madam. Then, what about those letters?" I asked.

"Sir... For the past 11 months, we have been staying in a rented house, near to my office. Usually official letters would reach our permanent address... that is almost 20 kilometers away... Nikhil used to go there every Sunday and collect the mail," she replied.

"Then, how will you get those letters which hurt his feelings?" I asked.

She didn't answer my question.

"What is your husband doing?"

"He is no more...", she wiped her tears with a hand kerchief.

"Sir, she got his job as death harness... My son, Arshad, knows the entire details... Sir, please summon him...", the Muslim woman said with anger.

Arshad stood before us like a culprit, trembling with fear... He was unable to face those two mothers. He knew the depth of his fault.

"Sir... to be very frank, he had no interest in studies... He knew... his IQ was not enough to complete his course... Sir, he didn't want to hurt his mother... Every day, he used to go to different places... He watched different movies and returned home along with me... Sir, how can I say this matter to his mother? How can I shatter her dreams?" Arshad started sobbing.

"Arshad, you can leave," I told him and started talking with her. "Don't worry Madam... If you can convince him, then we will give re-admission in the next year. He can join S4 and complete his course."

"Thank you Sir... I will talk with him, Sir."

"You are welcome... Did you tell him that you were coming here?"

"Yes... Sir."

"Where is he now?"

"He told that he would follow us," she said while trying to contact him over mobile. "He is out of range... Sir"

"OK... There is nothing to worry... Let him take a re-admission," I consoled her and they left peacefully.

"Sir, there is no point in giving him re-admission," Suja said. "He won't even complete fourth semester," she laughed.

"May be," I said while walking toward the canteen... "But, we have to."

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It was around 2.30 PM in the afternoon and I was busy preparing for the next class. Very tensed, Suja rushed to the staff-room.

"Sir... Nikhil committed suicide..."

"What?"

"Yes Sir... When she reached home, she found him hanging under the ceiling fan...."

"My God!"

"Siva Prasad got phone call from his brother. I will send him to you Sir," she rushed back to the class room. Unfortunately, a heated up discussion was going on in the class.

"Madam... Nikhil lost interest in attending classes just because of our lecturer Babu Joseph," one of the boys said.

"Don't spread up non-sense.... Do you understand?" Suja got angry.

"That is true Madam. He didn't allow him to attend classes for one week," another guy said.

"Madam... we are leaving now," the students left the classroom...

Some of them headed to his house... some staff members too... student union leaders also were among them... I thought of attending the funeral on the very next day as my house was quite far away from his house.

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I called Babu in the night and we discussed the seriousness of that allegation by students.

"That is really stupid... I don't even remember his face... if he had attended my class, his attendance must be there in the log book," he told in anger and frustration.

"Don't worry man..."

"You can say like that... I am the insulted guy... This is an allegation questioning a man's integrity... anyway on Monday, you check the attendance book, whether he attended any class on that time... Bastards killed the lecturer in me..."

"Cool down Babu... I will take care of it"

?

Saturday morning... I was on the way to attend his funeral...

"Sir... please don't come here," one of my loyal students informed over mobile phone.

"Why Rahul?"

"The mob is so violent... Sir... They still believe that lie... If any of our college staff comes for his funeral, sure... he will be attacked," he was talking in low voice... might be hiding somewhere...

"So, what should I do?"

"Sir, please watch a movie and go home," he told coolly...

I contacted our Principal over phone. He advised me, not to go alone... I contacted Babu and discussed the matter again... the noose was getting more and more tightened...

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When I reached our college on Monday, I was warmly welcomed by the angry posters stuck on walls... "Arrest Premji, the killer!" "Where is Babu the murderer? Arrest him" "Arrest Suja" "Is it a college or a mental asylum?" "Stop tormenting students for attendance"

"Nikhil, we will never forget you"... Some students were busy distributing Photostat copies of his photograph.

"Have you ever seen this guy Nikhil at least once?" One of the student's leaders asked.

"Who knows him? He is just a martyr... a martyr has very important role to play in politics," laughed the other boy.

Nikhil was absent during all the classes conducted by Babu Joseph as per attendance register... Why Babu alone, every lecturer... Poor guy is legally safe, I thought. Then Suja came like an embodiment of tension...

"Sir... have you seen the posters?"

"So what? Let them do anything they like... Suja, be cool... no more tensions... we are safe both legally and ..."

Suddenly my mobile phone started ringing... Principal was on the other end... When we walked towards his chamber, I was busy measuring the depth of anger on the faces of students... They were staring us like aliens... Never believe the mob... Never believe your students too... how sad! When we, the entire staff of college, were about to start a meeting inside the Principal's chamber, the student leaders rushed in.

"Sir... Not even a single staff from this college attended his funeral. Why?" student leader Kiran asked.

"You know the answer better than me," our Principal told... "You people only threatened every staff not to attend... because his friends and relatives were violent... And now you are asking me, why?"

"At least you should have attended..."

"But, how... in a dangerous situation like this?"

"We would have protected you...," Arun Sha said... "His dead body was buried only after the last bus had arrived there... We were so disappointed... none among our teaching staff was there... any lecturers... nobody... really disgusting Sir ... He was a student of this institution... He deserves respect..."

Suddenly, some of them started breaking the glasses of windows... In just five minutes; they were stockpiling glass pieces... some stained with blood... They were acting like maniacs... When Police party arrived, everyone left quickly...

"Let whatever happen, we will go to his house," Principal declared stubbornly and we supported his decision.

We started the journey in a rented bus. I used to get phone calls from my loyal pupils... "Sir... please don't come here... please... You are putting yourself in danger."

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We reached his home and there was a large crowd there at that time. They gave us some cool drinks. Later we went into her room... Suma was lying on a cot from Saturday, without even a cup of water...

"Suma... please get up daughter," an old woman told her.

She got up and sat on the bed... poor woman started crying aloud holding the hands of our principal. He didn't say anything... words are of no use sometimes! Some lady teachers talked with her and they said openly the reason why we were late. When we were about to leave, that house was rounded by a group violent youth and local political leaders... Everyone wanted to take advantage of the situation and they were showering filthy words on us.

"Everyone can leave except Automobile Engineering lecturers," the crowd declared.

"There is nothing like lecturers of Automobile engineering among us... We are staff of our college," Principal said coolly. But the mob was not at all happy.

Some of them spotted us... God! They were about to manhandle us! Their shouting reached its crescendo and we were totally helpless... We were not even allowed to get out of her home... Will they burn our Bus? Tension... tension was on every face among us... Suja was trembling with fear... I too was tensed...

"Why did you kill him? That too a student from scheduled tribes... You know... what you had committed is atrocity against weaker sections of our society." a local Congress party man shouted.

"We are going to approach National Human Rights commission," one of the student's leaders reached there that time.

"That bastard is their HOD," someone spotted me and in a quick move they tried to reach near me. But our friends made a human shield around me. "God! We are going to get crushed," my mind said.

"Don't touch him," I heard a rumble from the house! "You people... please get out of my house".

The crowd was literally shocked... Suma, mother of the deceased boy, stood there before me like solid rock. She stood like my guardian angel... She walked forward and the crowd moved out like the sea-water receding before Moses.

"You want to find out who is responsible for his death, don't you?" She asked the crowd raging with anger. "I am only responsible for his suicide... I killed him," she started weeping aloud... "I only forced him to learn Automobile engineering... Officers from my office advised me to do so... He could have easily become an Assistant Motor Vehicle Inspector if he would have completed his diploma. There is reservation for our community too, the scheduled tribes... Even the pillars of the Regional Transport Office get heavy amount of bribes everyday... God! My greed only killed him... I was just pressuring him though he was incapable to follow the tough syllabus..." she was shouting hysterically...

"Thank you for saving our lives..." I told her in a lower tone...

"Sir... Did you anticipate this would happen to my son?" She asked me and I was forced to remain silent...

Silence is better sometimes, otherwise you would be thrown into eternal silence forever!

"Sir... You might have had a gut feeling, otherwise you wouldn't have asked that question when I came to meet you... 'Where is he?'" She wiped her tears... "He loved me so much... and he succumbed to love, since he could not face me again..."

I was watching the expression on the faces of that local crowd. Some of them started leaving deeply insulted... Our staff also quite relieved from tension...

"I killed him...I only killed him..."

I could listen to her cries echo within my soul while standing near the fresh grave...

"Are you a teacher?" The corpse in me, asked my splintered soul.

The dead-flowers, scattered around the grave, began to laugh at me...

July 15, 2011

?

Premji

KINGDOM OF GOD (Short story)

KINGDOM OF GOD

It was a hot afternoon in November and we were standing near Tiruvalla Town Bus stand, that too sweating heavily after lunch.

'Premji... Hotel owners are cheating the public like anything... We ordered for Arabian Biryani... and what we were supplied was local Biryani! Mere bones! Just a silly name can cost us a lot,' my dearest friend, Gospel worker Samuel John couldn't hide anger.

'That's called 'branding,' Sam'

'Stupid! This world will remain capitalistic until money dies... What to do!'

'You have to visit his backyard... Once you do that, you will never ever step into any hotel'

'You are right... but, we don't have any other choice.'

'Sam... I have a dream... wherever we go, we will be able to get some food from any home... and some place to take rest.'

'Then, every hotel in the world has to be closed down! It can happen, only in the Kingdom of God! A new world based on sharing and caring!' Sam told in a pensive mood.

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'Daniel 7:27: And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.....

Matthew 3:2: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Dear folk... repent.,' a sixty year old man standing at a lone corner of the bus stand started preaching sermon aloud through a megaphone addressing the passengers.

People moved around him as if nothing was happening around! Nobody cared him! Not even the flies settled on his curly beard could distract him even a single bit! He didn't need any reference, for the entire Bible was within his heart.

'Sam... Who is that guy?'

'Premji... don't you know him? He is Cheriyan Thomas... For the past thirty five years, he has been preaching sermon all over Kerala... He never cares whether it is raining... or hot Sun..or winter... Every day, he goes to a new place and preaches Bible the whole day... Some praise him... some curse... Some people make fun of him... and some others spit on him... But, nothing touches him..'Premji... you and me... we work for our wife and kids... but, he works, day and night, only for God!'

'Then, how can he support his family? Who will pay for his expenses?'

'Praise the Lord! See Premji... Pathanamthitta is a Christian majority district in Kerala state. Tiruvalla Town is Christian settlement... and more than fifty different Christian gospel groups are active here...

I am also one among them... but he is none among us!

'Sam... I have a simple question... You all believe in Jesus... me too... then, why can't we unite?'
?

A rich guy around forty stopped near Cheriyan Thomas and tried to hand him over a fresh currency note with a denomination of Rs. 100/-

He stopped preaching sermons for a minute.

'Son, who are you?' Cheriyan asked him politely.

'I am Jaison George.'

'Good... What do you do?'

'I run a hotel here in Tiruvalla Town.'

'Is this money the fruit of your 'righteous' hard work?'

'Yes,'

'Are you sure that this money is not the fruit of sin?'

'What do you mean?'

'That you never exploit your customers by charging too much... that you never exploit your laborers by paying less... that you never adulterate food for profits... that you never live without fearing God...', the preacher explained calmly.

Jaison George was silent for a minute.

'Forgive me Son... Hunger is nothing new to me... I am not in a position to accept your money... I am sorry... Please try to lead a righteous life... May God bless you!'

'This man must be crazy,' Jaison George thought while walking away, totally confused.

The old man continued his gospel as if nothing had happened!

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'Premji... We have witnessed a great event... a live teaching by Jesus... how a believer lives up to the teachings of Jesus... It's impossible to find such a God loving and God fearing man! You know Premji... we all dream for... we all preach for... we all await for the Kingdom of God... When that comes true... you know, what would be the position that the Lord would offer him?' Sam asked me.

'I have no idea!'

'I am sure, Cheriyan Thomas will be appointed as the 'Collector of Pathanamthitta District' or sometimes even more... 'Governor of Kerala State...', Sam was really exhilarated!

'Sam... Let me ask you something...'

'Yes'

'If it hurts your religious beliefs, forgive me in the name of Jesus...'

'Whatever it is, you tell me...'

'Sam... Is there any need of tax collectors and clergy in the Kingdom of God, where everyone is equal?'

Premji

LOVE IS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD (Short story)

LOVE IS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Before getting the status of 'Silicon Valley of India,' Bangalore City was known as 'pensioner's paradise'. My uncle too migrated there after retirement and he opened a telephone booth with fourteen lines to get out of boredom after a quick honeymoon with the city. He is very fond of me and I use to visit him regularly. But, he was intelligent enough to take dealerships of almost all cellular phone providers at the very starting of cell-phone boom in India. There, I met him... Veer Singh Bahadur, a Gurkha from Nepal. He was working as a security man in a large women's hostel where lot of young girls working in IT sector used to stay. He is a well-built young man of five feet two inches height. An innocent smile was hidden behind his eyes always.

'Sir, where is Gopi Sab?' he asked me one day while I was sitting in the cash counter.

'Uncle has gone out Veer Singh... Tell me the matter'

'I need some re-charge coupons for those girls... Gopi Sab used to give them on credit base,' he told quite innocently. I checked up the matter with my uncle through mobile phone and issued them happily.

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'Prem, if I keep Rupees one million on that table and tell him to take care of it... then I can go for a world tour peacefully... You know, the money will be safe, remain untouched, when I return... That's the belief I have on Veer Singh... He is a Gurkha... embodiment of faith,' my uncle told in that evening.

'Yes... I know'

'If a man says he is not afraid of dying, he is either lying or is a Gurkha'. I remembered the famous quote by Former Chief of staff of the Indian Army, Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw.

Three days later, I met Veer Singh Bahadur again at Bangalore Railway station.

'Premji Sab, I think you are going back to Trivandrum'

'Yes, Veer Singh'

'Even, I am going back... Shadi... Sab... Shadi*... I am going to get married next week.'

'Congratulations in advance Bahadur... Is it a love marriage?' I started kidding him.

'No Sab... it happens only in movies,' he replied shyly.

'But, I know that you are in love... So, when will you return?

'You are very naughty, Sab... I will return only after two months Sab'

* Marriage

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I was thinking about him while traveling in the moving train. Gurkhas... they work in India as trusted security men from the times of British Raj. Born fighters they are! Gurkha regiment is one of the most privileged regiment of Indian army. Why do they work in India for cheap wages? For them, it is

a great sum as the money value of Indian Currency is almost double than that of Nepal's currency! So it is a profitable occupation. But, new generation security cameras are a real threat to them. But, machines don't have that something... Guts... Courage...

?

Again I had to be there in Bangalore for a week to look after the business as my uncle was on tour to Thailand with his family. These new generation companies are so cunning, they give more and more gifts to get more and more business. Veer Bahadur came to our shop to get some more recharge coupons.

'How is your new life?' I asked.

'What life, Sab? She is there and I am here,' he replied in a sad tone...

His pain is known to me as Kerala has the highest number of 'Gulf widows'. Husbands return to Gulf weeks after marriages. Who knows when they will return! Veer Bahadur has to spend another ten months to meet his young wife. And the saddest thing was... he had to spend twenty four hours guarding very sexy girls... that too in the cool climate of Bangalore... What a punishment! God! Poor guy lived like a drained soul.

'Sab, will you please do me one favour?'

'Tell me, Veer Singh'

'Sab, just before leaving for Bangalore, I presented her a new mobile phone so that I can talk to her twice in a week. There are no land phone lines in our village. But, our Matron Madam doesn't allow me to go out frequently. And when Parbati, my wife, calls, Madam doesn't allow me talking more than a minute.'

'It's a painful situation Bahadur... Your Madam is very cruel... tell her to fall in love with someone.'

'You can only help me, Sab,' he told while taking out an old NOKIA handset from his khaki uniform. 'One of the kind girls gifted me this... but... this is of no use without a SIM card. I don't have a passport or any identity cards... but, you can provide me one SIM card.'

'That's not possible Veer Singh... it's against the law. If anything happens, uncle will have to go to jail,' I had to deny his request painfully

'It's OK Sab... Forgive me....,' he said while leaving hopelessly.

Poor man... I felt very sad....

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Uncle and family landed after two days. Veer Bahadur helped me in packing up some household articles that I purchased from Bangalore. My wife was already fed up of my frequent trips to Bangalore. Casual leaves... half pay leaves... and almost all forms of leaves were over... My Principal was showing his cruelty as scores of green ink on my columns in the office attendance register. My wife too started scratching with her sharp nails! Just to console her, I had to invest more money on Saris, Churidars, nail polishes...no Gold... it's unthinkable... Woman's world is so queer! The life of a man ends on the previous night of his marriage!

'Krrning... Krrning.'

Suddenly Veer Singh pulled out a mobile phone from his pocket. His face started glowing like a Khukri* (the razor sharp knife used by them) on broad Sunlight... happiness of a small boy, having a chocolate for the first time in life...

'It's Parbati...Sab..'

Poor guy was kissing the handset... Even I too felt very happy seeing the lover in him... O! What exhilaration! Love is sweet madness...

He talked with her for nearly three minutes in hiding...

'Veer Singh, how did you manage to get a SIM card?'

'Sab, if you have money, you can get anything in Bangalore,' he said proudly.

'So you are happy... Now you can tell her sweet nothings in the nights too.'

'You are really naughty, Sab,' he told while laughing shyly.

?

I had a routine call from my uncle next week.

'Prem, I have sad news to share with you'

'Please tell me, uncle'

'Veer Bahadur is in jail'

'What?'

'Yes...he is in jail... Anti-terrorist squad of Karnataka state, along with National security agencies had arrested him. It was a combined operation'

'Uncle... How can a poor man be labeled as a terrorist?'

'This is the same question even I had asked myself'

'Quite embarrassing... Does he have any connections with Maoists of Nepal?'

'No'

'Then why?'

'He was using a SIM card that was under scanner of security agencies. It was one among those used by the terrorists who were behind some serial bomb blasts in Bangalore.'

'Unbelievable!'

'Then what was Veer Bahadur's version?'

'He says that he got it from the footpath. He won't able to get out even after twenty years. Life is gone!'

'He is telling the truth.'

'How do you know that?'

'A Gurkha will never tell lie... especially a Gurkha in love'

My mind is imprisoned along with him since then....

Premji

MATHS WIZARD (Short story)

MATHS WIZARD

Five weeks ago, I was forced to enter into the clinic of Dr. Rahul, one among my precious long-time friends.

'Good evening Dr. Rahul,' I greeted him in a broken tone, as my throat remained sore for the past two days.

'Premji... I can understand the real cause... over-teaching!' He started scribbling something on a piece of paper... 'You just teach them how to learn without the help of a teacher,' he started laughing... 'That was the first thing great professors taught us at Trivandrum Medical College...'

'I know... my dear rank holder... A teacher is getting paid for not to teach, but to inspire! But, he or she is absolutely helpless while dealing with numb-skulls!,' I told while going through the prescription, which none could read except the pharmacist in the nearby medical shop and the doctor himself.

?

Professor Ramanarayanan and Vedanarayanan, his one and only son, waited outside the consulting room of noted psychologist Dr.Prasad. Several Burkha clad women were also among the patients.

'They are Gulf-widows,' he remembered an old joke.

Most of their husbands were in Dubai or some other Arabian countries, whom used to visit them once in two or three years.

And at last, the father and the son were admitted into the consulting room.

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'Yes... yes... I remember him,' Dr.Prasad started the conversation.... 'Vedanarayanan... the national champion of All India Mathematics Olympiad'

'You are absolutely right, Doctor,' replied professor Ramanarayanan.

'Then, how come you are here?'

The old-man started crying uncontrollably.

?

I was standing in front of Maurya pharmacy, a noted medical shop in the city, selling almost every English medicine available in India, with Dr.Rahul's prescription. There was enough rush at various counters.

'Hi Premji Uncle,' Vedanarayan greeted me...

'Hello Veda... How are you?'

'Uncle, I am not feeling well for the past two days... common cold and high fever'

'Don't worry... it will be cured within two or three days'

'Thanks Uncle'

Soon, Professor Ramanarayanan emerged from the crowd with several strips of medicines.

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'Then, what happened?' asked Dr.Prasad

'He fainted in the next day evening and we shifted him to the near-by hospital...,' replied Prof: Ramanarayanan

'Does he have diabetes regularly?' Dr. Shankar Mohan, a retired professor, asked Prof: Ramanarayanan, while checking the used tablet strips

'Diabetes? No...he doesn't have it...'

'O! God! Then, who prescribed diabetes tablets to this kid? Show me his prescription...,' cried out the true doctor in him.

'The prescription consists of Paracetamol tablets and some anti-congestants... Then how did you get these tablets?'

'Sir, an old man was there in need of diabetes tablets... may be he might have...,' professor couldn't continue his explanation as tears choked his voice.

'My God! He is suffering from hypoglycemia*... there is no sugar in his blood...,' Dr,Shankar Mohan cried out.

?

'We could leave the hospital only after three weeks... Those diabetes tablets... they spoiled his brain... Veda lost his analytic ability,' professor Ramanarayanan wiped his tears. 'He now suffers from deep depression'

'Nothing to worry... Vedanarayan... If you cooperate, I bet, you will be alright within a few weeks,' Dr.Prasad started pumping faith into the empty eyes of Vedanarayanan.

'Is it possible,' the boy asked painfully as he couldn't trust his words.

'Yes... I have absolute faith on you...,' Dr.Prasad promised his support. 'O.K... now tell me the product of twenty and twenty?'

Vedanarayan couldn't answer even in five minutes.

'OK... now... will you please tell me the product of five and ten?'

'I don't know'

'OK... then what about two plus two?'

Vedanarayan didn't have an answer even to the silliest of all questions. The only possible thing that Dr.Prasad could do was to suggest a better psychiatrist.

?

Adv. Sundara Iyer, a high profile practitioner of law and the first cousin of Vedanarayanan, paid an unexpected visit to their home on the very next day. He was staying abroad for the past two months for some very important assignments. He was totally shattered by watching the pathetic situation of the poor boy.

'Uncle, didn't you cross check the medicines with the prescription?' he asked professor Ramanarayanan.

'I tried to do so... but, I couldn't..,' replied the old man painfully.

'Why?'

'You please try to read it out...,' the old man handed over the prescription.

'The handwriting is not legible... All I can read is the name and address of the doctor... Dr.Rahul... Regn: no:.....,' poor man wiped his tears.

'Sundar... my son... my son... we lost him... But... this should not happen to any other child in world,' Mrs. Ramanarayanan told in a stubborn voice. Her feeble hands, started crushing his soul...

?

Dr. Rahaul was shocked to receive the legal notice sent by Adv. Sundara Iyer. It was a well-drafted foolproof legal document.

'Rahul, what are we going to do now?' asked Mrs. Rahul in a panicked voice... 'It's very difficult to win over an arrogant advocate like him... See... he can ruin your career... Are you aware of that?'

'Yes...,' Rahul replied hopelessly. 'We have fifteen days to reply,'

?

An important press meet was going on at Trivandrum Press Club and several cameramen were busy covering the coveted event. I sat among the noted journalists in the second row.

Dr. Rahul carefully read out the legal notice sent by Adv. Sundara Iyer. There was pin-drop silence in the hall until he finished the reading.

'So... what are you planning to do? Dr.Rahul?' one of the senior journalists started asking questions.

'I am going to apologize to Professor Ramanarayanan and his son Vedanarayan... I am going to apologize publicly... since I am also a part of this personal tragedy...,' he accepted his fault stoically.

'You people should not run behind commissions offered by medical companies...,' Shahina, another firebrand journalist, was getting angry.

'I know... but, I am sorry'

'But.. Why didn't you write the generic name instead of that stupid brand name?'

'Madam... How many of the public can understand the difference between a generic name and a brand name? How many of you, ever try to raise this issue to the common people?' he asked calmly.

Unfortunately, she didn't have an answer. ('Buddie...That was a superb reflex,' I congratulated him in my mind.)

'People are over-informed now-a-days... They can easily check the quality of the medicines you prescribe... Is that the reason?'

'Everyone fears the power of knowledge... you too, Mr.Journalist... So, how do you manage them? To be very frank... we too use your techniques... 'just confuse them,'" Dr. Rahul was getting angry.... 'Anyway, I have to finish one more formality,'

In a quick move, Dr. Rahul handed Rupees One million to Professor Mr. Ramanarayanan as damages in accordance with the legal notice... 'Sir... My mobile number was there on the prescription... you could have contacted me'

'Do you have any questions to Adv. Mr.Sudara Iyer?' Dr. Rahul asked the journalists.

'Adv. Sundara Iyer, do you think the matter is settled?' journalist Shahina asked.

'No... It won't be settled until every one of you stops informing people about drug menace in the world... It won't be settled until every doctor keeps on writing prescriptions in a legible manner... It won't be settled until every parent keeps on checking medicines as per prescriptions... It won't be settled until every one of you keeps on checking every medicine before you swallow it... It won't be settled until every medical company keeps on paying bribes for the doctors for more and more prescriptions... It won't be settled until every government has solid control over pricing of medicines... It won't be settled until every government assures the quality of medicines... It won't be settled until every illegal medical trial on poor people is stopped... It won't be settled until every Medical college in the world keeps on bringing out under-qualified doctors... It won't be settled.,'

Everyone inside the hall stood up and the claps shattered the peace of stray pigeons sitting on the window sills and the parapet.

'Can you suggest any way out? Dr.Rahul?' Adv. Sundara Iyer handed over the mike to him.

'It can be... It can be easily done... The public has to found their own medical companies... Not even a single politician dares to reject their application for registration... They should donate funds to every noble project irrespective of worrying about profit... 'Do not prescribe the medicines of other companies until otherwise they are not manufactured from the public's companies,'.. They should command the doctors like that... I bet... within three years, this problem can almost be settled. What do you say?' Dr.Rahul asked journalists, whom were the creamy-layer of our fourth-estate.

Unfortunately, the pigeons settled back on the window sills and the parapet peacefully.

Premji

MediSIN (Short story)

MediSIN

Fifteen years back...

I had to resign from that prestigious company during my younger sister's marriage. Everyone asked my parents: 'Why did he do that?' Dad was fed up of this repeated question and he stopped talking to me. There was another reason too: I was one of the most eligible bachelors of our village! A jobless bachelor is mere waste!

Just for pass time, all I could do was reading books. I read every precious book from our local library. Joy, the librarian, he was my only friend. We used to smoke packets of Wills and discuss everything under the Sun. Then 'he' came, a very handsome guy, in search books.

'Premji, Dr.Sunil... the new doctor in 'SB Hospital,' Joy introduced him. 'Doctor, this is Premji... Ex-sales engineer!'

'Ex?'

'Yes doctor... jobless at present!' Joy teased me.

Two bachelors of same age... Sunil and I... We became very close friends in no time and I used to visit his quarters in the evenings. One day, I presented him a copy of my first book, a collection of short stories in Malayalam. He read the whole book in that night itself. He wrote and gave a letter of appreciation on the very next day. It was the first appreciation for writing, in writing, in my life. That evening, we were talking about the alarming rate of sterility among women who reside in the cities.

'Premji, I like the way you write stories... Now, I am going to tell you story... someday, in future, you can write it'

'That's interesting Doc!'

'Two years back... we were working as House Surgeons at our Medical College... One night, we... me, my friend Sajeew and his girlfriend Anita... were sitting in the casualty. Suddenly Anita started playing with the surgical cotton kept on the table.

'Anita, please don't touch it... It's sterile.'

'I know it's sterile... But, you are not sterile!'

Then Sajeew and Anita burst into laughter... I wanted to kill that bastard that moment itself... They went on laughing...

'Sajeew, what kind of idiot are you... telling intimate secrets to women? She will tell the entire college... Shit,' I started scolding him.

'Anita, did you tell that to anyone?' Sajeew asked.

'No'

'You better stick on to that 'No'... Otherwise, I will divorce you...Understand.'

'Divorce... even before marriage! That's great,' she laughed.

'Doc... then, why did they laugh at you?' I asked.

'I am not sterile, Premji'

'That means?'

'I have two sons,'he told in pain.

'Doc.. What are you saying? You are still a bachelor!'

'So what! Premji, you are an engineer... You won't understand the plight of a Medical student... Every Medical student... he or she has to be the most obedient to all Professors... otherwise Bachelor of Medicine will remain only as a dream.'

'That's there even in Engineering Colleges'

'Not up to our standards.'

'May be... then Doc.'

'One day, I bunked the morning classes and was sleeping nicely in the hostel.... Then somebody knocked on the door... Which bastard is that not allowing me to sleep? Our Department Head's personal peon was standing outside.

'Anything important, Rajettan?'

'HOD wants to meet you... right now...'

Jumped into jeans, I ran behind him. HOD was busy reading some medical journals.

'Good Morning... Sir.'

'Morning... Why did you bunk the classes?'

'Not feeling well... Sir,' I told a lie that he understood in no time.

'Sunil... You are in the final year... So, be careful.'

He was silent for a moment...

'Now... Go...Get it,' HOD told while handing over a small glass bottle...

I rushed out with the bottle. Peon Rajettan was standing outside... He was smiling...

'Rajettan, what is happening around?'

'Nothing man... A family is under treatment in our infertility clinic... Her husband was in Dubai for the past 12 years... His balls are dried up of the hot Sun... She is so beautiful... You are her ideal match... Your HOD has a great sense of beauty!' he started teasing me again.

Back in hostel, I was busy searching for some porn books... At last I got couple of copies of 'Fantasy'... Lovely pictures... beautiful stories... but... but...

'How come you are so late?'HOD asked in anger.

'Sir... tension.'

'What tension? Now...out.'

He kicked me out mercilessly and walked away with the bottle... Millions of fighters were swimming towards the unknown destination! God! My life...my life...

After nine months, one day Rajettan came in search of me again. I stood before my HOD like a lamb before a butcher.

'Boy, Congratulations... Now you are a proud father of two young boys,'he told...

'Sir?'

'Twins'

'Sir, can I see them at least once?'

'Sorry... No.. It's against medical ethics.'

'Sir...please... only once,'I started begging.

'No... you are a mere donor... now get lost'...

From that day onward, they come in my dreams... 'Father...Father...Father.'

'What kind of father? Someone, yet to see the kids... their mother'...tears were rolling down from his eyes...

'Doc... How can I console you?' I told in a sad tone. 'You better get married to Neelima... your hospital owner's daughter'

'Premji... what are you saying? You want to put me in troubles?'

'No... Doc... She is madly in love with you'

'How do you know that?'

'See Doc... You are a father... But I am a writer!'

He started laughing again...

Premji

MELTING POINT (Short story)

MELTING POINT

Most of the times, higher officials are very cunning! Particularly when subordinate officers are very smart and the situations to face are really tough! Even-though, it's a matter of pure escapism, they never fail to take the credits without shame! And I was forced to take the charge of conducting board examinations for five hundred diploma students, even-though I am not a smart guy!

Deadly preparations! From seating arrangements to staff allocation! Keeping secrecy of question papers to packing up of answer scripts! Uploading every exam detail to technical education board's official website! Internet is the real villain most of the times, and I am sure, it is going to rule us some day! The ever expanding invisible net!

Anil, Dy. Superintendent and I, the Chief Superintendent... only we both were totally responsible for conducting the examinations! He is a wonderful guy with lot of intrinsic energy and I am a lazy writer, who searches for stories even in dreams! Somehow, we managed to assign twenty five invigilators and warned them not to allow any malpractice in their respective halls.

'Premji, you have to be careful with that guy'

'Why, Anil?'

'He sleeps, even while riding a bike... Sure, he will sleep in classroom too,' Anil laughed. 'Managing idiots like him is a tough task'

'That I will take care of'

Six glorious days were over and another six more to go.

'So far, everything is alright,' Anil told me while sitting inside Principal's chamber.

'Sure,' I told while breaking the wax seals from used green question paper bags. What a silly time-pass!

'Premji... even I too have a story,' the brown sealing wax, bearing letters 'T.E,' told me. T.E stood for Technical Education and I am sure it will stand forever!

?

Seven years back... I was reading 'Brothers Karamazov,'

'Started reading your Bible, again in the morning?' wife teased me while handing over a cup of hot coffee.

'This is not Bible... '

'Did I say that it's Bible? I told 'Your Bible!''

'You are right honey... this is my Bible... You keep one inside my coffin too...'

'Premji... I have shocking news for you...'

'O.K.. Every wife is an expert in shock treatment!'

'Syam, managed to secure fourth rank in IAS...'

'What?'

'I.A.S... Indian Administrative Service... the highest position an Indian can achieve in Government service... Is it clear?' she teased me.

She was right... The smiling face of my beloved pal was there on the front page of Keralakaumudi daily.... Syam... we hadn't met for several years... where are you, now?

Suddenly my mobile started ringing...

'Premji... Syam here...'

'Congratulations Syam.... Just now, I was thinking about you,' I didn't allow him to continue.

'It seems, PTA (parent teachers association) of our college wants to congratulate me tomorrow... you must attend the program with your wife'

'Tomorrow is a working day... my casual leaves are over'

'No excuses Premji... you must come...,' he cut the phone call.

'We should attend that,' my wife told.

?

The college auditorium was jam-packed with students. Beautiful girls and wonderful boys, it looked like a miniature heaven! Somehow, I managed two seats in the second row.

'This is the same stage where I sang a group song all alone'

'Are you crazy to do such a silly thing?' my wife asked.

'My team-mates betrayed me!'

College Principal, Heads of Departments, PTA Secretary, professors and beyond all Chairman of our College trust Mr. Madanappalli Rajagopal... dignitaries sat on the expensive chairs in the dais... Syam sat among them, like a humble rabbit among jackals.

Principal welcomed Mr.Rajagopal for the presidential address. He showered words of praise on Syam boundlessly. He declared a cash price worth \$1000 for Syam as he added glory to his college! Everyone praised him mercilessly and at last it was his turn to thank them all. He picked the microphone and made him comfortable to deliver the reply. He looked towards the Heavens for a moment and started talking... His words, did they resemble heavy hammer blows, he had suffered earlier?

'Respected dignitaries on the dais, my teachers, friends and dear students... At the outset, I would like to thank you all for those wonderful words showered upon me. Thank you. I have nothing to say about my personal victory, for I know that every victory is momentary. But, this achievement is so important to me in a very personal level. Thank you.'

Heavy-hearted, he sat back and the meeting was about to get adjourned. But, in a quick move, College Chairman Mr.Rajagopal, picked up the chord-less microphone and announced for an open-forum, an interactive session between the students and Syam. He readily accepted it as it is the duty of every Government servant to motivate fellowmen for a better nation.

'Sir, tell us about your school days,' a tall boy requested him and the whole auditorium patiently waited for his reply.

?

Year 1994...

School days... Syam and I, best friends we are! We were classmates in a local school, where everything went on so smooth except the political interference by local parties. Students Union led by the left wing, and that of the right wing were the major players. They made hell a lot of agitations

for the most needy as well as unwanted reasons. But, the saddest after-effect of it was, students started leaving Government schools for the locally mushroomed private schools, where teachers were from poor educational backgrounds. Only reason said for the migration was, no strikes were allowed there!

Syam was the uncrowned prince of Right-Wing Students Union and his father Raghavan Nair, a highly revered teacher, was our Headmaster. Though Syam was quite friendly with everyone, he never cared for his father seriously and as a result, he ruined his life for the sake of silly student politics. He created hell a lot of problems for his father, that even PTA (Parent teachers association) never failed to utilize every opportunity to shoot poison-clad arrows toward him! Father and son, their relationship was getting worse every day!

Why did he act like this? Nobody knew the answer except me.

'He loves only her... praises only her... cares only her... She is so fair..., ' Syam told about his sister one day, while staring at his Sun-tanned dark skin.

'Syam... You are really handsome... That's why he had kept 'Syam' as your name..., ' I tried to console him. But, who cares?

My Dad, another teacher himself, and Raghvan Nair were close friends and they used to share all personal problems each other. They were very busy that time as SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate) exams were about to get started from 12th of March. Raghavan Nair had to stay at least up to 6.30 PM every day to straighten up things during the examination days.

Exams started. Syam used to leave the hall immediately after scribbling something on his answer book. Maximum time he used to spend there was around an hour!

'Syam, how are things?'

'Premji... I think... I can secure that magical figure of 210 marks'

'Just pass?'

'Yes... Then I can join for third group, pre-degree course... You can write anything about history!'

'Sounds funny,' we laughed.

?

Raghavan Nair passed away, on the third night exactly after our exams had started, due to a massive heart attack and Syam was thrown into the hot frying pan of life. No political stalwarts were there to support him... No income for him to maintain family expenses... Syam had to work hard from the very next day, immediately after the death ceremonies were over.

'Syam... either you or your sister, may get a government job as your father passed away while was in service. I am going to nominate her for that based on dying harness... She has good educational backgrounds... naturally, she may get the post of a teacher..., ' his mother opined.

'Sure... Mom... then, we need lesser dowry to get her married,' Syam replied like a seasoned brother though he was just fifteen!

She joined for the post of lower primary school teacher in a nearby school soon, with the help of our local MLA who happened to be her father's disciple. But, to make financial matters more worse, she eloped with her college-mate, changed her name and got converted into his religion. Syam had to work almost every day to clear the housing loans his father had taken earlier as his pension was insufficient enough to meet the expenses. Though his flower-like palm turned hard like rock, he managed to get back the documents pledged to the bank within two years. Of course, in the mean-time he managed to secure that magical figure of 210 out of 600 to pass SSLC.

?

'Sir, now please tell us about your Pre-degree days,' a small girl with childish face requested among claps.

?

It was a Friday afternoon and his mother was sitting alone in the veranda.

'Chechee... (elder sister)... You have a registered post,' the postman told. 'It seems like a notice send by an advocate'

'You read it down,' she said while putting her signature on the receipt.

'It is send by your daughter... She needs the share of her Dad's properties at the earliest... I am sorry Chechee... Now-a-days, it is impossible to believe young girls,' postman told.

'Will you inform that advocate to meet me?'

'Sure... Chechee... today itself, I will do that for you,'

?

Advocate Punchakkari Sukumaran Nair was one of her relatives. But, there is no role for friends and relatives in a lawyer's business life! He knew that better than anyone.

'Chechee, your husband's property can be equally divided into four,' advocate said.

'Why four? There are only three heirs including me'

'For your kind information... she has a baby girl now and naturally, she deserves two shares....,' Punchakkari gave his clarification.

'Then, let her have three shares... I am not going to take any of my father's property,' Syam said.

'In that case, you won't be able to retain this house where you live now... Is that OK?' Punchakkari asked.

'That's OK... I will make a small shack and live there....,' she pointed toward the empty land beside that house.

'I am afraid, that's not possible... Her husband will surely object... You know, sure it will affect their prestige,' Punchakkari said in a melancholic tone.

'Mr.Punchakkari... if that is the case, you find a way out?' Syam, a seventeen year lad, asked him.

'You better sell the one fourth share to her... One second... Let me call her husband,' Punchakkari told while dialing her husband's number.

'What did he say?' Syam's mother asked.

'He won't be able to pay more for that piece of of land... Since it contains a Khabar... grave of your husband,' Punchakkari told her painfully and she went inside and returned back quickly.

'Give her the documents... Tell her to come and collect the key tomorrow morning... It will be kept on the door itself,' she told calmly looking on Syam's face.

Heavy-hearted, Punchakkari Sukumaran Nair walked near to his bike parked outside. One moment, he wanted to burn that fading document... 'Stupid relations,' He cursed his stupid profession for he saw his late mother on her face...

Syam took a rented house and soon his mother joined her husband. But, her last wish, to sleep beside her husband, left unfulfilled. He got the hardest of all slaps in his life on that evening when my Dad saw him in drunken state. And on the very next day, he was admitted to the nearest college by him. Syam was forced to stay with one of his rich relatives, running a big hotel in that town. Knowingly, he selected third group, for there was no need to attend college to get through! Soon, he

was kicked out from there too as his daughter started suffering from 'sympathy-love syndrome'!

?

'Then... Why did you select Malayalam language for B.A (Bachelor of Arts) degree?' a boy around nineteen, who had the looks of an intellectual, asked.

'Malayalam is our mother-tongue... We should not forget that...,' everyone laughed though what told was quite serious.

'Sir... I doubt... You did MA English with an eye on IAS?' one MA student asked.

'Nothing like that... That time, I was staying with a retired English professor... Food and stay on free of cost,' he laughed.

'Premji... your friend is pouring out pathos!' my wife teased me.

'Were you politically active in College?' the final question escaped from someone's throat.

?

Syam had to end up in college hostel immediately after he was kicked out from the relative's hotel. There, he understood the difference between left wing and right wing. Within no time, he became the torch-bearer of the left wing. They gave him food, shelter and dogma and everything! Blood soaked strikes followed him.

The rise of a new dare devil student leader... My Dad was so annoyed to read the news about him in dailies...

?

'Then, why did you leave politics?' somebody asked.

'I didn't leave politics... By nature, man is a political animal'

'That's not a fair answer'

'Yes... I know... I know,' Syam closed his eyes. 'In every man's life, there is a melting point'

?

It was a bright Sunday evening in March, 1999. I was standing near Saviour's Bar in Thiruvananthapuram with my friends from College of Engineering Thiruvananthapuram. Unfortunately, they couldn't make their promise. But, I could find him there inside the bar, along with his comrades, washing away the tedium of politics.

'Comrades, will you please excuse us?'

'Sure'

Only we both were left there... Soon, silence encompassed us...

'Bastard... Why do you ruin like this?' I couldn't control my anger.

'What did you call me?' he shouted violently

'Dirty bastard'

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The Bar staff threw both of us out. Ashamed, we both stood out, covered with dust and dirt all over.

'Premji... Come... Let's go to our comrade's den,' Syam invited me and I followed him as if nothing had happened.

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'On the very day, I left student politics... rarely attended classes... I did every kind of job to buy books and journals... The gap between left and right wing are so narrow now-a-days... When I completed BA degree, my lecturers - who congratulated me today - advised to get a job... than joining for MA English... They all knew that I wouldn't be able to attend classes regularly... But, God appeared before me in the shape of Prof Jayendran... God bless him... He gave me food and English... Our beloved, Sri. Madanappalli Rajagopal was the chairman then time also... Neither cash award nor any sort of financial aid were given to me... No concessions... My victory belongs to none of you... It belongs to my father... for he sacrificed his life for me,' Syam couldn't control himself.

Madanappally Rajagopal sat on his chair like a statue made of ash!

?

'Where is he?' Dad asked Mom in the evening.

'Might be, roaming out with his friends'

'Anyway, don't let him go out from here tomorrow onwards,' Dad was bit uneasy. 'Times have changed drastically... You know... Syam had started the habit of drinking... Bastard... When will he understand the real pain behind his father's suicide...'

'Suicide? What do you mean?' Mom couldn't believe her ears.

'Yes... Raghavan Nair's death was a suicide... He desperately wished his son to get through at least SSLC... One of his relatives, a high ranking army-man, assured him that if Syam could get through SSLC, he would put him in the armed forces... But, the shortcut selected by him was very risky... After all he was also a Dad!'

'What was that?'

'Breaking up of the wax seals of question paper packets, using a thin, special purpose knife... You know... Being the Head Master, he was in charge of all question papers for state level exam SSLC... He used to take out the question papers of the very next day, copy them and place them back safely by fixing the wax seal again by re-heating... that too late in the evenings... And he used to teach Syam, half of those questions in the night... But,'

'But?'

'Unfortunately, he was caught by the Dy. Educational Officer on the third day... But, he didn't report that to higher authorities as he knew Raghavan Nair since childhood days... After all, he is also a father... Friend too... I was the only witness... We both are the only people who know his death was a suicide... It was a death of honour... A man without honour is a dead man! I got this letter on the third day after his death,' father handed over an old blue inland to Mom. 'But... Syam... when will he understand that?'

'When did you come?' Mom asked me in uncontrollable anger.

'I didn't go anywhere.... and I won't,'

Premji

MINDFULNESS (Short story)

MINDFULNESS

'Colonel Uncle is admitted in Apollo Hospital,' Mummy informed me through telephone. 'It seems... he has lung Cancer.'

?

Like every innocent child, I too had a childhood hero - Colonel Sugathan - who slept peacefully under sedation, in the hospital room.

'Cancer has covered almost every portion of his lungs... Chemotherapy has to be started as early as possible,' Dr. Manohar informed us: Sunny, his one and only son and me. 'But, his failing health is unable to withstand the powerful Chemotherapy... So, what to do?'

'Let him decide it, when he wakes up..., ' I replied. 'What do you say, Sunny?'

?

'Boys... Already, I am seventy two... Let me leave peacefully..., ' the brave soldier in him demanded, though his lungs were chocking.

'That we will decide,' Sunny told hesitantly.

'How many times, I have asked you to quit smoking? You didn't even listen to me at least once..., ' Sumithra, his beloved wife, was getting sentimental.

'Sunny..., ' his voice toughened... 'My life is mine... Did you live out a life, like the one that of mine?' Colonel Uncle asked.

'No'

'Then... do what I say,'

Soon, pain started tap-dancing inside his weary lungs.

'Will you please wait outside,' the young nurse who entered into the room requested us.

'Shanti,' I tried to memorize her name, printed on her id-card.

?

'If we don't start treatment right now, he could be with us, may be for some three or four days... The condition of his lungs is getting deteriorated every moment... Cancer, inside the lungs, is something like a wildfire in a hot windy summer..., ' Dr. Manohar informed me in private. 'All, we can do is taking measures to reduce his pain... I think, he needs the help of a psychologist... Let him stay out of depression,'

'Sir, I think, you know Dr. Sarun, a noted psychologist... He is one of his nephews.'

'Yes, I know him... May be, he can help him,'

?

'Psychologically, he is ten thousand times stronger than me... Dr. Manohar misjudged the

tough-man!' Dr. Sarun told me.

'Whatever it is, you must be here with us... Is that OK?'

?

Sumithra, his beloved better-half, could sit beside him only while he was sleeping as he loathed every unhappy face.

The first day was over.

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It was nearing five in the evening. Her duty time was over and Shanthi, the young nurse, was about to leave for the hostel room near to the hospital.

'Sir, Can I sit with him for a while...,' Shanthi asked us.

'O! Sure!' Dr. Sarun told her.

'Thank you,' she walked in.

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'Hello Sir... How do you feel now?' Shanthi asked while sitting beside him.

'I feel much better today,' a feeble smile appeared on his face.

'Thanks God... You have close resemblance to my Papa'

'Is it? That's really interesting... What is he doing now?' asked Colonel Sugathan.

'O! He is no more,'

'Very sad'

'Sir, how many daughters do you have?'

'None! But, now, I have one...,' the old man pressed her hand... 'You... my precious daughter...,' he smiled happily.

'Thanks Papa... Shall we have some coffee?'

'Surely'

'Papa... You haven't told me anything about your childhood!'

'Sure I will tell you... I was born in a small village... and my parents were very loving....,' he started unwinding the past.

She left after spending two hours in his room. Second day was over.

?

'Premji... where is Shanti?' Colonel Uncle started asking me right from the morning.

'Today is her weekly off,' I told casually and soon his face turned dull.

?

'Good Morning Papa,' Shanti appeared from somewhere, with some freshly cut Sun-flowers.

'They are really beautiful,' he started inhaling their fresh smell. 'They are really beautiful... And you too look so beautiful in this yellow Chureedar... (Indian dress)'

'Thank you...They are the lovers of Sun...,' she placed them in the flower-vase.

'You are right,' added the old man.

'Papa... please tell me about your first love'

'First love... ha... ha...', he started laughing painfully. 'I met Sumithra just before the Indo-Pak war of 1971... She was staying with her elder brother Colonel Amar Sing Chouhan, my superior officer that time. He was real tough guy, who protected his little sister like a princess... Soon, we fell in love... He was absolutely shocked when he came to know about our relationship... He was totally against us,'

'Very interesting,'

'Those were beautiful days... my daughter... Soon, the war broke out... We fought the enemy like wild lions,'

'Did you kill anyone?'

'Yes... hundreds of enemy soldiers... And that night, Colonel Amar Sing Chouhan was badly hit with a bullet on his left thigh; I was to command his forces... We slaughtered every one of them protecting the esteem of our nation...', great valour appeared on his face. 'We won the war... I was awarded with Keerti-Chakra, one of the greatest honors for bravery... and the beautiful woman I love... I love... Colonel Amar Sing Chouhan was very proud of being my brother-in-law!' he was exhilarated with happiness.

She left, spending more than four hours beside him. He slept peacefully the night whole night. Third day was over and the wildfire was spreading faster.

?

We were standing outside the hospital room.

'Good Morning Sister,' Sunny greeted Shanthi in the morning. 'Are you on leave today?'

'Yes,' she replied while entering into the room.

'Good Morning Shanti,' Colonel Sugathan greeted her in a feeble voice.

'Good Morning Papa... Shall we have our breakfast?'

'I am not feeling hungry... Still... what did you bring for me?'

'Tender Chapatis and dhal... today, we are going to eat from Military mess...', she said smiling. 'I made them especially for you,'

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'He is very relaxed now,' opined Sunny, who was sitting amidst all of us outside the hospital room.

'Absolutely...', I said.

'He was very happy with me, too, yesterday,' said Sumitra aunt... 'He wishes to be alone with his newly found daughter!'

?

Colonel Sugathan was living out every moment of his as if he was having a quick recap of his life... That was really interesting and soothing... He enjoyed every moment of it... every moment...

'Daughter... You haven't told me anything about your life'

'What is there to tell about the life of a nurse!' she laughed loudly.

'That's not the right answer... dear,'

'I am working here day and night to support my poor family... I am working here day and night to repay my educational loans... I am working hard so that both ends can meet somewhere... that's it,' she laughed without even the slightest amount of uneasiness on her face.

'I love happy people... None can take away one's happiness if he feels happy every moment,' told

the old man...

She left, only late in the evening.

AND THE FOURTH DAY WAS OVER.

?

Sixteen days passed and the death ceremonies were over... Sumithra aunt remained silent throughout the journey. I parked the car in front of the ladies hostel and she walked towards the reception room.

'Premji... you know... what we had experienced from Shanthi, is called 'mindfulness,'..the supreme form of empathy! I couldn't realize such a thing so far in my career... She is a wonder...,' Dr.Sarun was all the praise of her.

There in the hostel reception, Sumithra waited for the young girl, who was just back from duty. She couldn't control her tears when she saw her from a little distance. Shanti hugged her tightly and wiped her tears with her hand.

'I do not know how to thank you, my daughter... He left happily... Thank you...,' the old woman couldn't control her tears again.

'Papa was a great man,'

'Yes... He left, with just one wish... unfulfilled... I know, he can't be peaceful without that,'

'What's that, dear Sumithraji? If humanly possible, we should realize that...'

'Surely... He wished... you to be there in our own home... as a flame of love... We have a lovely lad for you.....,' the old woman kissed her forehead.

?

Premji

MOTHER (Short story)

MOTHER

'Dad... will you please get me a packet of 'jail' Chapatis* and chicken curry?' my younger son started tampering my brain in the morning.

'How do you come to know about that?'

'Dad... I shared some from my classmate Arun yesterday... you know, his Dad is working there and their food is so delicious...'

The jail DGP (Director General of Police) who introduced a commercial catering unit that functions inside the jail complex is a true visionary. In order run it with minimum overheads, the inmates started growing almost every variety of vegetables as well as chicken for fresh meat in the jail compound. I tried to recollect various articles published on the same matter in several local and national dailies.

*unleavened flatbread

?

It was nearing three o'clock in the afternoon.

I parked my car (unfortunately, we fall under the same age group!) in front of Poojappura Central jail and started walking towards the outlet next to the main gate where fresh packets chapattis and chicken curry were sold.

I placed four packets in the rear seat and the car started speeding up. But, soon my eyes picked up a familiar figure walking ahead and I slowed down the vehicle.

'Hi Naren,' I cried out while stopping the car next to him.

'Hi, Premji... How come you are here?'

'O! That's a long story... now, get in please'

He was bit hesitant at first, and then he got in.

'We haven't met you, even at least once, in the past twelve or thirteen years!' I told. 'Where were you all these years?'

'I was wandering here and there for a permanent job... Unfortunately, I am still in search of one... Will you please help me to find out a good job?'

'Sure, my friend... Tell me, your field of expertise right now?'

'Certainly, it's not Chemistry... that we learned during our college life...'

'Then?'

'I love cooking,' replied Naren calmly.

?

I stopped the car beside Sulaiman Kakka's restaurant, a place quite famous for non-vegetarian cuisine throughout the city.

'Meals are over, Sir,' Sulaiman Kakka, an old-man in his seventies, told us politely.

'That's no problem... Will you please get us some coffee?'

'Oh, Sure'

Soon he came near us with two cups of steaming coffee.

'Kakkaa... Why don't you please join us?' I asked him

'Oh, sure,' he pulled a chair beside us.

'Kakkaa... Please meet Naren... he was my classmate... and now, he is in need of a job... you know, he is a wonderful cook.'

'To be very frank, it's quite difficult to get very good cooks now-a-days, Premji Sir...'

?

Two weeks passed event-less.

'Bappaa (Dad)... have you gone crazy?' Al-Ameen, the one and only son of Sulaiman Kakka, started shouting in the evening as he had not been there in the city for the past two weeks. His chubby face was burning with anger.

'Ameen, mind your words,' said the old-man impatiently... 'What's your latest problem?'

'I didn't create anything new... See... Our hotel is a public place and how dare you appoint a murderer as our kitchen staff?'

'Murderer? Who is that?'

'Mr. Naren... He was appointed here as a cook on the very day he was released from the central jail... and that too after twelve long years for slaughtering a young boy... He should be fired right this moment,' demanded the thirty five year old Al-Ameen loudly.

'Ameen, I better close down this restaurant for ever than firing him,' the old man replied stoically.

'Bappa, what do you mean? Are you out of your senses?' Ameen cried out.

'Ameen... no more talks on the same subject....'

?

Sulaiman Kakka was a firm believer of Allah and he used to sell only fresh food. The sale of food was not a profession for him, but, it was an act of divinity... Hotel waiters were fed much earlier to the meal sessions starting from 1 pm to 3.30 pm. None should be hungry while they are in work, which was his governing principle!

He walked into the kitchen closely followed by Naren. It was a very neat and tidy place.

'You are going to prepare something for me... everything is here,' the old man declared... 'I will appoint you if and if you are up to my standards'

'Surely..., ' replied Naren.

The imported razor sharp knife started dancing on the cutting board while he was chopping the big onions and capsicum. The old man watched every move of his carefully. Within half an hour, three different chicken items were tasted by the old man.

'nhum... very delicious... I will reserve you for my elite customers,' a pretty smile appeared on his face.

'Sir, shall we talk for some time in private?' requested Naren.

?

'Boy, I haven't asked anything about your family,' said the old man.

'Both my parents are not alive... and I don't have any relatives or a home'

'Is it so?'

'And the most important thing is...,' he stopped for a while. 'I am just released from the central jail, today afternoon... Premji is still not aware of that... otherwise he wouldn't have taken me here'

'Is that so?' the old man stopped for a moment... 'Why did you go to jail?'

'It all happened some twelve years back...,' Naren started unwinding his life painfully.

?

It was nearing eight o'clock in the evening and fifty five year old Gopi Pillai was about to close his tailoring shop in that under-developed village.

'Gopi Chettan, please design a shirt for me... you know... it's... something like the one worn by Mel Gibson in 'The Bounty' movie...,' Ramu, a local rich boy appeared from somewhere on an expensive motor bike told. He was doing an expensive diploma course in the city.

'Who is Mel Gibson?' he asked innocently. 'Son... I am just a local tailor... not a fashion designer'

'O, that's not a problem... I will get you some photographs from the internet,' replied the boy, whose muscles were rock-hard as he used to spend hours in the health-club, while handing over an expensive piece of high quality imported silk cloth.

'O.K... I will try my level best,' assured the old man while taking basic measurements of his body.

'Earlier, people used to stitch clothes suiting for their bodies... Now they suit their bodies for ready-made clothes!' he told casually.

'I will be back on Friday,' informed Ramu while starting his bike. 'Is that O.K?'

'Today is... Tuesday... of course; you can collect it on Friday...'

The boy sped away while Naren got alighted from a local bus and started walking towards his father's shop.

'How is your newly found job?' asked Gopi Pillai

'Not really bad, my Dad,' replied Naren with immense hope and faith beneath his voice. Soon, he started examining the silk cloth spread on the long cutting table.

'You know... I too have got a promotion...,' the old man started laughing

'What do you mean?' Naren couldn't understand a thing.

'I am now a fashion designer!'

?

Ramu, who was on the way back home from the city, parked his expensive bike in front of the tailoring shop. His chubby cheeks turned red while trying out the newly stitched shirt as it was not up to his standards. He couldn't breathe properly as it was very tight at some points.

'You have spoiled it,' he cried out of uncontrollable anger.

'Then, I will make it little bit loose,' suggested Gopi Pillai politely.

'Are you kidding me? The cloth itself was worth around Rs 2000/-,' Ramu was getting angrier... 'You have to pay the damages,'

'That's not possible... I warned you earlier that I am not a fashion designer...,' resisted the tailor boldly.

'You bastard... I know how to... ,' Ramu started bashing the old man up and his helpless cries got buried in the noise of the last bus to that place.

'Leave him I say,' Naren cried out while running towards his father.

Ramu left the old man, in the middle who had already lost two or three of his frontal teeth, and started attacking Naren mercilessly. At last, Naren was forced to plunge a sharpened pair of scissors into his lower abdomen in-order to save his father. A single stab punctured his kidneys as well as the small intestine badly so that Ramu was forced to settle on the other world within a short span of ten minutes.

?

The inmates of C-block of the Central jail were busy arranging a 'welcome function' for Naren as he was awarded with twelve years of sentence. 'Nadayadi,' they used to call it in the local language. It was some sort of a cruel ragging in which the older inmates used to bash up the newcomers mercilessly and even the wardens used to support them. It was some sort of a psychological as well as physical attack for supremacy.

'None of you will touch him,' the toughest warden in the jail warned the inmates. 'And if anyone dares to do so, I will break his legs forever,'

?

Gopi Pillai expired immediately after Naren was sentenced for twelve long years and his destitute widow was forced to stay along with one of her closest relatives, another widow who was living all alone in a palatial building. Her children, living abroad, were absolutely happy as they got an 'unpaid' maid for at least twelve long years!

Sad, we live in a world specially made for opportunists!

?

'Naren, you are here for the past five years,' the jail warden reminded him softly... 'I came to know... that your Mom is not feeling well... You are now eligible for two weeks parole... Sure, I will recommend for you'

'Thank you Sir,' replied Naren.

?

'Stay there..., ' the aged widow shouted mercilessly. 'You are not allowed to enter into my home, Mr.Naren...'

'That's O.K...Madam... Will you please call my Mom?' asked Naren as he hadn't met his mother, even at least once, in the past five years.

The old woman didn't open her mouth as she was trembling with fear...

He sat on the garden chair, closed his eyes and waited for his mother. Soon, he was tightly hugged by a pair of feeble hands.

'Mom,' Naren started crying watching her malnourished body.

'What happened to you Mom?'

'Nothing..., ' she tried to wipe down his tears.

None can wipe down a torrent!

Unfortunately, they couldn't even speak another word throughout the whole night. Mosquitoes attacked them like fighter jets as they were forced to sleep inside of the open car shed.

'Will he murder me?' the house owner also had a sleepless night as she was really afraid of the

young man...

'One woman is the biggest foe of another woman,' Naren told himself while watching the moving shadows of the old woman walking inside the house quite impatiently.

?

'Her uterus is in a very bad shape and she needs continuous medical care,' a physician from the near-by hospital informed Naren... 'We cannot remove it now as her health condition is very poor... She needs to take complete rest,' he handed over a long prescription for expensive medicines.

Naren couldn't control his tears as he was incapable of buying them to relieve her pains. The doctor didn't care him at all as a sales representative was waiting outside impatiently.

Naren was away for the next few days in order to find some money to for her medicines.

?

'Medicines are of no use, my son,' she kept the huge medicine packet aside... 'How many more days are left for you?'

'Six more days to go back... '

'Naren, you must be beside me until you go back..., ' she pressed his hands tightly... 'Promise me...'

'Mom... I am not going back, '

'What?' the old woman was absolutely shocked.

'How can I leave you alone like this without any care? Let's end this up Mom... Why should we live like this? Let's end it....,' tears started rolling down from his eyes. She didn't reply anything... 'Mom... do you have any unfulfilled wishes?'

'Yes... You have to perform poojas (rituals) for the redemption of your father... And then we will follow him..., ' she said firmly.

?

It was nearing six in the morning and Aluva Manalppuram (sand-bed in the banks of River Periyar near Aluva) remained almost empty. Naren took a quick dip in the fast-flowing river.

'Be careful... Naren,' the old woman cried out... 'She has got terrific undercurrents'

A Brahmin religious scholar performed the Hindu ritual named 'Bali..., '

The wandering soul might be hungry... The closest relative had to feed them...

Naren placed the fresh plantain leaf containing rice balls at an empty spot and started clapping his hands. Stray crows, appeared from somewhere, and started fighting for the rice-balls kept on a plantain leaf...

Crows... they represented the hungry soul of his father...

'We shall stay here one more day.... I like to visit Aluva Shiva temple tomorrow,' she told Naren. 'I like to have 'Nirmalya darshan...(visiting the temple in the early morning)'

'As you wish, Mom,' Naren told while settling back in the hotel room next to the river.

?

Naren got up bit late in the morning and the bed next to him remained empty.

'Did you see my Mom?' he asked the small boy who used sleep in the reception.

'She might be there in the temple... I only opened the front door for her in the early morning....'

?

'Kaakkaa... will you please read this?' Naren tried to hand over a folded piece of paper, which had already started yellowing. 'It was the last letter by my Mom'

?

The old woman got up at around three o'clock in the morning. Naren was sleeping next to her like an innocent child. Poor woman started patting his curly hair and planted a kiss on his forehead. A cute smile appeared on his beautiful lips as if he was having a beautiful dream...

'Dream for a bright future... my son...', she told while picking a fresh pair of clothes up from the cheap airbag. Later, she placed a folded piece of paper inside his already empty pocket.

And the boy who had been sleeping on the hotel lobby opened the front door for her. He showed her the shortcut to the nearby river as she had to do a holy dip before entering into the temple.

She kept her fresh cloths and sat, all alone, on the cement steps in the river-bank and closed her eyes as if she was immersed in a deep prayer.

Later, stray dogs checked the strength of their teeth on her abandoned cloths.

?

'My dearest Naren...

Your Dad is alone... Let me join him... Let Him bless you for a fresh start of life... Never give up, my son... never... You are destined to live... You are destined to win... You are...

Bye my son... Bye forever...

Your loving Mom,'

Sulaiman Kakka folded the letter carefully as if he was handling a treasure.

'Inshah Allah! Only a true mother can write like this... ,' the old man told while wiping away the tears rolling down from his weary eyes.... 'Naren... my dear son... I am so unfortunate, that I do not have a son like you,' the old man hugged him tightly...

Premji

MOTHER OF ALL SORROWS (Short story)

MOTHER OF ALL SORROWS

Thirteen year back... I was working as a sales engineer, destined to sell huge excavators for a living. The meager income status forced me to share a room with Arun, my best pal, at Elsa tourist home - a nearly dilapidated structure that stood on steel concrete, next to the Trivandrum Medical College. He was a house-surgeon, undergoing one year training period after the completion of MBBS degree (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery).

Life-saver and a gravedigger! What a grave combination!

'Excessive workload, without proper remuneration and recognition and the notorious hostile approach by authorities and public!' Being a house-surgeon is the toughest period in the life of every medical student. And without their share, it's impossible to run a Medical College!

?

For the last ten days, Arun was in charge of night duty at the children's ward and literally he was fed up of the noise there... never-ending screams of children and women! Usually, he used to return by around seven in the morning and immediately he goes to bed even before brushing his teeth! But, on that day.... he was sitting awake on bed, keeping a pillow on his lap, with empty eyes.

'Arun, are you not sleeping today?'

'I don't think that I can sleep today,' he sank into the bed and started staring at the ceiling.

'You look very depressed... What happened dear friend? Did you have a fight with her?'

'Premji... yesterday night, I had to witness the saddest event of my life,' he closed his eyes for some time.

?

'It was around eight o'clock in the evening and I was sitting in the casualty, all alone, after the completion of rounds. You know, Anitha, my friend, was on leave and luckily there were no serious cases to be taken care of. Then, she came... empty-handed... with a boy around six years... At the very first look, I could understand that he was suffering from Japan fever... quite common now in places very near to seashores... Poor boy... he was shivering with high temperature... the fever... it had affected his brain,' Arun became silent for a moment.

'Then?' I asked with painful anxiety.

'I admitted him immediately to the intensive care unit (ICU) and started medication after contacting Prof. Dr Haridas. You know Premji... after all it is a government institution... we have limitations everywhere... Luckily, he started responding to the medicines... temperature reduced... She was sitting outside the ICU praying silently, while the boy was sleeping inside like uprooted spinach.'

'Did you have anything?' I asked.

'No doctor... How is my son? Will he be alright?' she asked.

'Let's hope so,' I consoled her and I summoned one of the attenders to get her some food.

'Sir... he is my one and only kid... His father is no more and I have no relatives other than him... Sir, I was working as a home-nurse in the home of an aged couple... My son got this fever from the local school where water is so contaminated... They helped me get some medical aid from a nearby

private hospital... but, how can a helpless mother like me meet the expenses,' poor woman, aged around thirty seven, wiped her tears with her very old faded cotton Sari like her faded life.

Poor woman didn't have anything to change also and the rich are selling their old clothes at retail chains like Big Bazaar! Bastards! I felt a twinge of pain deep within.

'Don't worry.... He will be alright by His mercy,' I tried to console her before going back to casualty.

Another mother with a very beautiful young girl appeared in the casualty. She was also admitted to the ICU. Both the women sat on long chairs, outside ICU.

?

It was nearing eleven thirty and I checked the boy's condition again. But, his condition was getting deteriorated fast. 'Anything might happen,' the empty face of the aged nurse stood beside me warned. She might have seen thousands of cases like this in her service life! I should inform her as early as possible.

How to break a bad news? It's really important for any Doctor as there are maximum possibilities of getting hit! She was waiting for me near the ICU entrance, and the other woman was sleeping on dirty floor, covered with mosquitoes.

'Sir, how is he?' she asked while looking into my eyes.

Eyes, they are the most dangerous organs in human body as they cannot hide lies!

'He is not,' I tried to tell the truth, but she didn't allow me to complete.

'Sir... please, save my son... I have nobody other than him... Sir, this moment... you are my God... you are God... you can save him... Sir... you can only save him... you are my God,' poor woman was so confident in a doctor like me!

'God! Where are you! And where am I?' My heart started screaming for his mercy...

I went back and tried to sleep little bit, sitting on my chair. You can sleep in war-torn Somalia peacefully... but, it is quite unthinkable in any cities in Kerala! Mosquitoes fly around like continuous bullet fire from enemy guns... Garbage... Garbage everywhere... Even an IAS officer's wife throws garbage straight on the road! God! Please give me some chloroform... let me sleep for some time!

?

'Sir, please come with me... the boy started gasping,' the aged nurse woke me up at around two o'clock and I followed her to the ICU.

'Let's give him Oxygen,' I said. 'The ventilator is out of order.'

'Sir... I don't think he will.'

'No assumptions... let's pray,' I couldn't take away my eyes from his cherubic face.

Sadly I knew... she was right... She had witnessed many more deaths than me!

'Sir, let's inform her... otherwise it's going to be a problem.'

There she was on the dead cold dirty floor.

'Let her sleep,' I didn't want to interrupt her last peaceful slumber.

'As you wish,' the nurse went back.

?

'Sir... he is no more,' the nurse informed me at around four o'clock in the morning.

We woke her up.

'Sir... my son?' she asked in panic.

'Dear sister... See... I am no God... I am just a helpless Doctor,' I couldn't speak any further. Something was chocking my soul...

'Sir?' She stood like struck by a lightening.

'Yes... he is no more,' the experienced nurse informed her calmly.

She sat on the chair, closing her face with her empty hands and we stood beside her like two stone pillars. She lifted up her head after five minutes.

'Sir, will you please do me a favour?' She asked calmly.

'Yes... surely... please tell me.'

'Sir... Please make immediate arrangements... that young girl in ICU will lose her eyesight... if the corneas in both of her eyes are not replaced within a week... how sad... Let her see the world through his eyes.'

?

'And then?' I couldn't resist my heart.

'She walked away in the darkness' replied Dr Arun... 'Empathy, thy name is mother!'

Premji

MOURNING STAR (Short story)

MOURNING STAR

It was a fine morning, though I didn't find it so fine.

I had a big fight with my wife early in the morning. The reason was quite simple, I didn't collect my salary for the past three months. Being a gazetted officer, it is my duty to claim the salary directly from the treasury. But, the lazy man in me doesn't like to claim the bills and arrears regularly. So, my usual writing session inside the local train was also got disrupted.

How can a man write something when his mind is totally blank?

?

"Sir, Shalu is not writing the exam today," one of the brightest students in my class informed me, secretly.

"What is the reason Raj?"

"Sir... she is not feeling well," he replied swiftly. "She vomited several times in the morning."

"Tell her to meet me right now..."

?

Shalu entered into my office, quite tired, as exam was to start within one and a half hours.

"Shalu, how do you feel now?" I asked her calmly.

"Sir, I feel a bit giddy..."

"Did you have anything in the morning?"

"Sir, I had something... but, I vomited it out completely..."

"That's O.K... Please drink some water... otherwise it will cause de-hydration..." I offered her my water bottle, kept inside the bag. "So, today is your last examination, isn't it?"

"Yes Sir..."

"You will get through all the other exams... Am I right?"

"Yes Sir."

"And if you clear this exam, you can have your Diploma in Mechanical Engg... Am I right?"

"Yes Sir... But, I haven't learnt anything for today's examination... I am going to fail today," she was about to cry.

"Shalu"

"Yes Sir..."

"You can win... you will win," I said.

"But, how Sir?" she couldn't believe my words... "How is that possible, when I have no idea about the subject?"

"I am going to teach you the entire subject in an hour," I promised her.

"Sir, it was taught by Sunil Sir," Shalu had a doubt... "He took nearly four months to complete it..."

"So what? I need just half an hour for a student like you..."

?

Mr.Narayan, Shalu's beloved father, met me on the very evening. He was working as Assistant Engineer in PWD (Public Works Department), in an office next to our college. He used to help us in every possible way for the maintenance of our college buildings. Narayan is a great friend and a highly accepted man among the social as well as friend circles. His 'happy family' comprises of his wife, Shalu and her elder brother.

"Thanks Premji..." said Narayan.

"O! Narayan... What's there in it? That's the duty of a teacher... And I did so..."

"It might be a small thing for you... But, it is really very, very important to me... otherwise, she would have lost one year... Thanks Premji... Thanks a lot," he shook my hands tightly.

"So, what's her future plan?"

"She likes to go for Bachelor of Engineering in Mechanical Engineering..."

"Well and good... She has a great caliber for studies..."

"You are right Premji... But, she has immense tension during exams... I am not sure whether she can cope up with that..."

"That's quite natural with girls..." I laughed.

"Certainly not in everyone's case..." he too started laughing.

"But, she will get through with flying colours..." I had absolute faith in her.

?

"Sir, result has come," Shalu called me during the first week of June... "I got through Sir... with a distinction... Thank you.. Sir..."

And she came to meet me on the very next day with a handful of expensive chocolates.

"Sir..."

"Congratulations Shalu," I took a chocolate.

"Sir, please take some more... for your little boys..."

"O.K... You are the topper, aren't you?"

"Yes Sir... by your mercy...", she smiled.

"So... What is your future plan?"

"Sir, I have to secure a job... Will you please help me to get a good job?" she asked innocently.

"O! That's quite embarrassing! Narayan wants to send you for higher studies..."

"I know Sir... But, I have to find a job," Shalu was adamant on her decision... "I need a job very badly..."

?

Narayan met me on the very next week as the seat allotments for engineering seats started from the very next week.

"Premji... She is not interested for higher studies, it seems," said Narayanan, bit desperately... "You are the only one capable of revoking her firm decision..."

"Sure, I will... But, on one condition...", I said sternly.

"What's that?" Narayan was thrown into total confusion!

?

"Shalu... Why do you need a job, when you have every possibility to continue your studies?" I asked.

"I have it... Sir... But, I need a job very badly..."

"But, why? Are you in love with any of your friends?" I asked about the worst possibility, for a young girl of her age.

"No Sir... I have some other problems..."

"Please tell me openly..."

"Sir, I really envy upon my Dad's friendship with you!"

"My friendship? Ha...ha...ha..." I started laughing loudly. "But, why?"

"He is not that much friendly with any of us in our family," she replied painfully.

I was shattered to the core so that I could not speak to her for the next two minutes.

"Tell me... in detail..."

"Sir, before getting married to my Mom, he had an affair... And he is not out its hangover over so far... Unfortunately, he couldn't realize his dream... But, does it have anything to do with my Mom?"

"No... not at all..."

"Sir, he didn't let her join for any job, though she was well qualified... Do you know what happened to her life? She doesn't have the most valid thing... financial freedom! And naturally, she got transformed to someone having the same status of a servant... She doesn't have an opinion... A woman is getting vacuumized from her life... intimate personal life... She lives in a house, constructed on the core of a volcano... But... Sir... She has no complaints at all, since she loves him... she respect him... so deeply... Sir... We have, everything," Shalu stopped for some time...

"Sir... He provides everything we need... everything... But, we lack the most important thing... peace... smile... happiness... We love him a lot and he loves us a lot, that we know... But, we miss the true essence of family life... that unity... that love... My tensions are the bi-product of all these... I hate to walk on a tight rope... It's really dangerous..."

"That's why you need a good job!"

"Sir... Everyone is so happy in his company... everyone enjoy his selfless love and care... He is a role model for everyone... Everyone prides about his contended family life... that makes me real crazy," she stopped talking as a heavy downpour had taken an abrupt stop.

?

"Premji...", Narayan wanted to say something, but he couldn't.

I saw tears rolling down from his flooding eyes...

"Narayan... Anyone, who lives only in the past, is wasting his life forever. One must learn how to live in the present... Embrace the present to enjoy the finest moments in life..."

"You are right... Premji..."

"Don't worry, my friend... nothing is too late," I stopped for some seconds to gather the most truthful words of my life... "Go home as usual... have dinner together with your family... everyone must be there in the dining table... everyone... Togetherness is life... Narayan... Please try to crack some jokes... and when everyone is almost ready to sleep, call them beside you... everyone of your family... hug them tightly and cry for some time, together... Silence will wash away every drop of unhappiness... my friend... Heaven will dawn upon your family," I could see a morning star rising upon his innocent face, brighter than the Sun...

I started walking away, so lighthearted without even bidding Good Bye to him.

"Premji," Narayan called me from behind... "How many sweethearts did you have?"

"Just one! And now also JUST ONE!"

PREMJI

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD (Short story)

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD

"Shobha... Please put your signature on this document... See... Your husband needs it very badly..."

"What is it?" she asked me innocently.

"O... it's nothing ... but a divorce petition with mutual consent... Unfortunately, Pradeep is not gutsy enough to ask you..."

"How dare you ask me the same? Premji Sir, have you gone crazy?" Her beautiful eyes began to fire cannonballs to my heart... "Are you serious?"

"Unfortunately, yes!"

?

After many years of absence, I was back to the same institution where I began my official life as head of the department. Staff room was empty as a student's protest was going on. Students are puppets of political clowns most of the times. I sank into a plush chair and soon sleep began to dance upon my eyelids.

"Good Morning Sir," someone greeted me pleasantly who tore away a beautiful daydream mercilessly. I was forced to open up my eyes like a newborn blinking his eyes. "Sir, I am Pradeep, a demonstrator in our department," he tried to introduce himself.

"Take you seat Mr Pradeep..." He sat down happily in front of me. I could sense some sort of strange anxiety or curiosity upon his face. "So, how are things?" I asked him patiently.

"I will answer to your question tomorrow," he got up from chair.

"Pradeep, what is happening around?" I was totally confused.

"Pardon me... Sir... I cannot tolerate someone who is drunk," he replied calmly.

"But... I am not drunk!"

"May be... but... you still carry the smell... Sorry... I cannot tolerate that..." he walked away swiftly.

"Strange man..." I cursed myself and took a body spray from my bag... "Brute... What a strange name for a brutal spray!"

?

Next day... Pradeep was the first man to reach the office almost every day... and he was most punctual in his duty too.

"Good Morning Sir," Pradeep greeted me happily as if nothing had happened yesterday.

"Good Morning Pradeep..." I greeted him warmly.

"Forgive me... Sir, I cannot tolerate even the smell of alcohol... that's why..."

"That's OK... Usually, I don't take drinks... But, my colleagues threw me a sent off party day before

yesterday..." I tried for a quick cover-up. Unfortunately, it was true.

"That's OK Sir..."

?

Old friends are always the source of pleasure.

"What's wrong with Pradeep?" I asked Radhakrishnan, our peon, while sipping hot lemon tea in the college canteen. "He doesn't like even the smell of alcohol."

"Sir...don't you know that?" Radhakrishnan smiled.

"Who knows!"

?

"Sir, I lost my father when I was just ten... He died of liver cirrhosis... He was a maniac addict..." Pradeep stopped for a moment... "I haven't touched even a single drop of alcohol till today..."

"If you ever plan to have a peg, please let that be with me," I said. "You know, it's a honest plea."

"Sir, you have very good sense of humour," Pradeep smiled. "I will be on leave in the afternoon."

"What's the matter?"

"My father-in-law is back home after seven years... Old man is working in Dubai... I have to pick him up from the airport..."

Pradeep walked away.

?

Pradeep was absent for the whole next week. But, I was lucky enough to meet him near a de-addiction center one-day.

"Pradeep... what's happening around?"

Pradeep's father-in-law was sleeping peacefully on the cot. Shobha was sitting next to the bed.

"Sir... We were forced to drop him here... Old man is a maniac drunkard..." Pradeep said.

"Did he return penniless?"

"You are right... Sir..." replied Shobha.

I visited them many times during his de-addiction process. Soon, Shobha began to treat me like an elder brother. Pradeep was successful at last, though the old man acted strange many-a-times.

"Even a single drop of alcohol can take away your life," the doctor warned the old man when he was about to leave for home.

?

The old man was shifted to his home after one month long de-addiction treatment. Pradeep had the least interest to let him stay with them. But, Shobha, his beloved wife, was adamant to do so. As a result, her parents began to stay with them. But, on one condition by Pradeep: "no more drinking!"

Pradeep was absolutely right: the old man didn't have liver at all! He would die on the very next moment if he consumes alcohol again. Days went on as usual. The old man was fed up of all rotten soap programs in the TV. Slowly, he began to go out whenever Pradeep was not at home. Neither his wife nor his mother-in-law had any doubt upon him as the old man didn't have any access to money. There was nothing unusual in his activities till on that fateful day.

?

"Sir, Pradeep's father-in-law is no more," Rajesh informed me through mobile phone.

"When?"

"Just now... Pradeep caught him ready-handed and told him to get out of his home... right then! And the old man fainted down as he couldn't stand the shock... A massive heart-attack took away his life..."

?

Six months passed almost eventless. It was a pleasant sunny day in the spring season. Pradeep entered into my chamber with cover in his hand. And you know the rest.

"How dare you ask me the same? Premji Sir, have you gone crazy?" Shobha asked again.

"Why should I dare not? You love only maniac drunkards! Pradeep is only a tea-bag!"

"You are wrong..." she made an objection.

"May be... But... You haven't talked with him since your father's death... You have stopped loving him and..."

"You are wrong!" she was getting angrier.

"If the husband and wife have nothing to share and it's better to end up the relationship," I told calmly. "Instead of blaming him like hell, you should blame me first."

Shobha couldn't believe my words.

?

I had to slow down my car near that Ayurvedic Medicinal Shop as my right knee was paining like hell.

"Sir, what do you need?" Sunny Vaidyar, the local medical practitioner, appeared near the left window of the car.

"Some ointment to relieve knee pain," I replied. But, quite accidentally, I saw him sitting on a chair in front of the shop.

"Why is he sitting here?"

"He sits here from morning to evening... Some of his old friends get him one or two glasses of '*arishtam*'? the local Ayurveda liquor daily... He was the richest man here once, now he begs for a peg!" Sunny Vaidyar went back to his shop.

?

"Even, I didn't expect all these..." I couldn't face her powerful eyes. "If it could have been his father also, he would have done the same... He hates the habit of drinking so much... He is still merciless to such people."

"I just can't forgive him, Sir... My father succumbed to death in front of my eyes..." Shobha wiped her tears.

"Your father lived out his life fully as the way he liked and you still love him! Pradeep leads a very principled life, he comes home always in right time, he doesn't drink... But, you can't even tolerate him! Life is very complicated, my sister! Anyway, you have a long day to decide. Those who live only in the past gain nothing in the present!" I left the green colour application form on the table as I was about to leave.

"Sir..."

"Pradeep will be a little late today evening... I have arranged him a party... initiation to the kingdom of drunkards..." I showed her the cap of a Smirnoff Vodka bottle, peeking out from my shoulder bag. "It will make him wiser and happier!" I began to walk out, heavyhearted.

"Sir..." Shobha called me from behind. "You can collect the same tomorrow morning, if..."

"If?"

"Pradeep is either late or drunk in the evening..." She showed me the green colour application from.

A cute smile appeared upon her face though her eyes were flooding...

?

God! I must be thankful to my wife for replacing my old plastic water bottle with a fresh empty Vodka bottle!

Love you honey...

?

Premji

ONE AMONG NOBODY (Short story)

ONE AMONG NOBODY

"Premji Sir... Shall I call you "Dad"?"

I was shocked to the core as Ranju, one of my finest students, poured this humble request upon my benign soul. I couldn't answer whether "yes" or "no"! God! It's a confusing situation.

"Sir... Shall I?"

She was eager to know my response and her face reddened with some sort of special confusion. I sank deep into my seat and took a heavy breath... It was not of the same face when she came to my office along with her mother, in that afternoon, some four years back.

?

I was sitting all alone in my office with hell a lot of papers upon my table. It contained the lists of internal assessment marks ? to be uploaded to university website and many papers related with annual purchase of equipment and consumables.

Being the head of a department is real tough. One must be able to handle a bunch of people with different outlooks and habits. Students come from low income families... There are some from rich and influential families... Many others are there who work of a living and their studies... Again, problems associated with teachers are another mess. Some of them are unable to communicate with students properly which always ends up in discrimination... But, what to do?

Power means more responsibility.

My table and draw were never tidy, like my amorphous mind. Whenever I tried to arrange them in order, they ended up in new inventions. Life is stranger always! I switched on the computer and started checking the comments received for my latest poem in poetfreak.com.

"Premji Sir, may I come in?" twenty year old Ranju showed her head through the half door.

"Yes... Come in."

But, she was closely followed by her mother.

"O.K... Please tell me the matter..." I said while showing them two seats immediately opposite to me.

"Sir, Ranju was not feeling well for the past one month," her mother began to speak.

"But, Sir... She has attendance shortage now."

"I know... She was quite irregular throughout the past one and a half years. Without enough attendance, that means eighty percent, it is impossible to attend for examinations." I replied in an unsentimental manner. 'she can take readmission by next year. This is all I can do for her.'

"I know Sir... But, she will lose a year..." Her mother tried to plead though she was having deadly anger against her daughter.

"I am sorry, Madam ... Unfortunately, I cannot entertain such a request. You know, I have to run a department!"

Ranju kept her hands upon the table as if nothing has happened. I was shocked to see her nails, as dark as coal tar.

"Did you have to undergo any sort of chemotherapy?" I asked her calmly.

"No Sir," she replied inertly.

"I will do one special favour... You can attend the classes along with your classmates," I told her and went back to my work, unfinished, in the computer. They left without another word. I could hear Ranju's mother scolding her loudly, outside.

?

It is really boring to teach students. I never wanted to corrupt their thought process. Heads of institutions are supposed to take elective subjects mainly. I was forced to adopt a funny strategy to get out of this monotony. Every subject contained four modules and each module was allotted with eighteen hours. It covered the entire four modules in eighteen hours. Engineering is more than learning. In fact, it's a way of life!

"Students, you all have a clear idea about the subject that I am handling," I started interacting with them quite casually.

"Yes Sir," around ten percent students in the class replied.

"O.K... Let's make our own text book. What do you say?"

"But ... Sir..?"

"Here is the strategy... Create a new facebook group, especially for academic activities. Now, I will divide your class to four core groups. Each group has to find out maximum number of questions from the module allotted to them. Post them along with their answers in your special facebook group. I will go through each post and suggest the corrections. What do you say?"

"This sounds interesting Sir..." some boys said loudly.

"Once this process is completed, you can copy and paste the entire material according to your syllabus in a word document, your text book will be ready!" I said calmly.

"Done Sir...done!"

"But?" I stopped in the middle.

"But?" The entire class was eager to hear from me.

"Then... I will sit on the back bench and each one of you will have to teach me what you have prepared!"

"O!"

"We must utilize social media for teaching too... See... once you create such a group, I no longer need a notice board... If I wish give you some selection on the previous night of an examination, it could be done through facebook."

"What an idea! Sir ji..." Someone from the last bench shouted. Everything went well and posts started flooding in facebook, except from Ranju.

?

It was a fine afternoon and I summoned for Ranju through one of the junior students. She was in my office with two minutes.

"Sir..."

"Ranju... I went through your school records. And I know that you are very brainy girl..."

"Thank you, Sir," she replied while placing her hands upon my table.

Her nails were getting clearer.

"What happened to your nails? How come they have turned black?"

"Sir... that...", she was not in a mood to continue to talk.

"Never mix up your studies with your personal problems! If you do so, you will be the ultimate loser! Are you aware of that?"

"Yes, Sir... But, I can't study at my home...", she began crying.

"But why?"

"Nobody loves me!" She wiped her tears using her left hand. "Sir... Do you know... what happened three years back?"

"What happened?"

"My brother got a merit seat at Trivandrum Medical College for MBBS degree after clearing entrance examination."

?

"My entire family... Sir my father has four sisters and so do my mother... Ours is a huge family. They all were assembled at Kavery inn, a huge resort near my house, to congratulate my brother's solid achievement. I love him dearly and he is the only boy child in our entire family. Everyone loves him dearly and every need of him is taken care of by many! Sir, my mother is the most biased... She doesn't love me at all!"

"What's your father doing?"

"Nandakumar, my beloved father, is a business man and my mother is a house-maker, especially for my brother."

"Ranju... Don't you have any achievement?" I asked her calmly.

"I had many. But, what's the use? They were of no importance in their eyes. I am a second rated child in my family. Sir, I tried to grab their attention by becoming a rebel. But, that too didn't work out."

"Very sad!"

"Sir... I was craving for love... I was craving for some sort of appreciation... I was ashamed of my pathetic existence until I met him. And he introduced me many unhappy girls and boys."

?

"Your daughter is missing!" Mamma rang up and told my father on the very day I stopped attending classes. "She is not yet back home..."

"What happened actually?" I asked Ranju.

"Since I was craving for love, I got into the company of wrong ones. I was heavily drunk when father located me in a dancing party at a five star hotel in Kochi. Mobile phones are a real mess, Sir! He could pin-point my location with the help of that!"

Ranju started laughing, still looking at her blue nails.

"Then?"

"Then what! They started treating me like a stinking dog!"

"Is it?"

"Only death could give me honour! A weed doesn't deserve any honour! I took a whole bottle of "Round-up" ? the weed killer. But, I was bitterly defeated there also!"

I was shocked to hear her personal account!

"Sir... I have no merit... there is no meaning in life... I find everything hollow... love... life.... relations... education..." Her eyes resembled that of a dead fish! "Now my entire family treats me as their worst foe!"

"Dear Ranju! The secret of unification is pointing out the foe!" I began laughing and she too joined me. "But... I am here to appreciate you... See... You have overcome that deadly poison too! Only a solid mind can ever survive from such a deadly poison! Every game ends up in disaster... Count the blessings, my child!"

"Sir... Are you kidding me?"

"No way... And you deserve a special appreciation for it... I will give you enough attendance to appear for examinations so that you can save a year. I am going to violate the rules for the sake of you. What do you say?"

"Thank you, Sir."

"You are consistently poor at all labs... That's your only weakness... I will help you in that too..."

"Thank you Sir."

"All life, you have been desperately trying to change your parents! But, what is the result? Nothing has happened! Better change yourself! That's the simplest of all options. Nobody can take away your happiness unless you allow them to do so!"

"Sir... I can't study at home! I will go mad whenever I reach there!"

"Ranju... You deserve more appreciations... from me... from your friends... from this college... from the university... from the society... and from your parents..."

"Am I?"

"Yes... Do you know what is meant by "excellence?" Do a "little more" than your duty! So, train yourself to be alone even in a crowd. Be attached to everything and be detached the most at the same time!"

?

Our textbook building was a huge success as Ranju was the sheen anchor of the project. Ninety five percent students go through with high grades under her leadership.

"We are immersed in information but, striving for knowledge! So, shall I teach you anymore?" I asked at the beginning of the next semester with a new subject.

"No Sir...", my students started shouting. "We can manage!"

"Great!"

"How is life?" I asked Ranju.

"Most attached and most detached except you!" She smiled.

"Intelligent girl!"

?

Ranju completed engineering with flying colours. Unfortunately, she didn't maintain any contacts with me afterwards. And today, two years, she appeared in my cabin again.

"Why didn't you call me even at least once?" I asked her.

"Sir, you used to tell us... Every man is a separate book... Every man is a separate world..."

"And, every woman is a new book, exactly like you!"

"Sir, I took a great decision on that very afternoon that I had spent with you, that I would come again to meet you only with my greatest achievement in life. Everyone has to aim something bigger to claim more dignity... care and appreciation... Whenever I was down, I thought of your happy face after listening to the news of my victory, that too straight from me," Ranju began crying. "Sir, I am alive today just because of that afternoon."

"O! Dear... please tell me the happy news!" I was getting impatient the most.

"Sir, I have secured twelfth rank in IFS... Indian Foreign Service... They informed me just twenty minutes earlier and I haven't told anyone except you!"

"Congratulations! Ranju! Congratulations!"

"Sir..."

"Yes..."

She looked deep into my eyes for some time as if she was gathering strength.

"Premji Sir... Shall I call you "Dad"?"

Premji

PANDEMIC DREAMS

PANDEMIC DREAMS

I see the mountains
So far, so clear,
After many long years
Of contamination!
O Mama,
You are having
A great face-lift
After lock-downs!

I see wild swans
And dolphins
Back in rivers
And butterflies
Flutter everywhere!
O Mama,
You are having
A new life-path
After severe lock-downs!

Air is so pure,
Wind is so cool,
Fragrant and refreshing!
But,
I am not
I am not free to
Feel the freshness!
O Mama,
Why did you lock-down my face?

Time seems to be

Going faster
Drenched in fear and
Deep depression,
Time is speeding up
Fuelled with pandemic dreams!
O Mama,
Please
Unmask my face
And return my smile.
O Mama,
Unmask my face
And return my soul.

O Mama,
Let's dream for
A mask-free new world....

Premji
11/4/2021

SCENT OF A WOMAN (Short story)

SCENT OF A WOMAN

That small lake and the Sea were separated by a thin band of sand. And I used to stand here, on the long bridge above the lake, to watch Sun set in my younger days.

And that day, I stood there again... But, with a difference: I was in Uniform, Circle Inspector of Police. The dead-body of a very young woman was floating over lake water... Were it a suicide or a murder?

God knows... It's the head ache of every Policeman...

'Sir, he had gone somewhere... mobile is also switched off,' the Policemen who went in search of Thampi, former cadaver keeper in the Medical College, said.

'It's already getting late... How can we lift her body from water before nightfall?' I asked the crowd whose eyes were busy moving along with her floating body... 'Can anyone help us?'

They didn't reply either yes or no... numbskulls... I was in a huge dilemma... Then somebody stopped a modified Mahindra Scorpio SUV near me.

'Hi... Premji'

'Hi... Nazar... When did you come from London?'

'Three days back... I thought of meeting you... with Royal Salute,' he laughed... 'Tell me, what's going on here?'

'Dead body of a young woman is floating down... and nobody is ready to lift her up,' I spelled out my desperation.

'Is that a real problem?' Nazar asked.

'Yes'

He parked the vehicle on a side and started removing his shoes.

'What are you up to?'

'Just to lift her up,' he smiled while removing his jeans and shirt. 'Just two minutes,' he jumped into the Scorpio SUV. He consumed nearly 200 ml of raw Vat 69. 'Just for some guts,' he laughed.

'Thudd.' He plunged into the water and within no time she was lying on the ground. She was about to swell and her eyes were eaten by fishes... The public were busy raping her with their eyes.

'To lift a dead body in your place, someone has to come from UK.... Now... Get lost you... Bastards,' I shouted burning with anger... 'Dirty sons of bitches...'

Nazar laughed while consuming the remaining Vat 69.

?

After two weeks, he called from UK and I envisioned what happened in his house there in UK...

through his words...

Premji, my son was away at school... and only my wife was there at home. When I was to hug her, she pushed me away. Did she smell something foul on my body?

'Is this the way to treat your husband when he is back after a long journey?'

'Of course... it is like this... Mr.Nazar... Answer me... why did you lift her dead body?'

'Dead body? Whose dead body?'

'Don't try to act... Mummy rang up and told me'

'Did your Mom get training from Scotland Yard?'

'Naaaazar... don't try to change the subject... God knows... whether she was a prostitute or an AIDS patient... tell me... Why did you lift her body?'

'You want to know that?'

'Yes... I must' she was adamant.

'Whether dead or alive... women deserve respect,' I said calmly and she hugged me tight in a quick move....

'Scent of a woman! I feel the scent of a woman on your body,' she said calmly...

Premji

SENSATIONAL NEWS (Short story)

SENSATIONAL NEWS

It was around eight o'clock in the morning and the Railway canteen looked almost empty. Twelve year old Ayyappa Das - a neatly dressed, bit dark, Telugu boy entered in quite happily.

'What would you like have today?' waiter asked.

'One plate Iddly* Sambhar*, and two sets parcel,' he answered coolly in an alien language... a perfect blend of Malayalam, Tamil and Telugu... (Indian languages)

Ayyappa Das carefully dipped one small iddli in hot sambhar, and started eating very slowly. It resembled a practical demonstration: how to eat!

'Only those who know real hunger can eat like this,' a Sergeant, belonging to Railway Protection Force, told. He was watching him carefully, from the very moment he had entered in.

'Sir... he is seen here for the last two weeks... Nobody has any idea about him... like from where does he come... or what does he do?' the Railway canteen owner told the Sargent in Malayalam... 'Quite mysterious boy...'

'Will he come tomorrow?'

'I think so'

Ayyappa Das collected the parcel and handed over a five hundred rupee note. The boy collected the balance and left the canteen. Sergeant's face grew darker and darker.

?

Sixty eight year old Krishnan Namboodiri was watching BBC News, after finishing the morning duties, inside that two bedroom flat. The slanting rays of the morning Sun fell on his wrinkle-free face, which gave him an additional aura. Devaki Antharjanam, his beloved wife, was bedridden inside, as steel rods were inserted in her left leg due to multiple fractures. She needed someone's help always.

'Thanks to painkillers,' Namboodiri told himself as she was sleeping peacefully when he had a quick glance through the half closed door.

'Good Morning... Namboodiri Sir,' I greeted him warmly.

'Good Morning... Premji... Today is a holiday for you, isn't it?'

'Yes Sir... One of the Ministers of the State is no more'

'That is the one and only advantage you get from a politician... that too only after his death!' he said while laughing.

'How is Madam today?'

'Much better'

Suddenly a twenty five year old beauty entered in without even asking for permission.

'Pardon me Madam... I am afraid... I don't know....,' Namboodiri Sir stopped abruptly.

'Don't worry, Sir... Premji knows me'

'Sir.. She is Ms. Sangeetha... a noted journalist by profession....,' I introduced her. 'She has a couple of great stories in her credit and one of them lead to the political exile of some leaders,'

'Please... take your seat Madam,' he welcomed her. 'Premji, you talk with her, and in the mean time I will prepare some coffee'

'Thanks... But, no need of it... Sir, where is that boy?' her voice was not that pleasing.

'Who?'

'I don't know his name,'

'O... Ayyappa Das... He has gone for tuition... without knowing Malayalam, it's not easy for him to survive here in Kerala' Namboodiri Sir replied calmly.

'Don't you know that child labour is a criminal offense?' Ms. Sangeetha was getting aggressive.

'What offense? I am his local guardian... Let me ask you a very simple question.... Who are you?'

'I am Sangeetha. We run a non-profit organization named 'M&K,' partnered with Childline*. We got a complaint from a very reliable source...' she replied, that too her temper was steaming up!

'Will you please explain me what is Childline?' Namboodiri Sir asked.

'We support children... We save them from all sorts of exploitation,'

'What kind of children?'

'Children who live on the street with their families and often work on the street... There may be children from migrated families, or temporarily migrated and are likely to go back to their homes. Children who live on the street by themselves or in groups and have remote access or contact with their families in the villages. Some children travel to the cities for the day or periods of time to work and then return to their villages. Children who have no ties to their families such as orphans, refugees and runaways,' she started talking quite fast as if recorded in her soul!

'He doesn't belong to any of these,' Namboodiri Sir declared openly in the middle.

'Is he your son?'

'No.'

'Is he your adopted son?'

'Yes'

'Do you have any substantial evidences with you now?'

'No'

'What?'

'What is wrong in helping a child?' Namboodiri Sir was getting confused.

'Sir... There is nothing wrong in helping a child... But, what you do now is illegal... I am so sorry... we are be forced to lodge a complaint against you,' she told her clear-cut decision.

'Sangeetha... Why do you want to insult a reputed man and his bedridden wife, without even knowing the truth?' I asked

'What truth? Premji... Such people will have a million truths to say! Everyone wants someone to relieve his or her burdens... Unfortunately children are the victims,' there was contempt projected in her voice.

'Madam, are you bold enough to go Hyderabad along with Premji? You can go by the morning flight... and come back in the evening flight... don't worry... I will bear the expenses...' Namboodiri Sir asked her politely though he was burning with anger.

'For what?'

'To know the truth... the truth... brighter than millions of Suns,'

'Yes,' she said aloud as her boldness was deep hurt!

?

Anuradha Menon was waiting there in Hyderabad Airport with her white Maruti van.

'Hello Premji,' she hugged me tightly.

'Hi Anu... How are you?'

'We are fine,' she then extended her hand towards Sangeetha.

'Anuradha Menon... Anuradha Menon,' Sangeetha stood motionless for a moment... she couldn't believe her eyes...

'Do you know me?'

'Yes... Madam... I admire you... from my college days,' Sangeetha replied with lot of admiration.

Sangeetha was almost silent during the whole journey. It took almost forty minutes to enter into the compounds of 'Swathantra' (the freed), the headquarters of an NGO, helping destitute women and children. The tall buildings made of mud resembled the simplicity of life there. Constructions were still going on.

'Mud is stronger than concrete... It was the building material of the past... future too!' Anuradha Menon told. 'Sangeetha... This place was donated by Devaki ji'

'Who is that... Madam?' Sangeetha asked.

'The better-half of Krishnan Ji'

'Who is Krishnan Ji?'

'Yes... He only sent you here...' Sangeetha felt somewhat guilty...

'Premji,' Anuradha Menon tossed the van key to me, 'Go and meet your old friends'

?

'Krishnan Ji was the Chief Editor of 'Jwaala... the flame,' one of the top circulated dailies in Telugu language. He was the only man who stood with us when we started saving women and children from brothels... His people protected us day and night from their gangsters... He arranged loans for us... He is our one and only surety other than God!' Anuradha Menon told her while walking through their campus.

'But, only very few know that'

'Good Morning Deedi*,' children, who were studying under a tree, very warmly greeted Anuradha Menon .

'A very Good Morning for all,' she cheered them up. 'I will clear your doubts in the evening'

'Wonderful kids... Deedi,' Sangeetha told.

'Very loving boys... Unfortunately, the world is so cruel at them. Most of them don't know who is their biological father... But, I am their father, mother and everything!'

'Deedi... You didn't say anything about Ayyappa Das?'

'We are going to meet his mother,' Anuradha said calmly.

?

There... she was lying inside a well-ventilated room... her hands and legs resembled the twigs in winter... her eyeballs were like two burnt out stars... Yes... she was the star of so many 'fleshy dream nights! And not even a low-paid prostitute in India, doesn't have the guts to ask her customer to wear a condom!

'Banu... how are you today?' Anuradha Menon asked.

'I am so tired... Deedi... I can't even move my fingers,' a pale voice escaped from a drum ribbed with two hundred and six bones...

'See... Ayyappan has sent presents for you through Sangeetha... Cakes... Christmas cakes... We will cut them in the evening,' Anurandha introduced her.

'Madam, how is he?' the feeble woman asked Sangeetha in Tamil.

'He is fine,' Sangeetha told.

'Does he eat anything? Does he study well? Do you teach him? Will he come to meet me?'

'Yes... he misses you a lot,' Sangeetha prepared herself to tell a series of lies...

'She is counting her days... Slim disease eats away her life like hungry maggots,' Anuradha Menon told Sangeetha while returning.

'Slim disease... what is that?' Sangeetha asked.

'H.I.V'

?

Ayyappa Das was away when we reached his home on the very next day morning.

'Sir... I am extremely sorry,' Sangeetha didn't feel like talking more as her soul was bruised with guilt. She felt words were dying down at her throat itself.

'Don't worry... Real experiences strengthen life,' Namboodiri Sir calmed her.

'I know... Sir'

'Sangeetha, why don't you write about Anuradha Menon and her NGO called 'Swathantra'?' I asked.

'That's a wonderful idea... Premji... Surely, I will write about our trip to Hyderabad... Sure... I will write about Ayyappa Das too,' Sangeetha was really exhilarated.

'I will not allow that,' Namboodiri's voice raised above all.

'But, Sir?' Sangeetha was perplexed.

'You have every right to write about Anuradha and Swathantra... that's sensible journalism... But... you have no right to write about Ayyappa Das... If you do that... that's called sensational journalism... A journalist is not a hunter... but a fighter... Do have empathy on anything or anyone... about whom you write,' Namboodiri Sir told, with an unexpected glow on his face.

'Sorry... Sir... I understand...' Sangeetha replied with self-contempt.

'Wrong information, shared with the public, can cripple many lives... Clarifications on the next editions do nothing!'

'I understand... Sir'

'Banu passed away yesterday evening, immediately after you both left her...' Namboothiri Sir told us.

'Very sad...' Sangeetha said.

'But, I am very thankful to you... Ms Sangeetha.'

'Me? Why Sir?'

'Yes... Your kind words relieved her from eternal pain...' he wiped his tears.

Ayyappa Das appeared there with some sets for Iddli - Sambhar food parcels.

A cute smile appeared on his face when he saw us.

Sangeetha couldn't stop hugging him as she felt her heart would blast into millions of fragments....

'Now, you have an elder sister too...'

Ayyappa Das didn't understand anything... He stood as an embodiment of smile...

?

PREMJI

SILENT SIGNS (Short story)

SILENT SIGNS

'Premji... I will kill you on the spot if you don't reach there in time!' wife cautioned me over mobile phone.

'Anxiety, thy name is Mom!' I told myself.

It was nearing 3.30 in the evening and I was on the way to that expensive English Medium School, where my kids are studying. Monsoon paid a surprise visit and I was forced to take temporary refuge under a huge Banyan tree, aside the railway cross.

The railway-gate remained closed, awaiting the huge metal beast. Rain was coming down harder and the short queue of vehicles started growing on both the sides of that narrow railway-gate. And at last, a local train disappeared through the rain.

?

An Auto-rickshaw, unoccupied, had come to a halt beside me.

'Will you please drop me near the Central school? You know... that school is quite new to my sons,' I requested the Auto-rickshaw driver, a man in the fag-end of forties. 'If I don't reach there in time, they will start crying.'

He stared at me for a moment. His eyes seemed very heavy.

'Might be watching the late night matches of Euro Cup,' I told myself. 'Auto-drivers are great admirers of football!' Unfortunately, he didn't care me at all and the rain kept on intensifying. Suddenly, the railway gate was opened and several engines roared into life. To my dismay, the he sped away.

'Shit,' I cursed myself.

'Please get in... Sir,' he returned within a minute. 'Even, I too have a son...,' he told calmly.

'That's O.K.... thank you.'

The auto-rickshaw crossed the railway gate. He, desperately, tried to accelerate, though the heavy downpour made the windshield glass virtually opaque. The ringtone of his old Nokia mobile phone resembled the angry voice of the dissidents during a political party meeting. He picked the call up in loud-speaker mode.

'Sunny, he has fainted again,' I could clearly hear the panicked male voice from the other end. 'Poor boy is in real bad condition.'

'I know... I know... That's what the doctor said, while discharging him from the Government Medical College Hospital... yesterday,' Sunny, the auto-driver, replied painfully.

I could see the heaviest downpour of my life, in his eyes.

'Nhummm'

The auto-rickshaw continued running swiftly.

'He advised us to take him home... It seems, no hope... May be... he wanted to save us from further debts... but... you know... I don't have a home.'

'I know.'

'Dr.Markandeyan, the most famous neurosurgeon, promised me to remove his brain tumor tonight... but, I have to surrender Rs.100000/- (\$2000), by the evening... he is charging only for the expenses.'

'Then?'

'Students and staff from his beloved school... they gave me Rs.25000/- (\$500)... Auto-rickshaw driver's union, they paid me another Rs.25000/- I had to vacate my rented house... to get the advance amount paid ...Rs.10000/- (\$ 200)... If anything happens, I don't have a place to...'

'Don't worry..., ' I could listen to the painful reply.

My heart started fuming like volcano about to burst. Forgive me God... Forgive me...

'I don't have a place... now... my friend... to dump my household articles... The gentle house owner, allowed me to keep them in her empty car shed, temporarily. Somehow, I have to arrange Rs.40000/- (\$800) more by the evening,' he changed the gear.

I could see the huge buildings of their school through the rain. 'O! Shit!' I had to curse myself as I hadn't taken my purse purposely.

?

'Premji... keep your purse at home..., ' my wife continued her telephonic conversation.

'Why dear?'

'You know 'why,'... When I am striving hard to meet our monthly expenses, Rs 5000/- is hidden in your purse... that too for purchasing oil colours... your newly found expensive passion.'

'O.K... dear... Peace of mind is more important than passions!'

'Good... You can pursue your passions and realize your dreams when we become rich..., ' she laughed from the other end.

I love her laughter after every silly fight!

?

The Auto-rickshaw was stopped near the school gate and I handed him over the one and only Rs.100/- note with me.

'Sir, I don't have change to pay the balance,' he told.

'That's O.K, brother.'

'Thanks... brother,' he sped away....

All I could offer you is the prayer of my life!

?

'Daaaad... you are crying!' My sons, whom were standing near the security room, shouted aloud.
'No my boys... My eyes are drenched by the unexpected rain.'
Pain, thy name is life!

Premji

STARDUST (Short story)

STARDUST

'Premjeeeee,' my wife began to shout from the kitchen.

'Please don't eat my brains in the morning...dear... You know, I am writing a story.'

'You can keep on writing stories to astonish your readers! But, don't forget that 'you' have two small boys... If you don't take care of them right now, leave them forever,' she couldn't control her anger. (Yes... she is right... Most artists never care their families! An unfortunate universal truth!)

'Dad, get us Flintstones,' my younger son started shouting.

'Idiot... who are you to command me? See... I am your Dad... Add 'please' before that 'get'. Understand?' I poured the same anger upon him.

'Yes Dad.'

'O.K... What's that?'

'A cartoon DVD... Gloria Aunt has a copy.'

'Anger is a dirty form of energy, which will retrace the origin. Don't you know that?' my elder son asked.

'What?'

'You only taught us!'

'Is that so?'

?

Gloria aunt, an Anglo-Indian woman, is living all alone in a beautiful heritage home in Fort-Cochin. Arabian Sea is at a stone-throw distance from her home. Her father, a heavily paid employee of Kolar Gold Mines, purchased that beautiful building way back in the forties. Her twin-sons Wilfred and Alfred, now residing in US, force her to join them almost every day. But, she never cares!

Being her next-door neighbor, I have a very special place in her heart. Sometimes, she calls me either 'Alfred' or 'Wilfred' and I call her 'Mamma'. She loves me a lot since I am an ardent listener of her well-crafted stories. I love her a lot since she has the biggest collection of movies: DVD's of classics from almost every language on earth to local disasters! Whenever Alfred or Wilfred visits her, they bring an aircraft full of movies and she keeps them in a very orderly manner. But, now-a-days, she prefers cartoons and I am afraid, my sons would replace me soon from her heart!

'Everybody will become a child in the fag-end of their lives!' she laughed.

?

Two months back...

We were celebrating her seventieth birthday. Her sons too joined from US through 'skype.' Internet kills distance and time too! That's why every Airline company across the world is sinking! If they come to know about this fact, sure they would contact some criminal gangs to cut those thick Internet cables laid under the sea, connecting continents! World is just a small playground now! Tomorrow, it's going to be the biggest jail!

Some rare DVDs of 'Shyam,' a local 'heavy-head-weight champion' superstar, was my birthday present to her since he was her favorite local actor.

'Premji... Shyam is a terrific actor... I have decided to give him a treat someday... I love his dreamy... romantic... eyes... real 'Stardust!'

'Mamma... One day... Sure, I will try to bring him here as a surprise... Together, you both can enact an old love song.'

'You naughty,' Mamma got angry.

Woman looks so beautiful when she is angry! Try to make her laugh then! If possible, she will never leave you!

?

Shyam, the aging superstar, was traveling in his brand new BMW 7 series car, the latest addition to his fleet. The soothing music, that too from one of his blockbusters, dissolved into the ears of his driver.

He tried to cover the wrinkles around his neck by a colorful muffler. Repeated injections of Botox, made his facial wrinkles improved. If the effect of that muscle relaxant could last for two years at least, he wished sincerely. He cursed the poor quality make-up materials of yesteryears, which added infinite amount of toxins to his body, silently.

'Maintaining one's own popularity is a real burden,' he touched his arc-light-tanned hands. 'It could disfigure me some day,' he told himself while closing the expensive mirror fixed behind the front seat.

'Sam, pull over the car that side.'

He jumped out immediately after the car made an abrupt stop and started walking swiftly toward that heritage home adjacent to the sea. His aged knees, not ready to agree with his stardom, had begun to pain. What to do? The show must go on!

?

'Crazy idiot,' Sam thought while standing beside the luxury car. Poor man desperately wanted to become an actor. He even changed his name to 'Sam', a word having close resemblance to 'Shyam'. But, unfortunately he could only get transformed to a 'driver with star value!'

'Someday, he will give me also a chance,' it was the most repeated dialogue in his life.

'Get lost,' he started pelting stones at the crows resting peacefully on the branches of trees near-by.

'Single dropping on his car... lousy bastard will make me eat that,' he told himself. 'Every Car dealer gives him cars almost half the rate as a reward for 'hidden reference' and he gets enough margin when he sells it off with a new branding: 'a car used by Shyam'

A very beautiful teenage girl passed by.

'O! This is Shyam Sir's car,' a lovely sentence escaped from her beautiful mouth. 'Will you please introduce me to him?' she asked innocently.

'Sure... but,' Sam stopped in the middle.

'But?'

'What is my benefit?' His eyes started crawling down through her well-shaped body.

'Get lost...you....,' she walked away and the crows started making horrible noise as if they were congratulating her!

?

'Shyam,' Gloria Aunt couldn't believe her eyes. 'Premji is a wonderful guy... He kept his promise'

'Who is Premji?'

'My next door neighbor and a writer himself... He promised me to bring you here!'

'I am afraid; I do not know any Premji. I just dropped in... That's all,' he smiled

'Please take your seat,' Gloria Aunt requested him while searching for the remote control to switch off the T.V. The movie, running, was one of his blockbusters of yesteryears!

'No need to switch that off... Just reduce the volume a little,' the Narcissus in him told. He was desperately in need of another super-hit like that to survive in the most unstable industry ever: 'The Cinema'. A causeless uneasiness started creeping through his soul.

'O.K... Let me get you some chilled French Wine?'

'That will be a wonderful choice!'

'By that time, if you want, you can freshen up there,' Aunt showed her expensive toilet.

Shyam left happily, that too after thirty minutes long conversation with 'the fan of his life'!

?

'Mamma, you could have called me,' I couldn't hide my disappointment.

'Sorry Premji... You know... at that time... I thought... that... I was in cloud-nine,' Mamma replied innocently.

'O.K... Then... what did he talk with you? I like the authentic way, he talks to the media... Please... tell in detail'

'O... there was nothing important,' she told, uninterested.

'Mamma... you disappoint me.'

'He is not 'Stardust,' my son, as I thought earlier.'

'Then?'

'Bloody star-waste!'

It was the first time in my life; I heard a rough word from her mouth.

'Mammaaa.'

'Yes... Mamma only... Do you know, what did he say... immediately after handing over this visiting card, before he had left?'

'No.'

'If I am ready to sell this house, anytime, I am free enough to contact him! Real estate is his main business... it seems... and he would give me the best offer... Cunning bastards, who debaucherize art, are roaming in expensive cars to befool poor people... Premji... You... You should write this for the sake of me, 'Mamma commanded like Queen Victoria!

Premji

STIGMATA OF LOVE (Short story)

STIGMATA OF LOVE

First week of May 2011

I was sitting inside the laboratory block of that polytechnic college. I had been there, that too for the first time in my life, as an external examiner for conducting practical examinations for final year Automobile Engineering Diploma students.

"A student has come with Chicken Pox. Will you allow him to attend the examination?" Kishore, a demonstrator rushed in and told me.

"No... No... He cannot be allowed to attend the examination... See, Chicken pox is a contagious disease. It is against the rules," internal examiner Sajikumar told loudly.

Kishore went back and the boy walked in. His face seemed very childish and his pale eyes were about to rain.

"Please allow me Sir... This is my last chance," he started begging openly to Sajikumar.

"See, Premji is the external examiner... If he allows, I have no objection," Saji told him without any mercy.

He stood before me like a lamb staring at a butcher.

"What is your name?"

"Robin Roy."

"How many back-papers do you have?"

"A.C... All clear Sir"

"How many more practical exams do you have?"

"Two more Sir... today's lab exam and another one for improvement."

"All the theory papers are already over. How is your family?"

"I come from very poor background Sir... I do not know how to find money for my treatment."

"What is your aggregate so far?"

"69%"

"Kishore, give him two answer books," I told the demonstrator. "Now Robin you do one thing... write the procedures for both experiments. Write results and the missing parts... Sign on both the registers of attendance... Your next exam is on 12th, isn't it? I am going to conduct both of your exams today itself."

"Thank you... Sir"

"Just write the procedure and push off... Don't even try to touch a machine part," I told him. Contended, he walked away with two answer scripts.

"I didn't expect this from you Sir... This is totally against rules... What happens if he dies before 12th? All the registers will say that his exams are conducted... Then this Right to information and

other craps... you make me crazy," Saji was getting angry.

"Nothing will happen, my friend."

"You broke the laws... basic rules of academics," Saji was not ready to leave, as he too had equal responsibility as that of me.

"My Guru G Ramachandran said these lines long back... There are three kinds of laws. 1. Manmade law 2. Social law 3. God's law.... A Man made law can be broken social cause... A social law can be broken God's law. I have broken a man made for God's law... Otherwise he might have lost one year and a distinction... And one more thing, we are going to give him 80% for both the exams..."

"O.K Sir, your decision is right, now write and give me 3 songs for my music album. I have to compose music for them during my free time," the Music Director in Saji told.

"Art makes a life worth living!"

We both forgot the same incident and I back after six or seven days.

?

31st May

I got up quite late in the morning and had a quick shave. Quite unusually, my face had excessive burning sensation.

'Daddy, please take me to Karikkakom Temple... I like to throw 'Pori' (rice grains made like pop-corn) to the fishes and those green turtles living in the temple pond.'

'We shall go in the evening....' I promised him.

?

As promised, my boys had a wonderful time in the temple during the evening.

Back home, I removed my shirt. My mother-in-law spotted a red boil on my stomach area. 'Son, this is not a good symbol... It is the holy mother's gift!'

"What kind of gift?" I was getting confused.

"I think... Chicken Pox"

We headed to the Doctor nearby.

?

'Premji, this is Chicken Pox', the Doctor confirmed. 'Now, take anti-biotic... no fried items... have plenty of tender Coconut water... and take plenty of rest.'

We were about to go back...

'Let's meet one more Doctor... I think this is Tomato fever', my wife told.

My life was becoming like a ripe Tomato!

'Her assumption is correct... I will give you some simple medicines... later you can take some Homeopathic Medicines...', the quite experienced new doctor told me.

"Sir, I have to travel 300 kilometers tomorrow, to join my new college", I told

'Transfers are the worst enemies of every government employee,' he laughed while accepting the fees.

?

June 1st

I joined the same college, from where I picked up Chicken Pox, on the very next day. I ran away from there after applying for 14 days leave to live in isolation... No TV... no Computer... no internet... No night games...

I couldn't even see my children... It was absolute madness...

?

June 23rd

And today, after three weeks of leave, I am back on duty... My wife and children were 200 kilometers away from my working place, and from now on I could meet them once in a week! A family is splintered into two!

We were sitting in the staff room... Being the most senior man, I am in charge of the Head of Department. Two boys entered into the department to collect their Certificates. One of them stared on the pockmarks on my face...

"Sir, he is the one who gave you Chicken Pox", Kishore told loudly.

'I am sorry, Sir,' the boy was about to worry... "Sir, has any other member of your family contacted with it?'

'So far no by God's grace! See I have saved your 'one year'... You have secured a first class diploma... You have got a job... You have got everything you desired! But, what have you given to me? All these scars... three weeks half-pay leave... five thousand rupees for medicines... What is this man?'

"Sir, it is your fault', my friend Saji, former internal examiner, interrupted. 'I warned you then: 'please do not break the laws'... not to avoid basic rules... But, you didn't care my words... So enjoy...'

"Sir, everyone in my family was affected with Chicken Pox. My brother had boils even in his eyes... I am so sorry, Sir...' the boy Robin Roy told... 'Please issue my mark list. I have to produce it before my employer within two or three days.'

'Bring your Dad tomorrow and pay me Rs. 10000 as compensation... Then only I will think of whether to issue it or not in time... What do you say?" I teased him.

"Sir, I won't be able to pay any compensation... already Chicken Pox my family budget for several months... Sir, my family will pray for you and your family everyday... Please don't worry Sir... None from your family would be touched by it," tears were about to roll from his eyes... Mine too...

We both started smiling... I saw Jesus in his eyes...

"Eternal happiness is the result of supreme sacrifice," Jesus smiled...

I saw his bleeding wounds transform to fragrant flowers...

'Premji, there are only two Universes ... inner and the outer... Your inner - universe is your mind... that is my kingdom... When you fill it with eternal happiness, it becomes heaven!' Jesus smiled... I too...'Prem, these pockmarks on your face and body... what are they?' He asked jovially...

'My Lord, they are the Stigmata of love!'.....

Jesus kissed my soul...

?

Premji

STORKS OF SUMEKO (Short story)

STORKS OF SUMEKO

It was a bright evening in the spring. Soumya was standing near the front gate of her palatial house, awaiting the school bus.

'My daughter is getting skinnier everyday... She is so tired after the school... poor kid,' anxious thoughts kept on gushing out through her mind as her six year old daughter Shruthi was the fruit of thirteen years of infertility treatment. Whatever food, that too made after a lot of research from noted cookery books, remained almost untouched every evening! Why evenings... everyday! She wished to plant bombs on every torturing cell named schools! Stupid society! And their silly education!

'Hi... Premji,' Soumya waved her hands when I was about to cross her.

'Hi... Saumya'

I stopped the bike, a little ahead of her, by jamming the breaks. It creaked a lot before coming into halt!

'When are you going to throw away this junk?' she teased me:

You are nothing but a friend in front of a childhood friend!

'Not in the near future!' I laughed. 'Then... how is life?'

'Same routine... getting her ready for school in the morning... household duties... that will be over by ten... the watching 'the never ending serials in T.V..... You know... the heroin of the best running serial didn't deliver even after two years of pregnancy!'

'Idiotic! Is she an elephant?'

'May be,' she laughed aloud. 'And waiting for Shruthi in the evening and then teaching her... preparing her project works'

'The same routine of a 'Gulf widow',' I teased her.

'You know... Premji... For just two kilometers, they take her around ten kilometers everyday... every school bus operates like that... they have to drop other kids too at their doorsteps'

'Just two kilometers... and your car is lying idle... Why can't you drop her every day?'

'First of all... I don't know how to drive! I am really scared, when I see a vehicle approaching from the other side! And who knows... what will be left with when you return back! Thieves move around, more free than Policemen, that too in broad daylight!' she laughed again.

'Idiot! A wonderful woman like you should never depend on others... Just one week is enough! I will make arrangements for that.'

'Thank you... I will try my level best.'

'When is your husband coming back from Dubai?'

'By next week... don't worry, Premji... your quota will be taken cared of... What's that? Aaah... Bacardi...,' she smiled. 'Recession has nothing to do with alcohol!'

'Thank you.'

'Premji... why are you crazy of that bitter stuff?'

'First it tastes bitter... then better.'

We laughed.

?

Shruthi used to sit beside Akhila in the school bus everyday as she was her guardian angel. Akhila, studying in seventh standard, is a voracious reader and that day she was reading the translation of a Japanese book taken from school library, telling the story of Sumeko.

'Chechee... (Elder sister)... Please, tell me also the story,' Shruthi requested as she was fascinated by the colorful illustrations.

'Shruti Molu... This is the story of a young Japanese girl named Sumeko... She was the victim of Atom bombs, dropped in Japan during Second World War... understand,' Akhila started a new story as daily routine.

'Yes'

'Do you know what a war is?'

'Yes... lots of people die... I have seen it on T.V.'

'O.K.... some sixty five years back... Americans dropped two atoms bombs in Japan... one in Hiroshima and other in Nagasaki... three hundred thousand people dead... How many people were dead?'

'Three hundred,' Shruthi stopped in the middle.

'Thousand... O.K... and another three hundred thousand people were affected by its radiation'

'Chechee... what is meant by radiation?'

'What is radiation? How to explain her?' Akhila was bit confused. 'Ah...it's heat... the heat of the bomb blast... And Sumeko was a small girl like her,' she pointed at ten year old beautiful girl with Rosy cheeks, sitting on the other row of seats. 'Our...poor...Sumeko was also exposed to that heat... You know... the heat of Atom bomb can cause blood cancer.'

'There is no cure for it... isn't it Chechee? Mummy was telling that the other day to our next door aunt,' Shruthi shared some information innocently.

'Yes... You are right... In Japanese, they call the radiation victims like her as 'Hibakusha'... And Sumeko was diagnosed suffering from blood cancer... She was getting weaker and weaker everyday... One day, someone told her a simple cure,'

'What was that?'

'Making paper storks... Make a thousand paper storks... Then death will step away.'

'That's interesting,' Shruthi said.

'She started making them and her condition was getting better... But, she couldn't complete a thousand,' Akhila gave proper modulation to her voice as a trained dubbing artist.

'Did Sumeko die?'

'Yes... when she died, her friends counted the paper storks... there were six hundred storks, of different colours, in her collection. How many?'

'Six hundred... a very sad story Chechee... today I will tell it to Mummy,' Shruthi told painfully while

going through the sketches in that well illustrated book. The last page contained a line diagram...
how to make a paper stork...

?

'Please make me one,' Shruthi started pleading her. 'pleeeeeease.'

'No... No... Not now,' Akhila was not interested.

'Pleeeeeeease.... Checheeee,'

Akhila couldn't resist the innocence in her and she tore a sheet of white paper from her notebook. The bus was running at average speed and she completed the paper stork as per instructions. And at last she made a beak just by folding on end.

'It's so beautiful,' Shruthi gave a surprise kiss to Akhila.

Happily, Akhila went back to the book.

'War is evil,' Shruthi played with its lovely wings throughout the journey. 'War is evil... otherwise Sumeco wouldn't have died'

?

The school bus stopped at her stop.

'Bye... Chechee....,' Shruthi was ready to jump out of the bus... from the cage of letters to the comfort of her freedom zone named home....

School bags were heaped at one corner of the bus and Saumya collected her heavy school bag from the Ayah, caretaker woman. The bus driver, an old-man, was waiting for the Ayah to close the door.

Suddenly, the stork had a strange wish: to fly up in the strong west wind, as it had fallen down from the hands of Shruthi. Ayah closed the door and the bus was about to move slowly as he gradually released the clutch pedal.

'You can't escape from me....,' Shruthi managed to catch hold of the paper stork's tail.

Quickly, the white paper stork turned blood-Red...

Premji

THE FOURTH ROOM (Short story)

THE FOURTH ROOM

It was a pale morning in last October.

I was sitting in my half-cabin office, sporting through the result analysis of previous semester examinations. Though the 'Examination Management System' was completely online, and result analysis could possibly be accessible at the tip of a mouse-click, our honorable Director never allotted such a link to underdogs like me.

"A man who wants to lead an orchestra must first turn his back on the crowd," that was his favourite quote, which he implemented without any mercy!

Director was very keen enough to ensure that every Principal, HOD and lecturer in any of the technical education institutions under him, must be aware of their outcome by preparing the result analysis manually. He had the stature of a mighty 'Matador' with a dagger in the hand to puncture any educationist's heart during the regularly-held academic review meetings! It was a silly ritual earlier, now it's like making a salt-less soup with your own finely chopped brain, and letting you savour it along with bitter-guard juice. Though the teachers in my department are of extremely hardworking and cooperative in nature, the results remained a nightmare for all of us, especially me ? the HOD.

"Sir, may I come in?" Amit, one of our third semester Diploma students, slowly pecked his head.

"What's the matter?"

"Sir, I have some shortage of attendance..." He replied in a lowered tone.

"Being your class tutor, I will never recommend you for promotion to fourth semester Diploma in Engineering," Anil ? a senior lecturer in my department intervened in the middle. He was shivering with anger as if he was touched by a high tension wire.

Lecturer Anil is a 'terror' among students for his die-hard commitment towards parents and the unending passion for teaching. He has even the minutest details of each and every student in his well-maintained data-book, that too from time immemorial!

Amit, a careless, lean boy around eighteen, stood before Anil like a rat in captivity of a hungry cat ? which hadn't seen even a piece of meat for millenniums. Cats are funny creatures, as they usually don't kill their prey in one single go.

"Sir, you know, I have lost a lot of attendance because I was bitten by a stray cat," Amit started pouring out petty excuses one by one. "Please modify my attendance to 65% so that I can register for examinations."

"As on today, you have only 51% attendance, which makes you unqualified for exam registration... Your internal marks didn't even cross single digit... And you still have a lot of back-papers ... Clear them first, and apply for re-admission after six months," Anil told him openly as he didn't deserve any mercy.

"Sir, one last chance?" Amit asked shamelessly with a naughty smile on his face.

"Get out..." Anil lost his temper.

"But, Sir... Will you recommend me for re-admission?"

"If and only if you clear all arrears..."

Unfortunately, Amit was the best student with highest index mark at the time of Diploma admission.

?

Eight months back (Since last October)

Usually, I do not engage classes for second semester students. Being the senior-most faculty, I was forced to engage 'Life Skill' ? a newly introduced course- to the second semester students. The current generation lacks some sort of psychological competency, which I have been familiar for many years, especially in the later years of globalization. Being teachers, it's our duty to develop them into active and productive members of the community.

Sixty-six little monsters were sitting in front of me quite impatiently. It's very difficult now-a-days to ensure their attention for more than five minutes! A large smart-phone screen would then appear on their mindscape! Participatory learning could be the only solution.

"Boys, how do you define the term 'skill?' I asked.

There was a bit silence for some time...

"Skill is a talent or ability that comes from training or practice..." one of the back-benchers replied.

"Great! Then, what about life skills?" I asked him.

"It might be something that could help us being successful in life..."

"Impressive... Life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable humans to deal effectively with the challenges and demands of life. By the way, what's your name?"

"Sir... My name is Amit..."

?

And on the very next day, first semester examination results were announced, no doubt Amit was the topper. After a short session of result analysis, I had to switch on to a new concept in Life-skill called 'Johary Window.' One of my students quickly completed the sketch of the same on the black-board. A large square was divided into four equal-sized squares to form the shape of a window.

"The Johari Window is a technique that helps people better understand their relationship with themselves and others... Consider this picture as a house with four rooms... It will help you to identify the real 'you' in you."

"But... All the rooms have the same size..." Amit said.

"Good... Room 1 is the part of ourselves that we and others see... Room 2 contains things that others can see, but we are unaware of it..."

"Is there any such thing?" There was a short discussion among the boys.

"And the third room is a 'very private' place, that nobody knows the contents other than us!"

"O! It's the place where we hide our secrets!" Suneer cried out. "And what about the fourth room?"

"Nobody knows... neither you... nor me... or Mr Amit..." I replied with a smile. "You must increase the area of Room 1 at the expense of Room no 2 and 3 for becoming a very successful social being..."

"That would be a bit difficult!" Amit said.

"Not at all! Shall I prove it with you as an example?"

"Ok Sir,"

"Now tell us, what are your strengths, weaknesses, aspirations and insecurities in life if any..." I asked him.

The whole class transformed into after a wave of laughter... And Amit waited for the last one for not making any noise.

"Sir, I am very positive, able, fun-loving, intelligent, calm, caring, helpful, punctual hard-working, dependable and trust-worthy person. I have a brother who is learning for Civil engineering..." He poured out a great set of adjectives in praise of himself. "I am bit tensed and nervous while managing emotions."

"Aspirations?"

"I like to become a Car designer... and regarding insecurities, so far I have nothing as such..."

"O.K Amit... Who is your best friend?"

"Suneer," he replied without any confusion.

Another lean boy, got up from his seat and looked into my eyes like a sheep which was about to get slaughtered.

"Suneer, Now, you are going to pour out the contents of room number 2. Tell us something that you know and he doesn't know about himself... You can be a bit critical also..." I encouraged him.

Amit looked into his eyes with hidden plea not to sacrifice him like a lamb thrown into leopard's cage. And I encouraged him through a wink.

"Sir... Amit is a first class liar... He is not at all positive, able, calm and caring..." Suneer started speaking. "He is not hardworking anymore. Today he is the topper, but I bet, he will lose at least four subjects in the forthcoming examinations. He spends a lot of time on his smartphone... Shamelessly addicted to Smartphone-mania... He is not punctual... How can someone be punctual who spends the whole night playing games on the smart-screen? He is almost absent the first hour everyday..."

"Then?"

"Sir, Amit has very poor level of emotional intelligence that makes him purely undependable... He can never be a very good car designer..."

"Why?"

"Sir, what he lacks is passion..."

Amit stood frail like a withered Lily, crushed mercilessly till the last fume of fragrance!

"Suneer... You seem so critical!"

"Sir, I will never leave an opportunity to nail a person if it will help him to correct himself..." Suneer smiled. "He is absolutely insecure, otherwise why should he join for a part-time job? I think he will never succeed in life."

"Amit, how was the session?"

"Very brutal..." he smiled... Unfortunately, I could feel a narrow scar made of tears upon his soul.

"Truth is always bitter, Amit... the entire sweeteners on earth can't make it better..."

?

Though Amit had to leave temporarily, his presence was there, in and around our department, almost every-day. But, he tried to avoid even the vicinity of my shadow. He was doing some meagre

jobs for a living, later I came to know.

"Premji, Amit didn't attend even a single examination," Anil informed me after the November exams were over.

Time continued her merciless journey like a vegetarian monster and the next exam season appeared without any buds or blooms... cruel April...

"Anil, I need your help to fix the time-table for practical examinations..."

"Surely..." he replied and opened a new excel spread-sheet quickly. "Sir, you know, my father is not feeling well for a couple of days... He is getting admitted tomorrow at Nims hospital..."

"Is it? Let him get well soon..."

"Thank you... Kindly excuse me from being posted as internal examiner for practical exams..."

"I am afraid, I can't do that completely, Anil... May be I can spare you for conducting some supplementary exams... Only two or three candidates would be there... It won't take much time to finish off... Is that OK?"

"That I can manage... Thank you..." Anil replied happily.

?

Practical exam duties... Centralized valuation camps... and many more unwarranted duties... Summer vacation bid good-bye with a naughty smile... My small office cabin was lost in dust like an abandoned shack... A part-time sweeper cleaned the room with utmost care. And finally, I settled on the revolving chair whose rusty bearings started creaking, unable to bear my excessive weight.

"Sir, may I come in?"

It was Amit, closely followed by a stout woman. She handed over a bunch of official papers and medical certificates to me.

"Sir, please recommend him for re-admission," she requested politely.

"I will... But, on certain conditions... Are you ready to accept them?"

"Yes Sir..."

"No more smartphone usage..."

"By God's grace, he lost it..." she wiped her eyes.

"He should be here by nine every morning... No class-bunks..."

"Ok Sir..." Amit promised me. "We bought a new house at Punthalathazham..."

"You wait there in front of the office..." I showed him the way out and he walked out calmly. "Tell me Madam, is he staying with you?"

"Yes Sir... I sold our old house and bought a new one... Now, both my sons are with me."

"What about your second husband? Is he still with you?"

"Sir, I still don't know whether it was a bad or good decision... I had to find a second husband immediately after the death of their father... Amit couldn't accept it and he became rebellious in every respect... Just to calm him down, I was forced to present a smartphone, and that ruined him entirely..."

"Very sad..." I said.

"My second husband is ready accept him as his own son and sponsor his education... He loves me a lot... But, I had to leave him alone for the sake of these boys... I have to find out a new job, just to repay the housing loan and look after their learning expenses."

"What kind of job that you anticipate?"

"An American couple offered Rs 14000 to look after their aged parents... Sir, Amit will attend classes from our new house for a month... Then, I will put them in a hostel near-by, so that I can take up my new job... Hope, I can spare Sundays for my husband... Poor man, he is also alone..."

"What is he doing?"

"He is a quite well-to-do retired army man, currently working in a bank as security officer..."

"OK..."

"Sir, will you please do me a favour?" She waited for a moment. "Please let him be here today... He is all set to come home with me today... I have to meet my husband who promised me a share of his salary today... I can't meet him if Amit is with me... He won't let me..." she stopped in the middle to wipe her eyes. "My sons need money for everything, but they don't know, how difficult it is... Sir... I didn't any other option, otherwise I wouldn't have gone for remarriage."

"What about your elder son?"

"He doesn't have any problems with my husband..."

"Ok," I handed the signed documents to her. "Give it to our office Superintendent... I will manage the rest... now, send him to me..."

She walked away with the biggest 'thanks' of her life!

?

"Amit, where is your mother?"

"She went home..."

"Ok... Did your mother take any loan to purchase the new house?"

"Yes... Rs 6,00,000."

"How will she repay it? Have you ever thought of it?"

"That... we will repay it... My brother will get a job... I will get a job... then what..." he replied confidently.

"That can be done only after two or three years... Amit... We are standing at the third room of your life right now... Don't you remember the Johari Window that I taught earlier?"

"Yes sir..."

"Why didn't you attend Life-skill supplementary examination where you were the only registered candidate?"

"That day, I had a big quarrel with my mother and I left the home..."

"And do you know what had happened here in our department?"

"No Sir..."

?

Vishu festival was approaching which always fall in the middle of April. The Golden Shower tree in front of our office bore a lot of yellow flowers. The flowering was profuse, that no leaf was being seen. We were setting in the department staffroom awaiting Amit, the one and only registered candidate for Life skill examinations.

"Shall we conduct the exam here itself?" Anil, the internal examiner, asked me.

"I was about to tell that... Anyway, how is your Dad now?"

"He is much better than yesterday... I had been with him for the past ten days... and you deserve a special thanks... I have been taught by my Dad for being punctual in all the duties entrusted to us...and that's why I am here..."

Almost an hour passed, but Amit never turned up...

"Let's wind it up," I told Anil while marking 'ABSENT' in the attendance sheet. "You may go now and give some company to your father so that he can recover fast."

A very strong wind blew suddenly, and the Golden Shower tree showered almost all her flowers down on Anil's vehicle parked underneath. His mobile phone started ringing in a feeble tone, that he had deliberately kept at low volume not to disturb his father in the hospital room.

But, a gentle soul had just departed...

?

"I am sorry, Sir," Amit tried to wipe his uncontrolled tears... "He was ready to sponsor me... How could I bring such a misfortune to him?"

"Yes... Anil lost the chance for being with his beloved father till his last breath... I feel myself also guilty... But, it makes you more responsible... If you lose any subject from now on, you will deepen his pain... Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir..." he became sober again...

"Amit, let me ask you one more question, do you have any right to indulge in the personal life of others?"

"No Sir..."

"Then why do you interfere in the personal life of your mother?"

"Because we loved our father a lot..."

"But, she too didn't have any choice..."

"Sir, Now I understand her..."

"Good... If you don't, she will have to work as a housemaid from next month onwards... Boy, responsibilities makes people powerful... Forgiveness makes life worth living..."

"Thank you Sir... Can I ask you a simple question?"

"Surely..."

"What could be the possible content of the fourth room?"

"Tolerance... I like to believe in that way... Now, run to your classroom..."

He walked away with the most beautiful smile on earth though his eyes were flooding...

?

Premji

9/6/19

THE HOLY TRAIL (Short story)

THE HOLY TRAIL

'Hello... Mr. Pai?'

'Yes... May I know who is on the line?'

'Sir... It's me... Premji,' I replied happily, listening to the soft voice from the other end.

'Premji? O! What a pleasant surprise!' He couldn't control the exhilaration

'Sir... I am in Bangalore... to be very precise, at Lal-Bagh!'

I had been there in Bangalore for the past two days as I was accompanying the annual tour program of our Automobile Engineering Department students. Being head of the department, I never used to accompany a student's tours. The vigorous students, in their violent teens, vanished into the greenish expanse of 'Lal-Bagh -- The Red Garden,' a well-known botanical garden in Southern Bangalore, India.

Annual flower-show was going on in the famous glass house and as a result there was heavy rush in and around the garden.

'The garden was originally commissioned by Hyder Ali, the ruler of Mysore, in 1760 and later finished by his son Tipu Sultan. Lal-Bagh, spanning almost a square km, houses India's largest collection of tropical plants and the rarest plants, has an aquarium and a lake,' a guide started explaining the history of the garden to the tourists standing near the main entrance.

A Maruti Ritz Car stopped next to me and Mr. Pai, a man in the beginning of his fifties, got down. He looked exactly the same as I had met him in the last time. More gray were there in his nearly bald head. He was my Boss, during a short span of three years, when I was working as a sales engineer. We used to travel a lot for the promotion of heavy equipment, especially cranes. He was the first reader and critic of my poems... To be very frank, I am free from his influence in life so far... He is my great friend and philosopher!

'Hello Mr. Premji,' he shook hands with me... 'It has been almost thirteen years since we had met for the last time... Am I correct?'

'You are absolutely right...Sir'

I got into the car and it sped away to the nearest pub.

?

'From where did you get my number?' He started the conversation over a mug of chilled beer.

'I searched for the people who deal with the products of 'Escorts construction equipment Ltd.' In Bangalore,'

'That's interesting...You are still a salesman!' he laughed.

'You are right, Sir,' I stopped for a second... 'You know... desperately, I needed a change... and that's why I thought of accompanying the students'

'Me too... Premji... Even I like to be away from the business pressures... at least for ten days... You know... I would love to go the Himalayas'

'To the Himalayas?'

'Yes... to the abode of snow... to the largest mountain range in Asia separating the plains of India from the Tibetan Plateau... I love to feel the clouds as explained by Kalidasa, the great poet... Premji... Will you please join me?'

'I would love to... but, unfortunately, I cannot afford the expenses right now,' I replied desperately.

'Expenses? Don't worry about that' Mr. Pai promised firmly... 'Let's go to Gomukh,'

It was a word of honour!

?

It was a fine morning in the middle of May... We hired a jeep from Jolly Grant Airport in Dehradun and headed towards Gangotri, 265 km away. Silence encompassed us throughout the journey as we were busy enjoying the scenic beauty of the Himalayan terrains for the first time.

Gangotri, one of the four Hindu religious sites in Utharakhand state of India known as 'Char-Dham,' is dedicated to the Goddess Ganga. Lots of devotees, tourists and Hindu Sanyasins with matted hair were seen everywhere. It is a sleepy town, situated on the banks of the river Bhagirathi, the upper portion of river Ganges on the Greater Himalayan Range at a height of 10,000 feet. We checked in to the hotel where we had our reservations.

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It was nearing five thirty in the evening... We took bath in River Bhagirathi as a part of holy ritual of the Hindus ... A single dip was more than enough to convert anyone to an ice-pillar!

I could offer three handfuls of water to the flowing river for the redemption of my beloved grandma... She too had the same name as the river: 'Bhagirathi'. She brought the Ganges of happiness to my childhood life, not from the upper heavens, but from her selfless love...

'Premji... According to the Hindu myths, King Bhagirath did penance here,' said Mr. Pai.

'And after which, heavenly river Ganges came down on Earth as per the wish of Lord Mahadeva...

'To save earth from the fierce impact, Lord Shiva held her in his locks... Gangadhara... There is no end for the myths' Mr. Pai laughed.

After visiting the Gangotri Temple, later in the evening; we performed Gangaji's arti...offering lights to river Ganga...

'O! Holy Mother... please dispel darkness from the universe!' We too prayed along with the large number of devotees coming from all over the world...

'O! Holy Mother... please take away our sins...and enlighten our lives'

?

The trail to Gomukh starts from Gangotri and the trek starts by entering Gangotri-Gaumukh forest range. It was nearing nine'o clock in the next day morning and there were only a few trekkers on that day... Virendar Thapa, our guide in his thirties, arranged permission from the entrance at Kankhu post, 2 Km from Gangotri. He was a very dynamic chap... a dare-devil! There were around ten members in our group.

'Earlier, the Gangotri glacier used to start from here... Due to melting, now it has gone till Gaumukh,' Virendar Thapa said painfully.

Soon we entered into the rough terrain of horrifying wilderness in the forest area... We were so fascinated by the scenic beauty of lush green...

'Chidbasa is 9 km ahead of Gangotri,' said our guide.

'Chidbasa?'

'Sir...Chidbasa is the abode of Chid trees,' he told us... 'Pines'

Though the dusty trail was quite troublesome, we didn't feel any sort of tiredness at all... A special variety of Chid trees were seen in mass on the fall in the valley... The beauty and intoxicating smell of Himalayan flora is exceptional... And at last we reached Chidbasa...

We were lucky enough to have tea and some snacks from a small shop in Chirbasa... The steaming tea soon turned cold due to the freezing breeze coming out from the faraway glacier... And we started heading towards Bhujbasa under the mild Sun...

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It was nearing two'o clock in the afternoon and we entered into a very difficult trekking zone, approximately three kilometers away from Chidbasa.

'Premji... See that..,' Mr. Pai pointed at something.

It was a 'Bharal', a wild antelope, grazing at the lower-downs and I thought of taking a snap. But... I was shocked to see something... A loose rock... a huge boulder... It was on the way down towards us from higher altitudes with massive velocity... might be from a height more than 12000 feet...

Like two stationary boulders, we both were transfixed there... two boulders made of fear! I was so terrified that I couldn't even remember the first line of my daily prayer!

In a quick move, we were pulled back by Richard, a Canadian trekker and we took refuge behind another boulder as per his instruction...The fast coming boulder disappeared within seconds to the lower downs! It took away the antelope instead of us! A wild sacrifice!

'Thank you Ric,' I shook hands with Richard... 'God's own hands' I pressed his hands tightly out of immense gratitude. The snowy breeze started piercing my panicked lungs without any kindness...

'Do you know which place is this?' asked Richard.

'No,' replied Mr. Pai.

'This is Gila Pahar... the most dangerous zone in Gangotri ? Gomukh trail... notorious for the loose rocks falling from the heights and extremely dangerous landslides... You know... there was a massive landslide on the upper-heights two days back,' said the seasoned trekker in him.

We crossed many shallow streams and wooden bridges... By around half past four in the evening, we reached Bhujbasa, 12440 feet above the sea-level ...

Bhujbasa is the abode of Bhuj trees... In the olden times, people used to write on the leaves of Bhuj like present day's paper... Kalidasa, the greatest of all poets, wrote his great epics and dramas upon it!

Gomukh, our final destination was only four kilometers away. It could be seen as if in a wide long-shot.

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Virendra Thapa quickly established tents for the night stay and soon we could feel the glimmer on the abode of snow... It was very difficult for me to adjust with the sleeping bags and other equipment to safeguard oneself from the merciless cold...

We got out of the tent as sat upon a boulder... O! The lonely Moon, in his majestic brilliance, stood above us like an eternal sentinel...and his golden rays added brilliance to the nearby peaks...

'Sir... sitting outside could be dangerous... please take rest inside,' cautioned Virendra Thapa, the

guide.

'No problem young man... If I am destined to die here, be it so,' replied Mr.Pai while playing a beautiful song from his mobile phone...

'Chand jaise mughde pe bindiya sitaraa.....O sitaaraa...'

?

Early in the next day morning, we started trekking towards Gomukh, closely following Richard, the Canadian trekker.

'This is a very rough trekking rout,' opined Richard... 'Very dangerous boulder zone,'

Soon, we were entreated by the majestic view of 'Mt. Shivling,' holy symbol of Shivji, in the western gateway of the lower Gangotri glacier ... The mighty rays of the morning Sun started sprinkling Gold upon the snow-clad mountain peak... And opposite to that majestic 'linga,' stood the triple peaked Bhagirathi Massif... The holy peaks were named after King Bhagiratha from time immemorial! We continued our trek paying respect to the serene nature!

'We have trekked almost 18 km from Gangotri' said Mr.Richard.

'Yes...we are now at a height of 4255m... Sir... please watch the wild topography... see those boulders and the scattered broken snow...O! That's Gomukh!' I cried out.

'Premji...just feel the hard clayey snow of the glacier,' Mr.Pai said...

?

Triple peaked Bhagirathi Massif stood behind the terminus like the glittering trident of Lord Shiva... The purest water upon earth gushes out from Gomukh, the terminus of Gangotri glacier. It was surrounded by boulders and the sound of water resonated like Omkaar, the all-encompassing primordial sound! River Bhageerathi, the main tributary of Holy Ganges, starts her painful journey from there...

'Shivoham... Shivoham... Shivoham' someone cried out...

Gomukh is the holiest place to every devout Hindu.

We walked near the terminus carefully... The cold breeze coming out from the glacier was unbearable... Mr. Pai collected a handful of water from the turbulent stream and washed his face... He sprinkled some drops upon his nearly bald head as if he was in a trance...

'Aum Nama: Shivaya'... Have mercy upon us...O! Lord Shiva...

?

The temperature was less than twelve degrees even in the presence of mild Sun light...

We had completed our trek from Bhujbasa to Gomukh just ten minutes back and my lungs were craving for fresh air from the high altitudes, but they were frozen in the multitude of damn-chilled air. I felt somewhat uneasy due to the pressure drop at Gomukh...

'Sir... I am freezing!'

'Then, what about that guy?' Mr.Pai pointed a man, around seventy, taking bath near the terminus of the Gangotri glacier...Gomukh...

He was wearing only a loin cloth and I was shocked to watch him taking more dips in the same stream...

None can take a dip twice in the same river... especially at Gomukh!

Soon, we were befriended by Major Ashok serving in the Indo-Tibetan Border Force. India shares

borders with China nearby... Himalayas are the divine sentinels of India. Still, we need more protection. He was of my age with family roots in Bangalore. He was so happy to talk with us in Kannada, his mother-tongue.

?

'That's Naga Swaroopa Baba... He won't leave Gomukh even in the toughest of all winters... He lives in the nearby caves during rain' said the Major.

'That sounds really strange,' I said.

'He doesn't wander a lot or ask for anything from the tourists... And he doesn't even pluck a ripe apple to kill his hunger'

'Then?'

'If somebody gives him something to eat, he eats... If a fruit falls from a tree, he eats... He sleeps somewhere here on a rock during the nights, that too only in his loin clothes...Naga Swaroopa Baba is a man of great spiritual powers,' said the Major with deep admiration towards him as the undertone... 'Sab Maa deti hein... Holy Mother will provide me everything! That's his unchanged belief!'

I felt really ashamed of watching my Timberland trekking shoes, full sleeved jerkins, monkey caps and every other sort of equipment to protect myself from the cold.

'Is he not afraid of wild animals?' I asked.

'Even I have asked the same question many times! 'I am not the body, but the spirit'... That was his simple answer' replied the Major.

'He must be a very happy man,' I said.

'See...Major,' Mr. Pai started speaking... 'There are thousands of people, like him, living in the Himalayas... They call themselves as Sanyasins... People doing penance! And the most important thing which I cannot understand is: just by sitting idle like this, what do they contribute to the modern society?'

'Mr.Pai... You better ask him directly, the illiterate Baba... He is basically a Mauni-Baba ? a Sanyasin who observes silence... still you can ask him... If he likes to answer, he will' The Major walked away swiftly to the nearby Army barracks

?

Naga Swaroopa Baba was sitting on a rock adjacent to the stream with his body completely covered with ashes, enjoying the one and only luxury of his life: the morning Sunlight! His matted hair and the loin cloth were still dripping wet and his eyes were fixed upon the brilliance of the morning Sun. Might be, he was absorbing energy from the Sun. His frame had the least amount of fat.

'Namaskar Baba,' Mr Pai greeted him politely.

'Namaskar Betaa (son),' replied the Baba in a kinder voice.

'How are you?'

'Because of his mercy, I am fine Betaa,'

'Shall I ask you something?'

'Sure... You can... Betaa,' the old man encouraged him.

'Baba... You are sitting idle always... Just by sitting idle, how do you contribute to the modern society?' Mr.Pai asked.

Baba looked into his eyes for a moment and later upon me. His eyes pierced my soul like another

trident...

'Betaa...what is your name?' asked Baba

'I am Mr. Pai from Bangalore and he is Mr. Premji from Kerala'

I could feel the humble pride behind his voice.

'Well... well... Come and sit here,' Baba invited us... 'What do you do, Bete?'

'I am selling very expensive machines' replied Mr.Pai while settling upon the rough rock as if he was trying to glorify himself.

'Very good Betaa ... Why do you make machines?'

'If you need electricity, you have to make dams. You need machines for the construction of dams.... You need machines like excavators and cranes for constructing factories, roads, etc and etc, buses, trains, air-crafts... everything is a machine... we need new machines... new inventions to improve the quality of human life,' Mr.Pai poured out his knowledge.

'Betaa... How do you construct these machines?'

'Baba... we construct the machines using metals'

'Very good Betaa... And these metals, where do they come from?'

'Baba... these metals... they come from the earth'

'Very good... And your machines, how do they run?'

'Baba... They run on oil and gas'

'Very good Betaa... tell me... from where does the oil come?'

'Baba... Oil also comes from the earth'

'Is it so?' Baba remained silent for a moment... 'So, everything comes from the earth! Am I correct, Betaa?'

'You are absolutely right... Baba,' replied Mr. Pai.

Soon silence encompassed us. I couldn't avoid looking on to glowing face of Naga Swaroopa Baba in the morning Sun. It was just another brilliant Sun!

'Bete... Are you capable of creating a little earth?' Baba broke the silence mercilessly.

We both were shocked to the core!

'No... Baba...no... that's not possible!' replied Mr. Pai, very politely.

'Then, what do you make? What do you invent? Answer me, beloved sons'

Tongue-tied, we sat there like two inert statues made of Ice, before the 'so-called' illiterate man. We were transformed into two amoebas with null ego!

Soon, Baba started talking aloud.

'Bete...You didn't invent anything new... And you are not going to invent anything newer... Everything, that you think ? you have invented - were already here... And just to make life easier, you construct new machines... And ultimately, what do they contribute?'

We both remained silent again.

'They contribute deadly pollution... You people are raping the Holy Mother... the mother Earth... every moment... And, by sitting idle here, I am not creating any sort of pollution... I am not raping her... See... What have you done to the river Ganges? How serene is she here' Baba plunged his hand into the holy waters... 'You spend billions to clean her...every year... to make her free from

pollution! She knows how to clean herself without even spending a single paisa (penny)! Just a single flood is more than enough... But, what is the use? You won't leave her again! The rape continues!

Silently, I looked into the eyes of Mr. Pai. He sat there as if he was in a trance. Baba could puncture our ego with a needle-sharp question forever!

'Bete... When you buy a new cloth, you add on to pollution,' Baba continued... 'The dyes used for colouring your clothes pollute the soil... pollute the water... The detergents used for cleaning them, again continue the pollution... I own nothing and I am not creating any sort of pollution... Bete... Whatever Ma... the holy Mother... gives, I am contented with that... If she drops me a fruit, I will eat... I am happy with that... By sitting idle, I am not creating any sort of pollution! And that is my humble contribution to the modern society... And that is my humble contribution to humanity,' Baba stopped talking.

I felt an everlasting lotus bloom within my soul!

'Bete... Now also, if you think...that I am wasting my life by sitting idle, let it be so,' Baba stopped talking.

We looked into his painful eyes. All I could see was the supreme divine bliss... We touched his feet seeking his blessings...

'Have peace... Bete... Do you know what the meaning of Gomukh is?'

'The mouth of a cow,' replied Mr. Pai.

'Earlier... might be some hundred years back... this snout resembled the mouth of a cow... but, What do you see now...? Bete... Does it resemble the mouth of a cow?'

We didn't have any answer...

'Now, it resembles the mouth of a dragon... Earlier the snout was at Gangotri... Now it has receded almost eighteen kilometers... It was there some hundred years back,' Baba pointed at a little distance ? might be around one kilometer... 'Everything is getting hotter and hotter... you are melting the world away,' he raised his eyes up against the Sun.

?

'Got the answer?' asked the Major Ashok.

'Yes,' Mr. Pai replied.

'But, that's incomplete!' said the Major Ashok.

'Why do you say so?' asked Mr. Pai.

'Please follow him today,' the Major walked away.

?

A seventeen year old boy was aiming at rock with plastic bottle in his hand. Unfortunately, the rock was wet by the turbulent stream from the snout of Gomukh.

'Betaa,' Baba called him from behind and the boy lost his aim.

Baba collected the bottle with the least hesitation upon his face.

'Please do not taint the holy mother... Bete... especially with plastic...' Baba walked away.

The boy was literally ashamed to the core...

'Bete... you are nothing but water'

Baba was busy cleaning Gomukh the whole day... The most serene place on Earth should be kept

serene... The teenage boy too joined him, might be out of remorse. Huge gunny-bags full of waste plastic and empty bottles were kept behind some huge boulders, unnoticed.

'They will be disposed in Gangotri for recycling... Tourism is the worst foe of nature,' Major Ashok said... 'But, one man can make a difference'

'Today, we are going to stay here,' Mr. Richard announced.

Soon, tents were erected near to Gomukh.

We took bath in the stream and collected the purest water ever in two small plastic cans - the pristine waters melting out from an estimated volume of over 27 cubic kilometers of Ice of the Gangotri glacier, about 30 kilometers long and 2 to 4 km wide!

?

'Baba, we are about to leave' I told him in the next day morning... 'We are going to Tapovan height Ashram'

'You are welcome again, Bete,' he blessed us with open arms.

There must be some specific goal in his life... might be something like protecting the holy river Ganges till his last breath... What is that?

I felt bit hesitant to walk away... and Baba could sense that easily.

'Any more questions, Bete?'

'Baba... Everybody has a specific belief or goal to lead his or her life successfully... What is your goal in life?'

'Bete... I have no specific goals in life... I have no craving for money, glory, recognition, food or anything... whatever I need to survive, she provides everything... Sab Maa deti hein'

'Then?'

'Only those who are not afraid of death can visit Gomukh... Be fearless Bete... Be free from the fear of death...' he walked away...

What's your real name Babaji?

Buddha?

Mahaveera?

Jesus?

* A story dedicated to the victims of recent Himalayan Tzunami.

PREMJI

THE LAST NUCLEAR PLANT (Short story)

THE LAST NUCLEAR PLANT

It was a fine afternoon in the last week of October, 2013. Dr Tamilarasu was about to leave his psychiatric clinic a bit early as it was the thirteenth birthday of his elder daughter. Usually, he used to be there in the clinic till eight'o clock in the evening. But, he was suddenly stopped by the father of a very beautiful girl, hardly fifteen, who stood beside him with a doomed face.

"Sir, are you leaving early?" asked her father.

"I have some urgent work at home... That's why; I didn't fix any appointment in the afternoon. Will you please come tomorrow? I will recommend them to issue you the first token..."

"Sir... Will you please prescribe for some sleeping pills?" said her father.

"What?"

"Medical shop owners will not supply them without any prescription," the other man's face grew grim.

"What?"

"She hasn't slept for the past ten days."

"Ten days?"

?

Dr Tamilarasu switched on the air conditioner and chilled air started moving in the room. Within the next twenty or thirty seconds, the young girl turned quite uneasy as her lungs started choking.

"Dad... Please ask him to switch it off...", the young girl started pleading her father.

"O.K... O.K... Don't worry," the doctor consoled her while turning the knob of the air-conditioner.

"This child is quite unsettled..." thought the doctor... "She is knitting her beautiful eyebrows continuously... What could be the reason?"

Recurring thoughts... Yes... I got it!

Though, Dr Tamilarasu was a practicing psychiatrist, he was quite known for his capabilities as a psychologist. He used to conduct regular workshops in schools and colleges to improve the life skills of students as well as teachers.

"Even I too have a beautiful daughter like you..." Dr Talmilarasu started the conversation with her. He used the words as well as the tone cleverly to step into her zone of comfort. An unusual smile appeared on her face. "Now... Please tell me your name?"

"Tamil Selvi," replied the young girl.

"Beautiful name... and we have something in common... what's that?"

"Tamil...", replied the young girl while going through the metal plate which bore his name as well as

educational qualifications.

"Intelligent girl..."

"Thank you...Sir..."

"Very good... Now, will you please wait in the next room? I would like to have a chat with your father... alone... Is that O.K, dear Selvi?"

"She is very afraid to sit alone..." said her father painfully.

"Don't worry Selvi... One of our nurses will give you company...Is that O.K?"

"Yes," she nodded her head.

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"Where do you come from?" Dr Tamilarasu started the conversation.

"Sir, I am from here only... the same city?" replied Mr Selvan, her beloved father.

"Tirunelveli?"

"Yes Sir..."

"So... Please tell me what had happened?"

"Sir, my daughter is a very bright girl. To be very precise, she used to adjust the top ranks in her class from the very first standard itself."

"O.K... then what happened?"

"There was a seminar program in her school with the participation of students from all over Tamilnadu state, last month. Unfortunately, she was the leader of her school team and they got the first prize."

"What was the main topic of discussion?" the doctor became curious as he used to publish various research papers in prestigious medical journals.

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"The need for conservation of energy, various energy sources, alternate energy sources, hazards and challenges and so on... these are the main topics for discussion during the seminar," said Miss Jaya Andrews, her beloved teacher, who is a source of constant encouragement for every student.

"Are you comfortable with the subject?"

"Surely Miss," Selvi replied happily.

"So, from where do you start your research?" asked the teacher.

"Shall we start it with nuclear fission?" asked Selvi.

"Surely... You can use the internet connection in our staff room for further information... But?"

"But! Information is not knowledge!" the girls shouted.

"Yes!"

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"Let's go through Wikipedia," said one of her friends.

"Never believe upon the complete authenticity of websites like Wikipedia," said Miss Jaya Andrews.

"Why do you say so, Miss?" one of the girls asked politely.

"Encyclopedias like Wikipedia are peer edited. The authenticity of many of its articles, are still under the cloud of doubt. But, the articles about science and technology are more authentic than that of history. Peer re-writing of history is very dangerous. It will misguide the future generations!"

"O.K. Miss."

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They went through more than thirty different websites on that day itself and the information collected started piling up in various folders within her personal computer. Selvi wrote an elegant paper for presentation in the seminar and her elder brother created a very dynamic power-point for the same.

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"Then, what happened?" Dr Tamilarasu asked Tamil Selvi.

"Sir, we did the best presentations and emerged as the best participants in that seminar."

"That sounds great! Congratulations Selvi," said the doctor. "Will you please tell me about your presentation?"

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Miss Jaya Andrews sat in the front row, carefully listening to the presentation by Tamil Selvi.

"A nuclear and radiation accident is defined as "an event that has led to significant consequences to people, the environment or the facility." Lethal effects to individuals, large radio-activity release to the environment are the major hazards.

The worst example of a "nuclear accident" till date is the Chernobyl Disaster, which occurred in 1986. It was said that the accident killed 30 people directly, as well as damaging approximately \$7 billion of property. A reactor core was damaged and significant amounts of radioactivity were released, which left a large geographic area uninhabitable. Radioactive fallout from the accident was concentrated in areas of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. Approximately 350,000 people were forcibly resettled away from these areas soon after the accident. The radioactivity had reached even Canada, nearly six thousand kilometers away!

A Nuclear meltdown is a term for a severe nuclear reactor accident that results in reactor core damage from overheating. It has been defined as the accidental melting of the core of a nuclear reactor, and refers to the core's either complete or partial collapse. A core melt accident occurs when the heat generated by a nuclear reactor exceeds the heat removed by the cooling systems to the point where at least one nuclear fuel element exceeds its melting point."

And she continued her presentation based on many technical aspects. Later she switched over to Fukushima Disaster, in which a nuclear power plant in Japan collapsed due to earthquake and the Tsunami followed by.

"People evacuated from places adjacent of Fukushima, Japan, are facing either not returning to their homes forever, or if they do return to their homes, living in a contaminated areas. And the major problem associated with every nuclear power plant, is the disposal of burnt out nuclear waste. If it gets mixed with drinking water sources, it will be detrimental to human life."

Let me wind up this session with a simple question ? "electric power or a radiation free life, which is

more important?"

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"I really wish, I could have attended your seminar," Dr Tamilarasu told Selvi. "Your presentation skill is exceptionable. Then, what made you so uneasy?"

"Sir, do you know something... Power generation from first nuclear reactor at Koodankulam started on 22/10/2013."

"From where?"

"Koodankulam Nuclear Power Plant. It is just sixty kilometres away from here, our home town."

"So what? Nuclear power is the only remedy for the 12 hour long power-cuts in Tamilnadu. Still, we are in short of hundreds of megawatts of power."

"Sir, are you aware of something? It seems, the combustion chambers inside of the reactors are made of recycled steel. They are not supposed to have any welded joints. Activists are saying that in broad daylight... Sir, every moment, I am very much worried about a possible nuclear meltdown. I am worried about the environmental pollution it may produce...And knowing that whatever food we eat, it might be contaminated... and always living with this sort of shadow of fear over us... that we will die early because of Cancer..." she was getting excited. "I am worried about the biggest man-made catastrophe in future..."

"Calm down Selvi...Calm down..."

"Doctor... It doesn't just kill now, it kills later, and it could kill centuries later...it kills generations..."

"Nothing will happen... it is designed by the Russians."

"Sir, More than 1.6 million people died of Cancer in and around Chernobyl since 1986... Media around the world ignored the matter very cleverly...They won't write a single word against the international nuclear lobby, who are busy selling obsolete nuclear technology to nations like India. Sir, you must be aware of one more thing, that the density of population in Ukraine is almost one third of Tamilnadu."

"Is it?"

"If a meltdown happens, who will bear the liabilities? What will happen to the victims? What will happen to the young wombs?"

"So, you mean to say that it is not safe enough to stay in Tirunelveli?" asked the doctor.

"Yes"

"Is there any practical solution?"

"Either they should stop functioning of the plant or we should move away at least a thousand kilometers away from here," said Selvi.

"Do you have any relatives in Bangalore?" Dr Tamilarasu asked purposely as Bangalore city was almost 600 kilometers away from Tirunelveli.

"Yes... my aunt stays there... But, she is childless."

"You can be her child... I will recommend it to your Dad."

"Is it?"

"You can stay with her... I assure." He smiled happily. "Tonight, you will sleep happily..."

They left happily and case was closed for ever!

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"Psychological disorders of victims of nuclear disasters" Dr Tamilarasu typed in the search box of Google. His weary eyes started reading the following information appeared on the screen.

The consequences of low-level radiation are often more psychological than radiological. Because damage from very-low-level radiation cannot be detected, people exposed to it are left in anguished uncertainty about what will happen to them. Many believe they have been fundamentally contaminated for life and may refuse to have children for fear of birth defects. Forced evacuation from a radiation or nuclear accident may lead to social isolation, anxiety, depression, psychosomatic medical problems, reckless behavior, even suicide. Such was the outcome of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the Ukraine. Such great psychological danger does not accompany other materials that put people at risk of cancer and other deadly illness.

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"Happy b'day to you...Happy b'day to my Sweetie, Happy b'day to you..." Dr Tamilarasu sang beautifully, while hugging his elder daughter tightly.

"Thank you... Dad!"

"We will celebrate your next b'day in Bangalore."

"Waw...Daaad...You are great...Can we spend three days there?"

"Three days? We are going to shift our hospital to Bangalore... Your Dad can have better prospects there!"

November 2013

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PREMJI

THE LAW OF SPACE (Short story)

THE LAW OF SPACE

It was a dull morning in the first week of January 2020. Though it was expected to have chilled mornings, the room temperature was not at all pleasing. I was sweating like a pig, as a causeless uneasiness was encompassing the air. Desperately, I pushed the earphones deep into my ears, and started listening to the unrefined voice of poet Louis Peter, who lived like a vagabond and died down at the footsteps of the Goddess of poetry. He was bidding adieu to his long-time lover ? poetry!

*'Why should we meet again,
When we cannot retrieve each other?
If you could be ready to accept me
Only after a hundred rebirths,
I would like to be that temple
Where you are enshrined
During those hundred births....'*

But... that harmony with poetry was clean-swept by a phone call from Arjun...

"Uncle... Mummy is no more..." somehow he managed to complete those words drenched with tears...
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Ceremonies were over...Arjun and wife flew back to Dubai, where he heads a moderate construction business firm founded by his father Mr Divakaran. Being one of his closest relatives, I used to call him 'Big-Bro' right from childhood.

Big-Bro and his beloved wife Anuradha were the most celebrated ideal couple in our family circle. He was left alone in that beautiful mansion, carefully designed by his wife, who happened to be my senior during college days. It was very difficult for him to accommodate the vacuum created by her untimely death, who was hardly fifty-two then. She was one of the most dynamic and charming woman I had ever met, other than my wife! I used to take a temporary refuge at their home whenever my wife had a temptation to 'roast and eat' my brains and pulverise my soul!

My younger son even wrote a poem on my peril...

*'Dad is a cracked piece of coconut
And Mommy is a house mouse
Gnawing and chewing the kernel*

To sharpen her teeth forever!
?

"Big-Bro, why don't you go back to Dubai and live with your son and daughter-in-law?" I asked one day, while giving him some company during his daily dose of two pegs of malt whiskey in the evening.

"I am not interested in doing business anymore, Prem..."

"You mean... you took a decision to retire?"

"Yes... Anuradha planned for a peaceful retired life when I turned sixty... We worked hard, day and night, to appease our material needs...But, I am helpless without her..."

"We are not 'matter' alone! Big-Bro..."

"Yes... Everything you see here, was her choice. But, she left me alone, amidst this gnawing silence..." he wiped the tears rolling down his cheeks. "She was my friend and philosopher, ideal partner for everything... She was my hope and breath! You won't believe me, till today, I do not know how to tie a tie! She managed everything personally..." Big-Bro consumed a peg in one gulp!

"I know..."

"I feel her presence everywhere..."

"Yes..."

"It seems a new disease is on the spread, I watched on TV last week... What do you think of it?"

"I do not have much clearer idea...I don't have a TV in my house..."

"But, I have! I disposed my business in Dubai last week itself!"

"A very good offer?"

"Not bad..."

"That means, you didn't quit business!"

"No... I quit business forever..." He laughed.

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Though Big-Bro had regular visitors from family and other social contacts, his uneasiness began to grow up like an untamed monster. The daily limit of pegs, doubled within a month and he picked up some more weight. He lost even the habit of using hair-dye! I couldn't find fault with his unexpected transformation. But, he was very punctual in assuring curios and decor items in his home, carefully selected by his wife from all over the world, being most clean on a daily basis.

His days began with a short walk to Anuradha's grave. Though his son and daughter-in-law wished to decorate her grave with expensive white marble tombstones, Big-Bro didn't allow them to do so, because it was against her will...

She wished to live, and leave, like a breeze!

But, things began to change as on 30th of January, when Government of India confirmed the first case of Covid-19 in the state of Kerala, when a University student traveled back home from Wuhan city in China. And on the very next day, Italian government suspended flights to and from China and

declared a National emergency. Soon, people began to lose faith on others and on themselves, suspecting the hidden claws of death! News channels were busy making 'route-map' of Corona patients.

"He went there, had some coffee... five people were suspected to be there in his primary contacts!" Reporters kept on spreading fear among the commons.

But, things were going out of control across the globe. Italy recorded a death toll of 6077 on 23rd of March. And on the very next day, 1.38 billion people of India were locked for a period of twenty-one days. It was the toughest of all decisions taken by any Prime Minister in India!

Arjun and wife Soumya were also trapped in the lock-down in Dubai. Big-Bro was left with no company. Even I was a bit reluctant to visit him, since violating the guidelines of lock-downs would land anyone in Jail! His aged caretaker too left him as her grand-daughter had a premature delivery. At last, he found some happiness in dusting out his wife's delicate collections of art and furniture.

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As the 'Stages of lock-downs' advanced to 2, his wine collection had depleted only to several pegs more! Though he had enough money to buy, the 'liquid crystal' was unavailable almost everywhere! Liquor addicts found temporary refuge in Marijuana, which ultimately ended up in addiction to both! Some day in the first week of May, I found a chance to visit him, that too without the knowledge of my wife. I found him running his own personal illegal brewery in his kitchen using a large pressure-cooker and some metal tubing immersed in water with plenty of ice! Things were slowly going out of control!

"Scarcity is the mother of invention!" he laughed loudly while handing over a cut-glass full of virgin alcohol!

"Really!" I grunted when the 'fire-extract' ran through my esophagus.

"Arjun and his wife are coming back by next week through 'Vandhe Bharat Mission'... (Massive repatriation operation to bring back stranded Indians across the globe)... It's better for anyone to be at homeland in tough times like this..."

"Death toll in Italy has already crossed 30000. USA is also worst hit, crossing 50000 deaths... Mr Trump is facing tough times..."

"India is far better..."

"I think, we are approaching the end times!"

"Whatever it may be, we must arrange a quarantine home for Arjun and Soumya, for a month."

?

Arjun and Soumya started living out their quarantine days in their ancestral home near to my house. It was a small house with minimal facilities, stood amidst a wide expanse of land and the young couple lived there quite happily. Big-Bro visited them regularly with groceries and vegetables. Some of their neighbors permanently closed down their windows opening towards their house. Unfortunately, my wife was also one among them.

"Fear of death is the worst fear man can ever have," I told my wife.

"What is death?" she confronted me with a philosophical question.

"Women are sometimes 'woe of man' by asking silly questions during tough times..."

"What is death?" she was not ready leave...

"What else, other than the separation of mind and matter..."

When their quarantine period was over, India had entered into 'Unlock phase-1'.

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"Premji uncle, I would like to speak with you something very personal..." Soumya told me when I visited Big-Bro and family after two weeks. Big-Bro and Arjun were busy settling some of their business deals.

"What's the matter?"

"My father-in-law urgently needs some sort of emotional support... I see the ghost of 'that man' now-a-days!"

"He was living alone for some time... Now, you people are here... aren't you?"

"That's not enough! That's the 'sympathy' we offer. But, he needs some sort of real 'caring' that only a partner can give..."

"You mean, he has to get remarried?"

"Yes..."

"But... Will there be any objections from Arjun?"

"No way! It was he who suggested it!" she replied with a smile.

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And the new partner, Soumya found out for her father-in-law, happened to be a poet named Sandhya! She was her family friend for long, who remained unmarried to live out her crazy passions like poetry, cinema, trekking and many more. Her passions were endless and her first demand was quite sensible, Big-Bro was forced to resettle into his ancestral home with limited modern amenities, which he hated the most! Soon, Sandhya Sis raided my house and took away a bagful of precious books, which were carefully kept on our book shelf by my wife.

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More and more relaxations happened on Unlock-2 and 3. And I lost regular contact with Big-Bro and wife. But, one day, he came in search of me to unbag the woes of an unsatisfied husband.

"It won't work out... Prem... We have almost decided to separate..."

"Are you joking Big-Bro? It's hardly three months!"

"No... Literally, I cannot tolerate her! My house is such a mess now... I am not getting a cup of bed coffee in the morning! I am forced to wash my on plates and cloths, which I am not used with. She reads up to midnight, watches crazy movies... And on some days, she paints from morning till evening! If we go to a restaurant for a change, she pays her share from her pocket... She is a strange sort of woman!"

"Big-Bro... I am very sad to say, that your requirement is not that of a partner..."

"What?"
?

It was August 15, 2020... We were celebrating 74th Independence Day, might be the toughest one in the history of independent India. Sandhya Sis visited us to return the literary books in the morning. She was kind enough to add some more from her recent online purchases.

"How is life?" I asked her.

"You know, it's something like 'Confucius and Lao-tzu' are sharing the same room!"

"You mean?"

"It's always a clash between discipline and freedom! One cannot achieve freedom through discipline alone! Then, separation is the best option available..." she replied with a smile, but sadness was the undercurrent.

"I understand... He is not free from the shades of his late wife... But, it will change..."

"I have no objections, Prem... But, I hate the strange comparisons... You know, like every human being, I too deserve some personal space!" She said while taking a deep breath of fragrant air emanating from the cluster of Roses in our home garden.

"Do you love Roses?"

"Yes... But, only wild varieties... They last for long!"

"Great! All I would like to request you is, please don't take a decision in haste..."
?

Big-Bro had gone out for his morning jogging session when I reached their ancient home with a mini-truck load of roses and locally available flowering plants. When we were about to unload it, Big-Bro appeared from somewhere. Soon, he was busy with strange ideas to set up a garden in the most disciplined way.

"Big-Bro... I brought them for Sandhya Sis... She is an artist and let her design the garden in the most unconventional way! What do you say?"

"Be it so! Then what shall I do?"

"Settle the bills first! And grow these Rose cuttings using potatoes and help her..." I handed him over a huge bunch of local varieties of Rose cuttings...

"How does that work?"

"You make a small drilling on a healthy potato with a corkscrew... Grab a Rose cutting, dip the end in honey, place the end into the hole in the potato and plant them into the ground. Potato will keep the Rose cutting moist and finally end up with roots!"

"And what will happen to the potato?"

"As the Rose grows, potato will die down to manure, just like your first wife..."

Big-Bro walked away without uttering a word, as he was unaware of her creative talents till her last days...
?

"When are you coming to visit our garden?" Sandhya Sis asked me over phone after two weeks. I rushed to their home in ten minutes as if I had been waiting for a call for millenniums.

It was an absolutely brilliant sight! Multi-hued roses were dancing on unusual patterns. But, what surprised me the most was, Rose stem cuttings grown in potassium per-manganate water, that too almost double in number! They had stronger roots. Big-Bro had done some extensive research and found out a new technique!

"How is our garden?" Big-Bro asked me.

"Outstanding! No painting or a piece of art, can ever be greater than something grown on earth!"

"Absolutely! Shall we go for a morning walk?" Sandhya Sis asked me.

"It is not safe to walk through the road... COVID is spreading up fast..."

We started walking through the boundaries of their 3 acre compound. There were newly prepared sand beds for cultivating vegetables. Their large compound ended up near a small waterfall.

Two water-streams, originating from some-where, were the main tributaries of that small, but gorgeous waterfall. But, by some hidden power of destiny, a moderate-sized rock prevented them joining together, just before falling down to lower-depths.

"If that rock is removed, it could be more beautiful! Water will flow down like a continuous sheet of colourless paper!" I said.

"Why should you worry about that? Let them flow sideways... You see, their destination is one and the same! Nothing bothers them, then why should you be bothered?" Sandhya Sis asked me.

"Some raw emotions can also create 'rocks' which blocks the natural flow of our life-streams... If you try to break them down, the flow becomes more and more turbulent... Instead of trying to break them down, why don't you try to continue the peaceful flow by ignoring them, in the middle of the larger stream called happy life? Why don't you flow around the rocks?"

"Prem... We reached into that sublime reality on the very moment we started working with our own Rose garden... Though it is very hard to accomplish 'Till you live, live happily and peacefully by by respecting the differences... Unconditional love is the only force which can unite two people without destroying their identities...." she started walking back holding hands with Big-Bro...

?

Premji

23/7/2021

THE SOLITARY REAPER (Short story)

THE SOLITARY REAPER

Kollam is one of the ancient cities in India, well-known for pepper and cashew trade and I live here like a homeless boor for many years, in many rented homes echoing with the 'jet-noise' which appear only in the evenings and their sting would elevate you the peaks of pain. The small rooms in many of them, were more efficient than most of the hot air driers designed by NASA in their heat retaining capacity, which could melt even the steel-bars of windows to fumes in no time! Friend, imagine what could happen to a human body made of 75% water, living there, other than the process of mummification! And the water, I am not willing to speak about it. Your septic tank is the next door neighbor's well! And during the rains, they become inseparable twins! Life is hell and ALL IS WELL! Unfortunately, it's the tag-line of every Indian city.

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Every week, I used visit at least two or three houses so as to satisfy the ongoing hunt for a good home of our own. It has been a routine for many years, and always ended up in great desperation - either we couldn't afford a good house at a preferred location or a small house that would fit in my pocket ended up near the heavy-trafficked railway line or at the borderline of the sea which was already licked by tsunami!

Real estate broker Babu is my latest partner in the 'building hunt' project, as my 'very important fierce enemy' (wife!) had given an ultimatum of three months, and we too had covered almost a century!

"Sir, I have a new house in my custody," Babu told me while stopping his rusty scooter in front of my newly-rented house.

"Is it affordable?"

"Tailor-made for your pocket!" Babu couldn't hide his exhilaration and we started moving towards a known destination. "Sir, it's a 2000 square-feet, fifteen year old house... and the asking price is rupees five million."

"Any more information?"

"House-owner is an NRI... But, he has a one condition..."

"What's that?"

"He will accept only pure white money..."

"Is it?"

"He needs fully accounted money for this deal so that it can be transferred to his overseas account without any Income Tax hurdle... PM Modi is a nightmare for NRIs too!"

At last, the scooter entered into Kollam Civil station area. We crossed many small roads and he stopped the vehicle in front of a locked house.

"House owner is a software engineer in Germany and he will be here by next week..." Babu told me.

The beautiful house situated in one of the calmest areas in the city. It was quite affordable to our

pocket. Actually it's real worth was around seven to eight million rupees... Multi-hued Bougainvillea were spread all above the outer walls, which needed careful pruning very badly. A series of passion-fruit vines covered the entire frontal area, crept over even the large gate. When broker Babu was about to open the rusty lock, it was reluctant to cooperate.

"That's not needed..."

"Why?" he asked with great bewilderment.

"Babu... I know this house in and out... The house-owner, is an old friend of mine."

"That's great..." Babu couldn't hide the exhilaration... "We will finalize the deal today itself... Ramu will call me in the evening... What do you say?"

"Let me ask my wife... She is the one who will decide whether to buy it or not!"

A ripe passion-fruit fell near me and its very large smell component filled my lungs with a torrent of memories. I tore open it to feel the taste - fruity and very tart like an average human life!

?

Three years back... a Sunday.

I was living in the same locality of the house that belonged to Ramu, the young man who was living in Germany. My landlord was the Godfather of all misers across the Universe and he had kept even the minute-most details of the fresh-most grass blade growing in the house compound. Poor man was our 'live security camera!' Every day, he used to walk around our rented house, at least twice or thrice, in pretest of morning/ evening/ mid-noon walk! That habitual miser had been living with a pacemaker in his chest for the past sixteen or seventeen years.

"He must be lying..." my wife told me one day.

"Why?"

"One million pacemakers can't make a 'stone' beat like human heart..." she replied angrily.

Usually, my days began with a jogging session for around twenty minutes... And many times, I used to get two or three ripe golden yellow passion-fruit that had succumbed to the passion of the previous windy nights, in front of the neighbour's gate. I was lucky on that day too, but someone called me from behind. A well-built man in his early seventies opened the front gate and handed over a plastic bag full of passion fruits.

"O! Thank you... Sir..."

"I am Rajan Pillai, secretary of our residential association... I thought of visiting your house since the last residential association meeting... We must know who all are living in and around the rental houses here..."

"Of course... you must... after-all we are living in very tough times..." I replied, though I was ashamed of myself that in many of our cities, the next door neighbor would remain like total stranger even after many years! Everyone lives in an island of their own with at least four security cameras to complement their weary eyes.

"You are right..."

"By the way, I am Premji, an engineer by profession and a teacher by passion," I shook hands with the old-man.

"What do you teach, Mr. Premji?"

"I don't teach anything... or better, I teach nothing... It's the student's duty to teach me..."

"You are a strange man..." he laughed loudly...

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As Rajan Pillai and Savithri Amma, his beloved wife, were suffering from chronic diabetes, I had to become the 'solitary reaper' of those golden yellow globes on regular basis... My sons were not even interested to smell those treasures of nature... With the help of Youtube-Baba, I tried many combinations of juice and jelly using the fruity pulp.

Rajan Pillai was an employee of Indian Railways and his wife - a government school teacher. What made them the luckiest were the high IQ of their children, which landed them in prestigious positions in their later-life. Elder boy was working as a software engineer in Germany and the younger girl was married to an army-man settled in Bangalore. They seldom visited the parents. Savithri Amma was very fond of my boys and she used to give them a portion of any of the special items made by her.

The aged couple were very active in the society, never hesitant to help people with their time, energy and money. He used to supply seeds of vegetables, saplings of many varieties of plantains and yam etc. to every household under our residential association in an old Yamaha motor-bike used by his son earlier. But, I was careful enough not to plant anything in our house compound as it was virtually impossible to resist our house-owner's watchful eyes which moved above and around our rented like unmanned American drones! The 'Nutty professor' had kept it as a special clause in our rental deed!

Rajan Pillai and I, we used to go for long walks whenever I was free. He never missed an opportunity to tell great stories of yester-years with minutest details and great passion till that fateful day, when he was about to faint after a short walk.

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"Coronary arteries diseases occurs when fatty substances are deposited along the wall of the arteries causing them narrow. Two of the coronary arteries of Mr. Pillai are having blocks...." Dr. Rajesh, a noted cardiac surgeon and owner of 'Chandra Heart-care' told us.

"What could be the possible remedy?" asked one of the veterans from our residents association.

"Either he can live with it as long as time permits... or he can opt for a Bypass surgery," doctor replied without any emotions.

"Let's discuss with him first," said one of his relatives.

"Let him get out of ICU first," I told them.

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To be very frank, modern hospitals are nothing but high-end butcher shops with supreme neatness and their modern diagnostic equipment have extensive attachments like that of heavy duty excavators which could dig money even from the corpse of a slum-dog who hadn't seen food or water for months. Rajan Pillai became their instantaneous celebrity as his son had full coverage insurance for his parents offered by the German Company where he was working.

After a series of painstaking tests, the poor man was admitted into the intensive care unit. His wife and relatives had to wait outside for a couple of days. He was released after six or seven days of the so-called 'intensive care.' Every small vein of the poor man's forearms was punctured with huge needles to add glucose and medicines though he was perfectly alright to eat three meals a day! But, he was not allowed.

Savithri Amma sold his motor bike off, the all-time companion of the old man, to a scrap dealer and stopped cooking every local food item that needed even the slightest amount of coconut oil for sautéing or frying. He was allowed to eat fried Tuna fish pieces covered with pepper masala only in long day-dreams!

Rajan Pillai's 'new morns' began with thin porridge made of crushed wheat, followed by dry chapattis

in the afternoon and ended with a 'morn' in the night why because the oatmeal porridge or the tasteless dry wheat bread pieces were insufficient enough to feed the starving worms inside his shrunken bowels. Poor man had to drink a golden yellow liquid, made of broken coconut shells boiled in water, at least twice a day as Savithri Amma was waging Mahabharata war against bad Cholesterol. Unfortunately, it supplemented his hunger at least twice! He had to relieve himself from the prestigious post of Residential Association Secretary to avoid the verbal pestering of his devoted wife.

When he is sick, she becomes the prick... God! What a Universal truth it is! The only family whom he was free enough to mingle anytime was that of ours!

?

Ramu, his German wife named Emma and their seven year old daughter Mia reached his home without any prior intimation. Unfortunately, his wife and kid didn't know any language other than German. But, my little sons, started communicating with the little girl in German with the help of a mobile app that could translate any language to the desired one. Within a week, they had enormous improvement in German.

"Guten Morgan," my wife told me while handing over a cup of steaming coffee.

"Who taught you all these rubbish?"

"Very poor in German," she was about to away with a naughty smile.

"Dad... It means Good morning..." my younger giggled.

"Ich liebe dich..." I told my wife.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

"I love you..." my elder son translated coolly.

"Bloody fellows, tried even that!" she couldn't control the laughter.

Soon, I started walking towards Rajan Pillai's house.

Emma found infinite happiness in pruning the untamed Bougainvillea's and nurturing plants in their home garden. And their little girl chased the dragonflies. Ramu joined me during the morning jogging sessions. Poor man was in deep confusion, what to do with his parents. His sister was not in good terms with any of them.

?

It was a fine evening and I was sporting through the design of an electric car ? one of my dream projects. Someone knocked at the door. Mr. Rajan Pillai kept a small bag full of Passion fruits on my table.

"Thank you Sir..."

"Shall we move on to the terrace and sit for some time? I have something very important to discuss with you."

Soon, my little boys placed two plastic chairs there on the terrace and we settled in for a long discussion. My wife appeared with two steaming cups of coffee...

"Unfortunately, I forgot... not to add sugar," she told the old man.

"It's a pleasure, for I haven't tasted some sugar for many days," he replied smiling.

"Ok then," she walked away.

"Premji, I am going to Cochin by tomorrow morning..." he began to speak seriously.

"Any medical check-up?"

"No... I am going to get admitted for Bypass surgery..."

"But... nobody told about it..."

"Nobody knows about it! It is not a personal decision... I had to submit myself before the collective decision of my family. Actually, there is no point in undergoing any operation like this... But, my wife and son are not ready to leave me..."

"What to do? They too have to make themselves secured, otherwise friends and relatives will abuse them with harsh words..."

"Are you supporting their stand?"

"No way... I strongly advocate for your personal freedom... It's your life... It's your decision..."

"Personally, I am afraid of all hospitals, especially the intensive care units... Do you know what's happening inside there? When, you people were waiting outside, I was lying on an elevated bed with as many sensors fixed upon my body... Nurses inside were busy either with smartphone games or on social media... The duty doctor was busy preparing for some entrance examinations. Even-though we call it intensive care unit, you won't get any care at all. And the relatives sitting outside believe that we are getting cared every moment!"

"Is it?"

"Yes... Premji... I witnessed many peaceful deaths in my family... especially, very aged people like my grandfather... We used to sit beside their bed chanting mantras or reciting holy books... They left peacefully by showering blessings on all of us... But, what's happening today? You die alone like a dog among those who crack silly jokes on you... You may feel like blessing your grandchild, but, you can't ... See, your hands are tied with some heartless machines... You die in absolute dismay! "

"Very sad!"

"One day, I was woken up from deep sleep by the horrible gasping of a man lying on the next bed. He dropped dead in two minutes. Sad, his eyes were searching for the dear and near..."

"Then why did you decide to undergo a bypass surgery?"

"Premji... You might be knowing that I was with the Indian Railways working as a ticket examiner... Always, I was in need of a lot of money for providing better education to our children, and those urgencies ended up in my dismissal, almost fifteen years prior to the normal course of retirement... I used to arrange seats and berths for many passengers without proper reservations in exchange of money... But, I was caught ready-handed by the Chief Manager of Southern Railways who happened to be a casual passenger. Never even once he used the special facilities allotted to him and not even once he had forgiven anyone cheating his mother organization... He was such a principled man and not even once I have cursed him till today... My family was humiliated everywhere... Luckily, one of our closest relatives sponsored both of our children just because of their merit... Whatever we own today, belongs to his kindness... Both of my kids always wished to stay away from us."

"Very sad..."

"I have transferred all the documents of our house to Ramu today... And our little savings to my daughter... At least, they should not curse their Dad!"

"That sounds really great... But, why did you decide to undergo bypass operation?"

"Ramu is capable of spending for at least fifty bypass operations on my feeble heart... But, he is very much worried about the criticism from friends and relatives that if I die without it. Unfortunately, I had to overhear him discussing the same with his mother. Premji... Already, I had brought them a

enough disgrace... Why should I do it again?" the old man wiped his tears. "It's a duel between fear of criticism v/s fear of loss of life!"

"Sir... Please calm down... They know you in and out..."

"If I had an elder son, he might be of your age... and I felt the same, always, in your company... I am here to say good-bye..."

"Our family's prayers are always with you..."

"Thank you...son..." he said while hugging me tightly.

Soon, the fresh smell of Tuna fish fried with pepper masala started moving around us like the last temptation.

"Would you like to have some?"

"Why not!" replied the old man.

?

The bypass surgery was quite successful, and they charges even for the hand-rub used by the nurses! But, the pace-making cells failed to generate a current that causes contraction of the heart with the rhythm of life.

?

"At last, I have located a good house, in a good location with ample space and compound, perfect fitting in our pocket," I told my little idiot.

"Where is it located?" she asked.

"You know the house very well..."

"Me?"

"Yes... Ramu is selling his house... Rajan Pillai's son..."

"We are not going to buy it... A house that is made of memories, cannot be high--spirited... Anyway, let's not stop the hunt, dear..." she hugged me tightly.

?

Premji

21/06/2019

TWISTED (Short story)

TWISTED

It was nearing 9.20 pm in the evening. Venad express was late for almost an hour. I was the last passenger left in the first class compartment awaiting 'decommissioning' after a meritorious service of 25 long years. I started walking towards the auto-rickshaw stand slowly.

My mobile phone started making noise.

"Premji... Your younger son didn't eat anything today..." my wife was on the line.

"Is it? What shall I get him now?" I was in dare-straits as shops around the railway station were almost closed.

Both of our boys were eagerly waiting for me when I had reached home. As usual, my little one began to search my shoulder bag. He was a bit disappointed as he couldn't find his favourite cookies. He left the bag there itself and started walking towards his mother. His eyes were about to flood.

"Eyyy... come here... You didn't search it completely," I told him showing a small paper packet. "It's for you."

The boy was reluctant to collect it.

"Your father has brought *Murukku** for you," My wife told him while opening the packet with great care. She broke a small piece of that crunchy snack. My sons snatched it from her within no time.

"It tastes like that of Beevathumma's...", she told me while offering a small piece...

"It's made by her...dear..."

But, she couldn't believe my words.

"Did you meet her?"

"Yes"

"How is she? Did she start any business?"

(Murukku is crunchy snack, originated in the Tamil Nadu state of India, and its name derives from the Tamil word for "twisted")

?

Inefficiency is considered as a blessing in disguise by many of the government employees. Higher officials simply keep them away from important duties. Unfortunately, I belong to such a group, and my higher officials consider me as a useless brat. 'Useless' is a divine status! I used to enjoy that status till our current director took over the post. Someone, very close to him, told about the crazy ideas of mine. He, personally, summoned me to his office at Ernakulam, nearly 120 km away from Kollam city where I am residing. I was forced to travel in the general compartment of Sabari express, heading towards Hyderabad, as I didn't have enough time to reserve a seat.

The compartment was almost filled with season ticket holders. I kept my bag on the luggage carrier

and started reading a daily from one of the co-passengers.

"Sir, please sit here," one of the guys, who resembled a street urchin, offered his seat.

"Then, what about you?" I couldn't stop asking.

"Sir... I will get down soon," he replied while getting up and soon he was away from my vicinity.

"Why did he get up?" I asked myself...

"Because of your crude looks... You resemble a cop in every move," my inner-conscience replied. Unfortunately, it was the opinion of my close friends! An aged woman, clad in an old faded Burkha ? the traditional Muslim dress, with several patches, was sitting next to me, sleeping. Train began to slow down as it was covering some caution area where railway extension work was going on. The excessive shocks made the woman wake up. Soon she was back after freshening up.

"Prem!"

It was Beevathumma... and I had been meeting her after six years...

?

My wife comes from a place very near to Kovalam, an important beach in the international tourism map. Fortunately, she has a beach in her backyard! We are happily married for the past fourteen years.

"I like to eat some murukku," she told my mother-in-law during the early stages of pregnancy.

Soon, Beevathumma reached our home with her utensils. She was accompanied by two of her beautiful daughters too. They resembled the full-moon! Beevathumma was a very jovial woman around fifty... Her face was very pleasant always and she cracked jokes regularly... People, who carry the worst of all storms inside, cover it with an innocent happy smile always!

My mother-in-law supplied her several small bagful of rice flour and *urad* dal flour, a huge can full of coconut oil and many other ingredients. With my personal heap, she made a local fire-hearth using three large stones inside a temporary shed adjoining to our house and started making a mix of rice flour, urad dal flour, with water, salt, asafetida and some kind of black seeds.

"What's that?" I asked Beevathumma.

"Sesame seeds..."

"We use cumin seeds in our place."

"Moly (my wife) doesn't like it," Beevathumma smiled.

Soon, we became very close friends. Beevathumma began to knead the mix into dough and started making spiral shapes by hand, upon a metallic mould. Her daughters too joined her.

"Do you want to try some?" Beevathumma asked me.

"Why not!" the kid within me replied louder. "I never miss any chance to learn anything new!"

"Then I will teach you how to make *kaimurukku*..."

Soon, my wife too joined us. The spirals were then fried in hot coconut oil. 'Frying' was the only area she didn't allow her daughters to take care of. Yes, fire decides the taste of anything! (even including life). The first of the fried up *murukku* was offered to the almighty...

"How is your husband now?" my wife asked her.

"Not feeling well... He is suffering from liver cirrhosis....," Beevathumma replied while checking the degree of frying. "Even Allah can't stop his drinking."

"And what about your five girls? Does he have any plans to get at least two of them married?" asked

my mother-in-law.

"I don't know..." Beevathumma replied calmly. "She is twenty four now," she pointed towards her elder daughter. "And the youngest one is nearing twelve. Life is always bitter Madam." She put a small piece of murukku in her mouth and started kindling the fire. The heat emanating from the open fire-hearth was nothing before her inner-hearth named mind. "My life is like these metal moulds... always exposed to fire and heat... or rust..." she cracked another joke while taking out those hot metal plates from boiling oil.

We made six or seven different varieties of *murukku*, starting from *mullu murukku* to *achu murukku*... Those were the best of all *murukkus*, I had ever eaten in my life.

My mother-in-law gave her a car-load of gifts and we left them in their shack, beside the sea-shore, in the evening.

"What is the secret behind her magical taste?" I asked my wife while returning back in our jeep.

"I don't know...but, I am really worried about her girls..." she stopped in the middle... "I know, your mother-in-law will help her in every possible way she can... She is so fond of her"

"Someone might marry them without any dowry... Sometimes, beauty is also a boon..." I tried to console her.

And that was what exactly happened later!

?

Train picked up speed and the metal wheels began to make horrible noise...

"Prem... how are you?"

"I am fine... Beevathumma..."

"What about Moly and boys?"

"They are also fine..."

"Inshah Allah..." she thanked the Almighty...

"How is your *Murukku* business? Are you getting orders regularly?"

"Very rarely...my son... Nobody likes to take pains now-a-days... You know, everything is readily available in bakeries... Big sharks are eating away the share of poor-folks too..."

"May be... But... none can beat your taste..." I praised her.

"Thank you... So, where are you going?"

"I am going to Ernakulam... What about you?"

"Hyderabad... I am going all the way for the first time..." Beevathumma replied calmly.

"Hyderabad? Alone?"

"Abida, my third daughter is studying for nursing there... She needs some money very urgently..."

"You could have taken your elder son-in-law also with you?" I asked her innocently.

"He left her uttering 'Talaag' thrice... it is the worst of all words invented by man..." Beevathumma stopped talking for some time. "She too delivered three unlucky girls! The last one is just five months old," the poor woman wiped her eyes. "Her husband was forcing her to leave the little girls in some orphanage... Amina went to Saudi Arabia, two months back, as a house-maid as her husband doesn't pay anything for the little girls. But, her meager salary won't be enough to look after them..."

"How sad..." even my eyes began to flood.

"I was forced to leave the little girls in with Noorji..." she looked outside as she couldn't hide her tears.

"Noorji?" I couldn't believe her words.

Carefully, she picked out an old book and prayer beads from her bag. It contained some hymns written in Arabic language. She opened a faded page and started turning the prayer beads. Fortunately, she was illiterate! Why do you need many languages for true prayers other than silence?

The compartment was almost emptied when the train reached Kayamkulam station. Noorji... I tried to remember her innocent face. She was a dumb girl from childhood, partially retarded too!

?

Ten years back... We were back to my wife's house for Christmas / New Year celebrations as I had ten days of leave. I loved jogging through the seashore in the Sunday morning. Nobody was there in front of the house when I reached back, completely drenched in sweat. Three women were crying bitterly when I reached our backyard. Noorji stood beside them smiling innocently. They all wiped their tears immediately when they had seen me.

"What's the matter?" I couldn't stop asking.

"Nothing...", my wife pulled me inside to our house.

"What the hell is going on here?" I was getting angry.

"Somebody tried to rape Noorji yesterday, when nobody was there at home."

"So? Beevathumma could have given a complaint to Police or women's cell..."

"Complaints are of no use when the culprit is from within the family..." my wife was getting tensed.

"Then, why did she come to our house?"

"She needs my help to sterilize her daughter!"

"This is absolute madness!"

"Premji, it is not the time to differentiate between sanity and insanity... Not even the best of all writers across the world, could even express the pain of a mother's heart even one percent. Beevathumma needs Noorji's uterus is to be removed without anyone's knowledge. And I am sure, I have to be with her. Dr Sasha will help her. Are you coming with me or not?"

"Yes..." somehow, I managed to reply. "I will be always with you."

"Thanks, my silly writer..."

I haven't seen Beevathumma smiling after that... Soon, she started wearing a long Purdah, covering her whole body. Were it to hide her pains?

?

Beevathumma was getting more and more uneasy as the train was about to stop in stations. Her fearful eyes were searching for someone.

"Don't you have tickets?"

"Unfortunately, train was about to leave when I had reached Trivandrum railway station," she replied calmly. "Ticket-less journey is not at all a problem in Tamilnadu and Andhrapradesh states," she tried to console herself.

The train was getting emptier and at last we two remained in a single cabin.

"What about your second daughter?"

"She is working in Abu Dhabi as a nurse. Most of her salary is still used for paying back the debts... paying dowry for my elder daughter... and medical expenses of my late husband... but, what is the use?"

"Very sad..."

"When Abida completes her nursing course, she will get a job in the same hospital where her sister is working. I hope, I can get her elder daughter get married after that."

"You still live in the same fishermen colony?"

"Yes... in the same shack!"

Her mobile phone began to cry instead of her... And the conversation lasted for some ten minutes...

"Are you happy dear?" Beevathumma was repeatedly asking her elder daughter... Poor woman began to weep like a child, so bitterly.

"It was her first call after one and a half month..." Beevathumma said.

I picked up a local daily, left by some passenger, lying on the next seat that of Beevathumma...

"Indian woman's hand cut off by employer in Saudi Arabia" ... unfortunately, that was the title. Allah had been merciful to her for the first time as He kept her illiterate all life!

?

Amina has been living in Rosaba Village of Saudi Arabia for the past two months. It is a dry village, they there are many greens like grass and shrubs all around. Her employer is a well-built man who runs a grocery shop in the village head-quarters. He has a beautiful wife and a small girl child. They lived in their traditional home with some milking cows and goats. A Philippine man is in charge of them.

Language was the biggest hurdle before Amina and she began to pick up as fast as possible. She had to look after the house owner's wife and his new born baby girl. Fortunately, the little girl was her one and only solace for love is the only language known by children... They always lean for it... Whenever she was allowed to pick up the child, Amina's breasts began to pain with excess production of milk. Though she is lovable by nature, the Arab woman used to scold her for her excess usage of water as it is a scarce commodity. Amina had been squeezing out the breast milk to relieve her during regular intervals, secretly. Unfortunately, the Arab woman caught hold of some strange type of desert fever for a week and her mammary glands dried up as a result. The little infant had been crying day in and day out for milk... The poor Arab mother began to lose all her charm...

"Shall I give her some milk?" Amina asked her one day, as her husband was away at shop, through gestures.

The poor mother couldn't believe her eyes. She opened the cup-board and took out some expensive toilet soaps, neat towels and some of used, but expensive Purdahs.

"Take bath and wear this," she told Amina.

"Water?"

"Use as much as you like," a cute smile appeared on her face... what a smile of relief... Since then the infant has two mothers... She gave her a secret raise in salary too...

?

"My daughter is happy now... Prem... After all, she is also a mother... How can she abandon a hungry child, when her children are getting starved in our home? After all everything is the grace of Allah!" she wiped her tears.

Did I see a grain of smile upon her lips?

I bought two cups of tea from the next station as the train was put on halt for fifteen minutes for crossing. But, Beevathumma couldn't drink even a single drop... I felt the hot tea as if I am drinking a hot cup of blood... She kept the tea for a quite a long time till it became cold like water. And at last she consumed it in a single gulp as if she was drinking the deadliest of all poisons. She took out the prayer book and the prayer beads. I opened my laptop and did the finishing touches of my power-point presentation on academic monitoring system. She was silent throughout the journey till my destination.

?

Ernakulam North Railway station... It was nearing twelve thirty in the afternoon...

I bought a packet of meal, two large bottles of water and some biscuits and handed them over through the window. She didn't feel hunger since long... The train was about to move... I took out some money and a railway ticket from my pant pocket. I felt very angry upon my wife, as she keeps just enough money in my purse. She knows, I am a spendthrift...

Beevathumma was a bit reluctant first to accept it first...

"Please accept it mother... Even sons have right to support mothers... Please..." my eyes began to flood.

"I will accept it... but, on one condition... You will not disclose anything to Moly... It will hurt her a lot..."

"Surely..."

"Please give it to Moly," Beevathumma handed over a small paper packet to me... "It's her favorite *Murukku*..."

She blessed me with her feeble hands... The train tore away a part of my heart and continued its merciless journey...

?

"Did she start any business?" my wife asked again.

"She owns a small *murukku* factory now... Her life is getting twisted and twisted like her tasty *murukkus*," I opened the tap to wash my face... Even Gods are incapable of separating tears from water!

October 2015

?

PREMJI

TWO SISTERS (Short story)

TWO SISTERS

It was a pale morning in January and Ammini Amma, an aged widow in the beginning of her sixties, was busy cleaning the surroundings of her already dilapidated home. She had been staying there for the past thirty years with her two beautiful daughters in absolute insecurity. Her late husband was a Naxalite - a hardcore communist revolutionary, who got vaporized by the Police during the emergency period of the seventies.

'Where is Sumangala?' Post-woman asked her.

'She went to tuition center... Is there anything important Madam?' 'O... Nothing...' replied the post woman.

And within a short span of twenty minutes, Sumangala got the first appointment letter of her life from the Department of Agriculture as a lower division clerk. She got her appointment in the reservation quota for physically handicapped people. And for the first time in her life, she started liking her left leg, crippled by Polio.

'Congratulations Madam,' said Aravindakshan Master, principal of that tuition center for school kids. Thirty one year old Sumangala had been teaching there for the past ten years to support her family. Unfortunately, that was the only income of their family.

?

The officer in charge of posting was kind enough to provide her posting at an office barely twenty km away from her house. The agricultural officer in charge of her office was even kinder so that she could leave for home around three thirty in the evenings. She deserved this concession as she was very good at her work as it was practically impossible for a woman like her to get a seat in the crowded buses in the evenings.

?

Sunanda, her younger sister, was of twenty seven years old. She was a very beautiful woman and her beloved mother was really afraid of her sexy outlook. Soon, a local marriage broker approached her with a list of several alliances.

'I am not going to get married,' announced Sumangala.

'Why dear?' Ammini Amma couldn't understand her intentions!

'I cannot satisfy the physical needs of a man,' she replied painfully.

'But, your periods are regular...'

'That has nothing to do with my life...', Sumangala said stubbornly. 'Let's get her married to someone...'

'You need a lot of money for that,' sighed the old woman.

'I will take a loan...'

'One of our relatives wishes to marry her... She too likes him... I knew this for long... But, I didn't tell

you...' smiled the old woman... 'Poor boy is waiting for her.'

'Is it? O.K... Let's fix it...' Sumangala hugged her tightly.

And the betrothal was over in a simple manner within a month.

?

It was a second Saturday. Sumangala walked in to the chamber of the Bank Manager for a loan.

'Sir, I need a loan for a hundred thousand rupees,' Sumangala told him. Soon she explained the background of the loan too.

'That's O.K... Will you please tell me what kind of security that you are able to offer?' asked the Manager.

'I hope, this is enough,' she pulled out her salary certificate from her new, but cheap, bag.

'Madam... I am afraid... it is not enough...', said the Manager without any change of expression upon his face.

'Documents of some land?'

'How many cents?'

'Seven cents'

'Unfortunately, that's not enough Madam' he said mercilessly.

'Sir... what shall I do then?'

'Please find another surety... Please ask some of your colleagues to stand as surety for you... Madam, I need only a salary certificate and a declaration... Then I will be able to release the funds within a week,'

Empty-handed, she walked away like a girl-child with a begging bowl.

?

It was the first Tuesday of the new millennium... Leftist unions convened a convention near our office in a local auditorium. As part of the grandeur, lunch with chicken curry was served around 1pm. Being special invitees, we reached there by the noon.

'Premji...', somebody touched my shoulders.

'Chandran... what a pleasant surprise... How come you are here?'

'I going to join your institution as head accountant,'

'That's great!'

Soon, Sugunan, a state committee member of the leftist workers union, started delivering his trademark speech... 'Are you aware of the political changes happening around us? What is happening in Latin America? What is happening in Bolivia and Venezuela? Comrade Hugo Chavez is doing wonders in their nation. He is the greatest sentinel of the leftist movement... The future of the world will be safe only through the doctrine of Marxism,' He went on like this and finally touched the current educational scenario in the state.

Mercilessly, he criticized the policies of the former right-wing government that crippled the public education system by excessive privatization. To be very frank, it was the finest speech in that political convention.

?

The second session started immediately after the lunch and the introduction of new members was the primary agenda. And at last, Comrade Chandrasekhar was invited to the stage.

'Dear Comrades... At the outset, I would like to thank you all for giving me this opportunity to stand before you. I am Chandrasekhar from Thirunellayi. And actually, I was supposed to join as head accountant at..... college today morning itself. My father was a communist and he remained a communist until his death. But, I would like to ask a very simple question to you: 'How many of you will remain as a communist till death?'..O.K.. Let me tell the answer: 'only a few!' That's the sublime reality, we face now... the decadence of a leftist party... Comrade Sugunan criticized the former right wing government for crippling the public education system... But, we should never forget the truth: 'It was actually started by the leftists... that is the truth, Comrade Sugunan... If anyone is over-informed, naturally he will question their dogma,' Chandrasekhar spoke out his stubborn opinion.

'Switch off the microphone and throw him out of the stage,' someone started shouting from the audience.

'Red Salute... Comrades..., ' Chandrasekhar walked away.

'You bastard... they would have crushed your balls to pulp,' I told in his ears.

'No way... Come, let's go to our college... I have to join today itself,' Chandran said.

?

Chandran started staying with me in the same room at Aryabhavan, a lodge immediately opposite to our institution. It was a calm place until his arrival. Soon, it was filled with laughter. But, he was an absolute loner in every office wherever he had worked.

The last week of every month was a nightmare to Principals of every institution. Salary bills of employees were to be prepared without any correction. It is very easy now-a-days since we have softwares like MS-Excel... But, such a thing was unthinkable during those days.

Chandran used to sit with two candles, a packet full of Beedi- locally made cigarette, and a packet of salted ground nuts. He used to take maximum three hours to finish the salary bill of seventy employees. Not even a single Treasury Officer was bold enough to object a salary bill prepared by Chandran. He was such an accounting genius.

?

He was a handsome man in mid-thirties. Being a heavy drunkard and dare-devil, he didn't even have the slightest element of respect towards higher authority. Women, especially 'Gulf widows' were his great weakness. He had a special knack in trapping those women whose husbands were away for years, toiling in the deserts. He was an oasis in their deserted sexual life. On certain days, he purposely avoided the habit of drinking and smoking. And beyond all, he used to brush his teeth twice with imported sweet smelling toothpastes.

'Do you have an appointment?' I used to ask.

'Yes... Sheela Mathew is alone tonight,' he laughed while going out at around eleven in the night.

And he was back in the morning.

'Have you seen this?' He took out an expensive Yardley spray from his pant pocket...

'Poor man might have brought it for her,'

'So what?' Chandran laughed silently fondling the nail marks over his powerful elbows... 'I haven't met such a sex-starving woman like her,' He pressed the knob of that and a sweet smell started flooding inside.

'Scent of a Gulf Widow...', I told carelessly.

?

Sumangala was in utter distress as she was unable to find a surety with a permanent government job. The black and red marks on the calendar became her permanent foes as the date of marriage was approaching faster. And finally, she decided to approach someone from our institution. And to her dismay, everyone deserted her mercilessly. The poor woman was about to cry as she could see only darkness ahead.

'I am ready to be your surety,' Chandran rose up from his office chair.

Everyone in our institution was shocked to listen to his decision!

'Do you have any crazy plans for her?' I asked him in the evening.

'I could see a real sister in her...', he lit a cigarette.

'You can give without loving...' I said painfully.

?

It was a simple, but elegant marriage. Chandran helped them in every possible way he could. Soon he was under suspension for drinking during duty.

'What are going to do from tomorrow onwards? I asked him in the evening.

'Wait and see Mr Premji...', he laughed as if nothing had happened.

And from the very next day, he started working as chief hairdresser in an expensive saloon in the nearby city. He knew the art of making money than anyone from our institution. And his service was reinstated at the month end.

?

Sumangala was really embarrassed to see him appear in her office.

'Hello Sir... How come you are here?' the innocent woman in her asked.

'I have come all the way to meet you,'

'Is it so... What shall I do for you?' asked Sumangala.

'Even I have to take a loan... Will you please stand for me as a surety?' Chandran asked politely.

'Why not!' Sumangala replied happily.

He left her office within fifteen minutes, that too with her official consent as his surety. He completed every formality for the loan in record speed.

On the very day he got the loan amount of Rs 2,00,000/- from the district cooperative bank, he got an unexpected transfer to the extreme north of Kerala. It was a special gift by the union leaders for questioning their sacred dogma!

Time went on so fast and I lost contact with him as there were no mobile phone services at that time. As the left wing lost power in the next elections, almost every leftist union leader were transferred to the farthest corners of the state as a part of political revenge. Comrade Sugunan was also one among them!

?

Sumangala took a casual leave on that Tuesday as Sunanda and her husband were at home.

'Today is a very special day,' said Sumangala... 'Today is your second marriage anniversary,'

'We should celebrate it then...', said her mother.

And on that fateful special day, Sumangala got a registered letter from District Cooperative Bank.
'Is there anything important dear?' asked her mother.

'O... nothing,'

?

Unfortunately, Chandran was one among their defaulters with almost eight months payment dues. The Bank was in no position to tolerate it and they decided to recover the loan amount from Sumangala's salary. She was paying almost one fourth of her salary to the bank regularly as down-payments for her personal loan.

'I will have to start tuitions at home for a living...,' she told her Mom when her sister and husband had left... 'I will have to pay three fourth of my salary to the bank for the next five years, if he is not willing to pay,'

'That's unthinkable... Why don't you meet him in person and ask him to settle it?' asked her Mom.

'Even I think so,'

And on the next Friday evening, she caught a train to the extreme north of Kerala, with a small bag full of clothes.

?

The Technical Institute at Cheemeny, a sleepy village in Kasaragod district, stood on steel and concrete, like a woman without any expression upon her face.

'Don't you know that?' asked the senior superintendent.

'What?' Sumangala yelled out in utter confusion.

'He committed suicide around three months back,'

'O! my God!'

'Very sad,'

'Will you please give me his house address?'

'They are staying here only.,'

?

'His wife will readily agree to settle the dues... She will not desert me...,' Sumangala told herself while she was on the way to his house.

The Auto-rickshaw ran for almost three kilometers through the narrow roads and stopped in front of a small house. Three goats were making noise inside a small thatched shed adjacent to the house and two little girls were busy feeding them.

'Where is your Mom?' asked Sumangala.

'She is in the kitchen...,' one of the girls ran in to call their Mom and she came out in no time.

'I am Sumangala,'

'O! Please come in... Chandrettan told me everything about you... Please come in...,' she offered a broken chair for her... 'Please be careful,' and soon, Vasantha, the young widow, broke into tears...

?

Eight months back...

'Chettaa, I have severe pain in the lower abdomen...,' Vasantha told her Chandran late in the night as she was carrying for the third time. 'You wanted to have a little boy and see how he is troubling

me,'

A pain grew severe and she was admitted in the hospital next day morning.

?

'Mr Chandran, she is suffering from tubal pregnancy and it will be extremely dangerous if it breaks...,' warned Dr Samuel, the most experienced gynecologist practicing in the nearby city. 'We should make arrangements for the operation today itself,'

'That's O.K...Sir,'

?

'The operation was successful and I was discharged after four days... and on the fifth day, my husband got the last suspension of his life,' said Vasantha.

'For what?' asked Sumangala.

?

It was nearing eleven in the morning and Chandran was having a cup of coffee from the school canteen.

'Sir, office inspection team has arrived,' the office peon informed him.

'It is so?'

And on the very evening, he got a charge memo for committing misappropriation of money... Eight thousand rupees from the office chest was found missing... Unfortunately, Chandran was the one and only staff responsible for the maintaining the same and Comrade Sugunan was in charge of the office inspection team.

?

'Sugunan Sir, please don't make it into an issue... I will replace it within ten minutes...,' requested the Principal.

'Sir... Are you not ashamed of supporting frauds like him?' Sugunan got angry.

'His wife was in hospital for an urgent operation...may be... that's why...,' said the superintendent.

'So what? No more discussions in this matter... I will recommend for his suspension right now and the termination from service later,' Sugunan shouted like a gladiator standing on the victory stand...

He had the same rat in his trap!

?

'The official file for his dismissal was fast moving through various government departments as nobody was there to protect him and he was getting more and more uneasy everyday... No money we had... nothing to eat... We were going through the toughest days of our life... And one day...,' Vasantha stopped in the middle... 'When those political leaders who eat away billions of public funds roam out freely on broad Sunlight, the cruel public were longing for my husband's blood.'

?

Comrade Sugunan got up around five in the morning listening to the cycle bell of the newspaper boy as he was having an inexplicable addiction to the whistle-blower daily of the party. He was shocked to see someone standing on the porch when he opened the front door.

'Who is that?' Sugathan cried out...

There was no answer. In a quick move, he switched on all the lights in front of his newly-built huge house...

Chandran was standing in the porch. But, unfortunately his feet were not touching on the ground! 'What a sweet revenge!' A sweet smile appeared on the dead face of Chandran, hanging from the ceiling.

'Death is the ultimate socialist and the only communist!'

Comrade Sugunan fainted down like gunny-bag filled with waste. He didn't get up from that shock since then.

?

Sumangala had to return by the evening train. But, she was forced to postpone the to the next day evening.

'O! little girls... Shall we go for an outing?' asked Sumangala.... 'You can also join us, dear Vasantha,'

'They will come with you... Sumangala Chechee...,' replied Vasantha, while covering her empty neck, quite unknowingly, with her torn Sari, the traditional Indian dress for women.

?

And they were back in the evening with several bags full of clothes, school books, pens and a gunny-sack full of quality rice. Vasantha couldn't control her tears and she started weeping like a child... helplessly...

'Mummy... Mummy... we have watched a movie for the first time in our life....,' the elder daughter opened the Pandora's box.

'It was so nice... Thanks... Sumangala aunty...,' said the younger one.

Sumangala walked near the young widow and lifted her face with her feeble hands.

'Don't cry dear... Everything will be alright,' Sumangala wiped her tears away... 'It's for you,' She opened a little box, took out a chain and a pair of ear-rings plated with one gram Gold.

Vasantha hugged her tightly and started weeping much louder.

'I have one more sister....,' Sumangala patted her shoulders softly.

'And two daughters too....,' said the younger daughter.

Soon, they all started laughing uncontrollably....

?

Vasantha slept off peacefully on that day, that too after several month-long insomnia... The Gold-plated chain, she wore around her neck, started glittering in the Moonlight. Her face was so serene and beautiful! The two little girls were sleeping with Sumangala aunty.

'He took a loan to purchase a home for his wife and kids,' she thought while lying in between the two girls... 'I will leave my spare cloths here, unknowingly... may be she can use them,'

And somewhere in the middle of the night, Sumangala was blessed with the sweetest of all dreams ever in her life.

'Dear... You can give without loving... But, you cannot love without giving.... One who loves his fellow beings, than himself, is a true communist... I am proud of you... I am proud of you....,' her late father kissed on her forehead.

Premji

UNSAVED IMAGES (Short story)

UNSAVED IMAGES

It was a fine morning in June.

We were busy packing our belongings from an old rented house. Life is journey from one rented house to another; it's true for almost every employed couple!

'Premji,' someone called me from outside.

Gopan, a bearded young-man, stood there at the doorstep.

'Premji... are you going to vacate this house?' he asked openly.

'Yes...my friend...'

'Will he give it to me for rent?'

'He will give it to someone, whom I recommend!'

'Sure! You are a good tenant...', Gopan laughed.

'I will recommend it for you...'

'Thanks Premji,... Do you have any information from Huntsman Corporation?'

'No... his private secretary wrote to me, Mr.Huntsman would contact me... but, nothing happened so far....'

'Really sad!'

'Gopan... You know a specific shrub, which can cure breast cancer, advanced hepatitis and any sort of incurable wounds... But, the scientific world won't care you... They all need proof... they all need medical reports, graphs, scan reports etc... and, you don't have all these...', I told

'It's a panacea... that's why, we have been desperately trying to contact researchers and medicinal companies, all over the world, for the sake of you...But, we are helpless...', my wife said.

'I know that, Madam'

'Please try to gather some proof'

'Any recent developments, Gopan?' I asked.

'Yes.'

?

Sunila Augustine, a twenty three year old, final year B.Sc Nursing student, woke up with heavy fever in the morning. Poor girl was busy attending the pediatric wards, where children lay unconscious, like silent playmates of brutal viruses. Her eyes, she felt them as two open hearths...

'Swallow this and take rest,' Parvathamma, her resident tutor, a stout Kannadiga woman, notorious for her short temper, nick-named as 'terror,' gave her a long tablet of Meftal-500.

Poor girl couldn't believe her ears, as she had been studying in a private medical college near Bangalore, where no excuses were allowed for not attending classes. 'Classes...what kind of classes? Just nursing...nursing... nursing...! Slavery is million times better!' her inner-conscience started revolting.

'Thanks a lot, Madam,' a pale smile appeared on her face. 'Are you on leave today?'

'I don't feel like, going today... Even, I too need some rest, Sunila... Anyway, let's talk for some time.'

?

Their open conversation went on for nearly two hours.

'Sunila is the gem of a girl!' Parvathamma could understand a simple truth.

'Resident tutor Madam, what a wonderful, soft woman, she is,' Sunila too had a belated revelation.

'Sunila... Nurses do agitation all over the nation for salary hikes and other allowances... They are fighting against all sorts of exploitation... You see... No hospitals, now-a-days, issue experience certificates to 'freshers' like you all... Then, how will you find money to pay back your educational loans?'

'I don't know,' she could see her aged parents, feeding three cows, their only source of income, deep within her mind... Sadness, encompassed her mind like a thick cloud.

'My kid... In future, you may get a maximum of around Rs. 4000 or 5000 as monthly salary... and you will have to pay back nearly Rs.300000 educational loan... How will you make it out of this meager salary?'

'Impossible!'

'The new generation banks, they know how to retrieve it...,' Parvathamma laughed silently.

Her cows started walking towards dirty slaughter houses and her ancient home, stood alone, awaiting bulldozers... The poor girl could feel her blood starting to boil again...

?

'One of your seniors, from very poor backgrounds, closed her loan immediately after the completion of her course,' the tutor said coldly.

'How?' Sunila became very curious.

'This is Bangalore, my kid... Anybody, has a minimum of ten million different options...here...,' Parvathamma laughed loudly.

?

In a lone corner of that air conditioned hall, Sunila, patiently, waited for someone. Her beautiful body resembled an expensive Chinese doll.

'I have completed B.Sc Nursing, with flying colours,' she could feel the pleasant smell of freshly laminated certificates, kept beside.

'Madam, here is the agreement,' an aged man, whose cold face resembled that of a Nazi General, handed a stamp paper over to her. 'Please read it... and put your signature, here'

She went through the matter typed in that hundred rupee stamp paper... 'I hereby undergo the medical treatment of on my own wish and will....'

'Let me bear the whole risk! They are not responsible for anything... even if I die too...,' she smiled while putting her curved signature. The pen moved above the expensive paper like flint stones on water...

'Here is the first installment,' the old man handed her over a demand draft worth 300000/-

'Thanks'

'Now, follow me...'

A large syringe full of some thick fluid dissolved into her veins.

'Now, you can stay at our guest house,' the Nazi smiled for the first time. 'Don't ever disclose this matter to anyone; under any circumstances... understand,'

'Yes'

'Good,' a 'multi-national' gray smile appeared on his grave face.

?

'Mom, somebody has fallen down, at our doorstep,' Sunny, a nine year old boy, cautioned his mother, who busy milking the cows.

'Who's that?'

'I don't know...,' the boy replied while rushing along with his mother to the porch.

'Mummeeee....,' Sunila fainted in her mother's arm, like a thin broomstick...

'My God! Where is you long hair, silky skin, fleshy body and sparkling eyes...,' the poor woman fainted on the spot.

?

'Premji... I went to meet her, when she was rejected by several famous doctors and prestigious medical institutions... that too when she was in a very advanced stage of Hepatitis... Her entire body turned yellowish...'

'Then?'

'At her dilapidated home, she was awaiting death, peacefully... All I asked was this, do you want to come back in life again?'

'Sounds great,' I said.

'Seven days,... I gave her that leaf extract, during early mornings. And she survived...,' he smiled. 'At last, she gave me a small present'

'Is it?'

'Yes... an ATM card worth Rs700000/-... Who needs that blood money? Then only, we could realize, what had happened.,'

'I can't believe it...'

'Premji... every disease on earth has a cure, which is already available on earth... all we have to do is, to find that out... this is the divine law of God.. the divine law of nature... Illegal clinical trials of untested drugs on innocent people, is a crime upon humanity... We are not 'guinea pigs....,"

Premji

Postscript:

The Supreme Court today sought the Centre's response on a PIL seeking inquiry into the alleged illegal clinical trials of untested drugs in various states of the country. A Bench of Justices R M Lodha and H L Gokhale issued notice to the Centre, Health Ministry and Medical Council of India seeking their replies on the petition. The court passed the order on a PIL filed by Indore-based NGO Swasthya Adhikar Manch which sought appointment of an expert committee to regulate the clinical trials done by many multinational pharmaceutical companies. The petitioner-NGO pointed out various cases of illegal drug trials going on in the country and has said such trials be stopped

immediately. It has requested the apex court to intervene in the matter. The bench, after hearing the petitioner's arguments, agreed to hear the petition and issued notices, asking the government to respond.

UNTOLD STORY OF A TEAR-DROP (Short story)

UNTOLD STORY OF A TEAR-DROP

Desperately, I watched the tail-end of Chennai Mail (Super-fast train) speeding away, from Tiruvalla railway station. 'Shit!' I was panting heavily like a feeble dog that had run for many kilometers, closely followed by angry street children. And I was forced to find out an alternate mode of transportation in that pale morning as the next train scheduled to my preferred destination was three hours away.

"Did you get the train?" asked my wife through mobile phone.

"No dear... I was trapped in the morning traffic..."

"Premji... you are so careless!"

I cut the phone abruptly as I didn't want to quarrel with her in a wireless mode.

?

I stood there at the nearby bus-stop like an abandoned alien waiting for his spaceship. Two or three express buses passed by without caring my repeated pleas to stop. Who cares for moth while sitting inside a huge metal-beast!

And to my surprise, an old Mercedes Benz car stopped beside me.

"Get in, Premji," a female voice, from the driver's seat welcomed me. It was Anitha. We hadn't met, at least even once, for the past three years. She was in the beginning of her forties.

"How come you are here?" She asked me.

"That's the same question even I would like to you ask you?"

"I am staying here for the past two years," she replied while speeding up the car.

"O.K... Where shall I drop you?"

"Will you please drop me at Thiruvananthapuram, my home town?" I tried to tease her as my destination was three hour drive away.

'Surely... You know ... I am on the way to meet Vinod," she replied with a smile.

Soon, silence encompassed us.

She woke me up when the car reached my destination.

"Are you still worried about him?" I asked Anitha while getting out of the car.

"With whom?"

"Anand."

"Absolutely not!"

Strange woman... When did I meet her for the first time?

?

Four years back...

It was a fine morning and the slanting rays of the morning Sun were dancing upon the railway platform. Vinod was sitting, all alone, in a metal bench at Thiruvananthapuram Railway station. He was working as the chief accountant of a huge private firm. Though he was in the beginning of forties, he resembled a boisterous youth. We both were bosom friends for many years as we both were regular passengers of the same train. He was such a jolly guy that the entire compartment used to reverberate by his superb jokes. But, on that fateful day, he remained like a shadow of his own.

"Vinod... You look very tired like you are having fever!"

"Please sit beside me," he replied in a low voice.

"Are you all-right, Vinod?"

"My nephew passed away, last week. Even now, I didn't get out that shock."

"O! God!" I remained silent for a moment. "How old was he?"

"He was twenty... doing MBBS course in Mangalore."

"His name?"

"Anand. You know... He was very fond of the sea from his very childhood. He was drowned to death while enjoying a holiday with his friends. And the saddest thing is... my sister got divorced some ten years back." He covered his face.

And in the middle, there was a special announcement that our train would start only by 7.30AM. He was absolutely silent during the next two hour long journey.

And the train reached our final destination.

"What is the point in living further? She asked me yesterday night." Vinod broke the silence. "How can I console her, my friend? You know, she has been staying with me since her divorce. Many times, I asked to get married again. But, she was adamant not to. I am not gutsy enough to ask her again... Nobody can understand the depth of her loss..."

"You are right..."

"Today, I left her in the complete care of my wife. But, how many more days? She too have to attend her job. I am totally confused."

"But, there is one and only one way-out, my friend..."

"What's that?" Vinod was very curious to know.

"Leave your children in the complete care of her. May be, that could save her from depression."

"But, that's not possible Premji."

"Why?"

"Unfortunately, we don't have children."

?

I visited his house many times in connection with the death ceremonies of the departed boy. People love to be in company of the most jovial people around them since they bring tonnes of happiness through their speeches and action. But, how many of us can understand the pain of their lonely

souls?

Six months passed event-less. And I was forced to settle down at Kollam, the head-quarters of the nearby district, as I was transferred to another institution. Every promotion is accompanied with a transfer!

It was around 11AM in the morning. I walked towards the small bookstall situated in second platform of Kollam Railway Station, in order to buy the latest "Magic Pot," a noted children's magazine. Quite unexpected, my eyes were fixed on a familiar face, which disappeared into an almost empty compartment of a local train, that started moving. Somehow, I too managed to board on it.

?

"Hi Anitha... Where are you going?" I settled down beside her. Only we both were there in the middle of that compartment.

"I am going to Punaloor... to visit one of my relatives," she replied calmly. "And what about you?"

"Vinod have asked me to accompany you through mobile phone. He will call you soon," I showed her my mobile phone.

"But, I didn't tell him that..."

"True brothers know everything!" my voice was overpowered by the mobile ring.

"It's for you."

He talked with her for a moment.

"And...What did he say?"

?

We got down at the next station.

We didn't exchange even a single word during the journey, back to her home, in a rented car till the silence was interrupted by another mobile ring. Soon, ample tension appeared on her face. Father Solomon was on the line.

"Please stop the car near the "Mother of all sorrows" Church," I told the driver.

?

"Please come with me," I was reluctant enough to leave Anitha, alone, inside the car.

We started walking towards the place where Father Solomon was living. He lived in absolute simplicity exactly like a true disciple of Christ. He had only two White gowns as white as his long beard.

"Good afternoon, Father"

"Welcome dear son... Who is this?"

'She is my sister.'

"Prem... Your sister-in-law had promised me some funds for our special orphanage..."

"I know... She has been busy trying among friends and relatives..."

"Daughter... Please wait for us a couple of minutes..." Father Solomon told Anitha.

And we started walking towards an unfinished building. Later, we were warmly welcomed by Vinod's wife in the evening.

?

"Are you still worried about him?" I asked Anitha while getting out of the Mercedes Benz.

"Absolutely not!"

"But... why?"

"When you both... Father Solomon and you... had left, I happened to meet a very old woman by some hidden plan of Holy Mother. She had been helping the Father to look after the children in that special orphanage, suffering from Down syndrome. She couldn't even walk properly. Still, she was ready to serve the needy. And on the very next day, Vinod dropped me there, without the least amount of hesitation, to serve the little ones... It was my decision..."

"But, he didn't tell me."

"I told him not to. And I met a widower there with a lovely kid. Unfortunately, she was suffering from Cerebral palsy. Prem... I couldn't resist her call..." "Mother... mother..." in some strange dialect.

"Life is so strange..."

"My husband is funding for the entire children there. I am happy now."

"I too"

"You know... I took that train to find out a suitable place to submit myself to death."

"That's why I was forced to follow you."

"Prem... There are three different kinds of persons... great people sacrifices their own interests for the sake of others... there are some other men who take care of others by protecting their own interests... there are human-beasts who protects their own interests by spoiling that of others... My brother Vinod is of the first kind."

"And your transformation, from the last to the first of these kinds, is really great!"

"I visit many schools and interact with children regularly. Wherever I go, I speak about Anand, my departed boy. I speak about you. Now-a-days, grown-up children don't even think of their parents while taking part in dangerous activities. They want to enjoy their life to maximum. They give least care to the feelings of their parents and relatives." She remained silent for a moment. "Tragedies make you feel worthless... You can overcome every tragedy through selfless service... Life is nothing but sharing and caring... Prem"

"Yes... The tear-drop of a mother can illumine a million Suns!"

?

Premji

VILLAGE OF LOVE (Short story)

VILLAGE OF LOVE

'Tomorrow is our tenth wedding anniversary,' wife reminded me in the evening... 'Shall we go for an outing?'

'Surely'

'And I would like to visit a temple too...'

'O.K... I will take you to such a place which serves both...,' I told while hugging her tightly.

'Children may see it... leave me,' she tried to resist.

'Let them see... the intimacy of parents is their future asset for leading a happy life!'

'Is it?'

She hugged me tighter!

?

It was a Christmas day.

'krr..ning... kr....ning,' my mobile phone started ringing mercilessly in the morning. Ajit, my bosom friend, was on the line.

'Good Morning Boss'

'Don't you allow me to sleep peacefully even in a holiday?' I was getting angry... 'Anyway Happy Christmas'

'Premji, I didn't call you up to greet 'Happy Christmas'

'Then?'

'I have some sad news to share with. Pradeep met with a deadly bike accident last night and he is now admitted in the intensive care unit of Love-dale Medical College in Tiruvalla... Poor boy... His right eye is crushed and there is internal bleeding from two or three places in the brain... And the situation is very critical,'

'Didn't he have any helmet?'

'Yes... but, the accident was deadly...'

'Drunken driving?'

'That I don't know... but, possibilities are there... O.K... then... I just passed on the information... Now, you can sleep peacefully,' he kept the phone.

'Idiot!'

I was in deep anguish as Pradeep was my right hand in the department. As almost every morning train had left, I was forced to postpone my journey to the next day.

?

When I reached Love-dale hospital on the very next day morning, his mother was sitting alone in the lobby next to the ICU.

'How is he, now?'

'O! He is still unconscious... Sir... and the internal bleeding is not yet stopped,' replied the old woman.

'Is it so?'

'If the bleeding is not going to stop, they might be forced to operate his brain'

'Will you please tell me what had happened exactly?'

'He was on the way back home after meeting a friend... I don't know what had happened exactly after that...,' replied the old woman.

'Where is his wife?'

'O, she went to the pharmacy... Almost every one of his friends was here till yesterday evening... You know ... the situation was really bad...'

Soon, silence encompassed us.

?

'Any relatives of Pradeep?' a beautiful nurse, who had just emerged out from the intensive care unit, cried out.

'Yes... yes...,' got up the old woman.

'Only two people can visit him,' said the nurse. 'Please come in Amritha,' told the nurse to a beautiful girl around twenty standing in front of the ICU.

'Sir, please come with me,' told the old woman.

'You please go inside... I will wait here,' I was unable to face his crushed face, still unconscious.

Amritha, the young girl, came out after two minutes and she started walking downwards. Pradeep's mother was back after five minutes.

'I am sorry... Sir, I didn't notice your presence so far,' Ranju, his wife, who was back from the pharmacy, told me.

?

Amritha, wearing cheap but tidy clothes, was back with some medicines. She knocked softly on the glass-door of the ICU and the nurse showed up her head.

'Chechee... (elder sister) He seems much better today,' Amritha told Ranju.

'Thanks God'

'And how is Arun?'

'Today also... he cried silently,' the young girl said painfully.

'Everything will be al-right, Molu*'

*daughter...

'Let's hope so,' Amritha walked away.

'Who is she?' I was so touched by her serene beauty.

'She is Amritha... Arun, her husband, is lying next to Pradeep in the ICU... He too had met with a bike accident...,' said Ranju.

'So sad'

'Really sad... He is just twenty four... You know... His body is totally paralyzed... Poor boy... He cannot even move a finger except his eyeballs...'

'Poor girl,' I said.... 'By the way, do you have enough money with you?'

'I can manage, Sir...'

?

One week passed and Pradeep was back into senses. He was so violent that the nurses were forced to tie down his hands and legs on the posts of the metal cot in the ICU.

It was a Saturday morning and I stood there in front of the ICU along with Ranju. Soon, a chubby nurse showed her face through the glass door.

'Sir, please come in... I hope, you can pump some energy to his weakened mind... He is an ardent fan of you..., ' said Ranju.

'I will meet him by next week,' I told while my eyes were busy searching for someone.

'Are you looking for Amritha?'

'Yes'

'She stopped visiting him,' said Ranju painfully while walking inside.

I sank into the chairs placed outside of the ICU and closed my eyes.

Amritha sat next to me. What a serene face!

'We are from Parumala, an interior town nearby,' Amritha started talking with me... 'Arun is my childhood friend and I am in love from the very day we had met for the first time'

?

Arun Thomas, a twenty four old handsome boy from a local Christian family, was running an electrical shop in Parumala town. He used to work as popular electrician in the nearby areas. He lost his father when he was just seven. His poor mother was incapable of providing him better education. Unfortunately, he lost her too in a local bus accident.

It was the early hours of Sunday morning and he was carefully examining the burnt out coils of an electric motor. Amritha appeared there with a painful, still beautiful, smile on her face.

'Hi Arun..'

'Hi...Ammu... how come you are here in the morning?' the young lad asked.

'They are going to fix my marriage,' there was bit uneasiness behind her voice.

'Good news'

'But, it doesn't sound that good to me,' she protested.

'Then?'

'I know just one thing, I will live with you,' she said in a firm voice... 'I will...'

'Have you gone crazy? My god! I don't have even a home..., ' he cried out... 'Ammu... Please don't spoil your life!'

'That I don't care..., ' she walked away.

?

Two months passed event-less and one more day was left with for her marriage. A huge shamiyana (temporary hall made of canvas decorated with colourful paintings) was erected in front of her house and her home was in a festive mood.

'Mom... let's go to the Devi Temple,' said Amritha in the morning.

'As you like..., ' mother told while coming her long hair.

?

Everyone has a reason to pray!

'Please save us...Holy Mother,' prayed Amritha.

'O! Holy Mother... Please, bless my daughter with a wonderful married life,' prayed her mother silently while standing near the sanctum-sanctum of that ancient temple.

'Are you happy, my daughter?' the mother asked while they were getting into the car.

'Mom... Let me see her once again... I will be right back...'

'The holy mother?'

'Yes...' Amritha nodded her head and headed to the temple.

Ten minutes passed and there was no trace of Amritha.

'Did you see my daughter?' enquired the mother to a beggar who was quite familiar to her for many years.

'I saw her going out through the other gate with a girl... Is there any problem, Madam?'

'Let me check,' the mother started running towards the other gate.

By that time, Amritha had covered at least three kilometers in her friend Anitha's bike.

?

'Arun, where are you?' Amritha enquired through her friend's mobile phone.

'I am at work... Is there anything important?' he asked casually...

'Yes... Please come to 'Pranayagramam'... the village of love'

'What are you doing there?'

'I am just waiting for you,' she cut the phone.

'She is crazy!' Arun started wrestling with his old bike... and it came to life after the third kick.

?

'Pranayagramam' aka the village of love was founded by Anil, a filthy rich man, in memory of his beloved. It is a huge beautiful orchard spanning around ten hectares. To be very frank, it's a commune of lovers as they are safe inside the huge walls of Pranayagramam.

There are no written rules as the language of love is alphabet-less. Everyone's income, however small that be, is added to a common pool and the needs of everyone was met with. The unemployed women cultivate nature fresh vegetables and fruits. They enjoy a collective living protecting their own individuality. Forty two couples were living there with a minimum of fifty children. It's a magical world. It's the last haven of true lovers!

'Ammu... come on... I will drop you at home,' Arun told her calmly.

'I am not going anywhere,' she replied boldly.

'Then?'

'We are going to get married right here... right now...'

'What?'

'Yes..., ' she pulled out a small piece of Gold from her purse. 'Thali*'

'You are crazy...'

'Yes... crazy after you!'

*a symbol of marriage bond

Soon, their marriage was solemnized in presence of every inmate of Pranayagramam. A simple meal was served and a small room was allotted for the couple.

'Now, please switch off your mobile phone,' Amritha cautioned him while switching off hers... 'They should not track us.'

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'Bloody cheat,' her mother couldn't control her anger when she received a message from her 'once beloved' daughter...

'You have insulted us forever... My curse will follow you all life...' Her Mom typed her reply message.

'Sunnichan, kick him out from your shop,' Amritha's Dad ordered his best friend.

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'There is nothing to worry, dear Arun... We are destined to live happily,' Amritha tried to console him.

'But, how?'

'Everything has a way out... Never worry about the problems... Think of the possibilities..., ' she pressed his fingers.

'O.K... let's empower the women here!'

True woman is a river of hope...She can cleanse your soul every moment!

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A small scale industry to manufacture quality electrical equipment was soon opened in Pranayagramam. It was an all-women initiative and Arun started working as its technical advisor and chief marketing man.

'Tomorrow is our first wedding anniversary,' Amritha told him late in the afternoon. They were desperately making love, the poor man's inexpensive enjoyment, for a pair of little legs!

'Do you have any plans...Ammu?'

'Nothing special... I love to distribute some sweets among children...'

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'Where is Arun?'

Night grew darker and darker like the impatience of Ammu. She started dialing his number.

'The mobile number you are calling is switched off,' she was shocked to hear the reply from the other end.

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'O! God!' Samuel, the oldest member of Pranayagramam cried out when located Arun lying unconscious on the roadside. The sweets were drenched in a pool of blood... His bike was crushed by some heavy impact... 'He might be knocked down by some huge truck owned the illegal sand-mining mafia...'

'His mobile phone, purse and a Gold chain are missing,' one of his friends pointed out... 'Somebody even tried to remove his wedding rings too!'

'Malayalis are real bastards...,' Samuel couldn't control his anger. Soon, he was admitted to the Love-dale Medical College.

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'We have removed two clots from his brain... another two more is remaining... I hope, we can dissolve them through medicines,' Raman Nair, the head of Neurology department opined... 'Almost every main bone in his body is broken... Liver is crushed...'

'Sir... whatever may be the situation, please save him,' requested Samuel.

'But, the treatment is quite expensive...,' the doctor walked away.

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'It seems your son-in-law had met with an accident?' the middle-aged driver told Amritha's mother while she was entering into the e-class Mercedes Benz.

'My daughter is dead, long back,' she replied arrogantly.

'Madam... but, she is your one and only child... and she needs financial support now,' opined the driver.

'Tell me: what is your duty?'

'To drive'

'Then do that...,' she slammed the car door out of anger.

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Arun opened his eyes on the seventh day... Unfortunately, he could move only his eyes.

'Arun, please try to move your fingers...,' Amritha tried to encourage him. But, tears started flowing down, like torrents, from his painful eyes.

'Arun... please...'

Unfortunately, there was no response. Soon, her financial sources started getting dried.

'He is a member of Pranayagramam... and we know how to arrange funds for him... we will try to give him maximum care we could offer,' said an elderly inhabitant, while handing over her gold chain.

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Days went on...and the tear-flow from his eyes kept on accelerating...

It was a windy night and Amritha was about to sleep on the cold floor in front of the ICU.

'Daughter.... Why do you sleep outside in the night?' asked an elderly woman whose husband was admitted there for a bypass surgery.

'Unfortunately, I cannot afford a room,' replied Amritha.

'You can stay with me as long as I am here... now, come with me...'

And in the same night, Pradeep was thrown in beside her husband. She stopped visiting Arun

several days later as she couldn't stand his tears.

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It was the second Saturday in January and we were standing in front of ICU.

'Does he have any health insurance?' I asked Ranju.

'I don't think so... you know... He will be shifted to the ward, tomorrow,' Ranju told me

'Ranju, have you seen Amritha?' the chubby nurse, peaked her head out from the ICU, asked.

'No..., ' she replied.

'She is standing downstairs,' I told.

'Will you please call her?'

I started walking downstairs swiftly.

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Amritha sat next to him in the bed and started patting his lean fingers. A huge expanse of calmness started shrouding his tear-free eyes. And after several days, Amritha could feel uncontrollable wetness in her eyes. She planted a parting kiss on his pale forehead. He tried to smile desperately and closed his eyes forever. Soon, she too leaned on his body and her long hair strands started tickling his dead eyelashes.

Pradeep slept peacefully unaware of all these happenings. Ranju tried to go beside Amritha.

'Please don't... let her cry for some time,' I stopped her quickly.

Fifteen minutes passed and the doctor appeared from somewhere, panting. He was a retired professor from a government medical college.

'Amritha..., ' he called out... 'Please get up dear... let me check him,'

Unfortunately, she didn't respond to his words.

'My God., ' the old man cried out as she had lost her pulse... 'Cardiac arrest,'

By witnessing two deaths simultaneously, I felt like fainting... Heavy-hearted, I started walking out...

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At last, their bodies were released from the hospital. When the ambulance carrying their body was about to move, the vehicle was stopped by Amritha's parent's car.

'Release my daughter's body,' she cried out.

'If you want, take them both,' the crowd started shouting.

'Release her body... otherwise, we will complain to the police,' her father started threatening the inmates of Pranayagramam... 'She is our daughter....'

'You can have her body upon my dead-body,' Samuel, the commune leader of Pranayagramam started getting angry...

'Whose daughter? Your daughter is dead long back,' their driver gave way to the ambulance...

'They will kill you on the spot if you open your mouth again,' he threw the car keys at her feet. 'I quit...'

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The men and women from Pranayagramam washed their body covered them with fresh cloths. So serene were their faces, which glittered in the evening Sun. She resembled a bride, sleeping; At

last, they both started their eternal sleep, together, in a freshly dug grave under a huge Banyan tree. Even the breeze stopped blowing at Pranayagramam. We all were wet by a light, unexpected, rain.

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'Have you seen Tajmahal?' my wife asked our boys.

'No... it seems somewhere in North India,' my younger son poured out his general knowledge.

'It is here...,' she told them while lighting a small oil-lamp in front of the grave of Amritha and Arun, which was converted into a small shrine... They remain the gods of Pranayagramam... 'Do you know the meaning of Amritha?'

'Deathless... eternal... Am I correct?' asked my elder son.

'You are right...then what about Arun?'

'Arun means the Sun,' shouted my younger son.

'True love is eternal... trillion times brighter than the Sun!' I hugged my family...

Soon, we were drenched by a drizzle, quite unexpected!

PREMJI

WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE (Short story)

WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE

Even though it is district headquarters, Mandya is not a big city like Mysore (The Garden City of India). I had to spend four years there, to complete engineering degree. Four years... God! What all I had seen... from agitations of farmers caused by narrow minded politicians.... to bloodbaths by fanatics immediately after the demolition of Babri Mazjid... every form of human madness... I am destined to bear all those in my soul.

Our hostel was just a stone throw away from the heart of the city. Sharing of 'Kauvery' river water was a burning issue between two states, Karnataka and Tamilnadu. As a result, Mandya City was under curfew. Farmers of Mandya were not ready to give water for the agriculturists of Tamilnadu. Why future wars... water causes for bloodshed every day!

'Why should a river flow through two states?' a madcap started singing.

'Just to make another river of blood!' his blind companion also joined the song with deep melancholy.

Agitating farmers were about to burn a petrol bunk, immediately opposite to our hostel, in the evening. Tear gas shells were fired and unfortunately they landed on our hostel ground! Students, already trapped in curfew, were trapped again inside the tear gas fumes and that time I was sleeping inside a new blanket. My classmate Vinod had a very tough time as his eyes started swelling. We used to call him 'Bulb' because of his ever-bulged eyes and that time it was exactly the same. Curfew was relaxed after two days and his father reached our hostel. He was a Bangalorean. (someone from the city of Bangalore)

'Premji, if I arrange a rented house outside, would you like to share that with Vinod? You know, he is a bit afraid of living alone', Jay uncle, Vinod's father, asked.

'Sure Uncle'... Even, I too suffer from low blood caused by poor food supplied in the hostel', I promised him since he was my best pal. 'Snoopy will also join us.'

Jay uncle became very happy.

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'If you vacate the hostel, be ready to face the consequences. If you Dad comes to know about this... that's all... there ends your engineering', mother warned me when I rang up and told her the matter.

Who cares the threats of Moms! That too at the noon of your youth! Even I needed a change...It was a wonderful new house in the outskirts of the city and we were the first tenants. There was a huge ground behind our housing colony and children used to play Cricket there. Soon, Jayaram Reddy also joined us. I was forced to learn the alphabets of cooking from our cook Maheswari. Whenever there might be a festival or something, she would be missing! Days went by happily and freshers joined our college. The tough times of ragging started, but we used to do only friendly ragging! It was fun for them as well as for us!

Just opposite of our house, lived a bank employee and his family. His two small daughters were my best friends. Local boy Krishna used to help us bringing vegetables, grinding rice for breakfast and transferring silly gossips. Months passed... One day, I was busy watching Sudha, a wonderful girl of

sixteen, riding slowly on her bicycle. She just smiled and sped away.

'Premji Sir, there is no point in watching her,' local boy Krishna said from behind.

'When did you come?' I was angry.

'Just now.'

'Why did you say so?'

'She is dumb, Sir.'

'What?'

'She cannot talk... she can only hear.'

'So what? Thanks God!' I said aloud

'Thank God!' poor Krishna was embarrassed...

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Automobile Engineering was quite a dry branch and girls from other branches used to care only very handsome guys. I was an alien among them... with a French beard! (What could I do if my beard had been growing just like that and that time it was not all a part of fashion!).

Nobody had any interest on Sudha. The finest language ever in the history of mankind is silence and of course that is the language of love! And we were enjoying that silence... Sudha... O! The nectar of love! Semester vacations started... Sudha, where are you, little darling?

We all returned soon as semester breaks were so short and unfortunately I was the class topper! It was quite unexpected! Everyone started teasing me... topper...topper... Idiots, I was a lazy guy during the past three years and now you see my real potential, I thought... But, I had to suffer a lot for that! That's another story.

'Now, submit your synopsis for project work', Mr.Naganna, our HOD, announced in the class room. He was a diehard 'Stalinist' professor! Shridhar and I... we both looked at each other...

'Old man is going to fuck someone's happiness!' he told in a lower tone.

Discussions were going on everywhere to find out a new concept to convince the HOD. I was busy converting that as an opportunity to grab some more money from my Dad! Naturally discussions steamed up even in our rented house, till night. At around 10'O clock, our fiends left for hostel and I locked the front gate. Being a very cold night of February, everyone slept off early in the nearby houses... everyone finished eating dinner except me. When I was about to start eating, calling bell started ringing continuously.

'Bastards jumped over the gate,' Snoopy said.

'Hostel gate might have been closed. Let them sleep here. Reddy, Open the door', Vinod said.

He went to open the front door. But, someone pushed him inside swiftly. Just sheer luck, he didn't fall down.

'Hey...what the fuck is going on?' I shouted?

'We have taken over this house', a six and half feet tall body builder answered. 'Shut your arse and keep quiet tonight... otherwise', he demonstrated the punch of a boxer.

I knew this guy, henchman of a local MLA (Member of legislative assembly). He grabbed the gate key and switched off all the lights. Suddenly a gang of four members moved into our house with some plastic bags. They all sat on the dining hall floor in semi-darkness. The Moon was rising up, quite late...

'Hoy... Give some glasses and water,' the muzzle man asked

They started boozing and we were standing in the front room. They could see us... Fear... nothing but fear, we were! We stood there as if observing silence.

'Boss, did you have dinner?' one of the gang members asked the muzzle man. That was a familiar voice.

'No... Mahesha,' Boss replied. 'I didn't get time... You know... I was searching for a safe house where students live.'

'Then, have it'. Mahesha handed over my plate of chapattis and curry.

Boss grabbed the plate and started eating like a hungry lion.

'Bastard! Who will water the fire in my belly?' I thought in vain...

Suddenly a bike stopped just outside our house. A tall guy and someone in a huge jacket entered into our rented house.

'God! She is a whore', Snoopy said in a low voice, 'that guy was our senior in college'

'Welcome... Welcome... 'Mysorina Malligai... (The Jasmine of Mysore)', Boss welcomed her pleasantly.

'O... I am flattered', she replied in sexy voice.

I could feel the feeble smell of some Jasmines on her plaited hair. Suddenly the smell of drunken lust started mixing with that of Jasmine.

'Boys, switch on the front room light and continue your studies', Boss ordered. 'And you guys, just keep quiet', he ordered to his gang.

Again the cloud of fear started moving across our mind-skies.

'Enjoy yourself Boss', Mahesha said with happiness. Boss vanished with her and the cot made of some cheap wood started creaking.

'Vinod, your bed is gone!', I said. Poor guy couldn't even smile.

Vinod, Snoopy and Jayaram were lying on a bed sheet spread on the floor and I was sitting on its corner. We didn't talk even a single word. What an insult! But, to my surprise, they all slept off coolly as if nothing had happened! The bedroom door used to open and close, loads of lusts were transferred. I heard her snoring in the middle! 'Quenching of lust', still continued! Then Mahesha came to my room in a jolly mood. He was working as a supplier in the Hostel.

'Mahesha, what is this? How come, you are with this gang?'

'Boss called me... So I am here. Forget it all, Premji... now, go and enjoy her. This is the best chance to lose your virginity', Mahesh teased me.

'Fuck you. Now, leave me alone'. I couldn't even think of surrendering my treasure to that bitch! I switched of the light and sat there like a metal statue. Police party might appear for night patrolling. The Moon was getting deep buried in darkness of clouds... and I ... in deep insult...

'Three times, in just three hours... Boss, you have great stamina,' another guy praised the Boss

They all slept off and time passed on snail pace. I had to wake them at 5'O clock in the morning. Better, they could have killed me! And at last the wall clock told me... 'boy... it's time to wake them up'. The Boss wanted to have it once again. But, his mates didn't allow that. She was sleeping peacefully in the bed. Boss woke her up from deep slumber.... 'Get up... bitch'

'Come, let's go now'

'Now?'

'Yes, now,' the sound of Boss started rising. 'Almost everyone knows us here'

'Do you have a vehicle?' she asked in a sleepy voice.

'Yes'

'Mysorina Malligai.' She was ready for another act in real life. My God! From where had she picked up those Jasmines? Some among the gang vanished in the dark and Mahesh rolled out the bike. Boss had a plan to leave her in the Bus stand. She moved out slowly and the Boss followed. My friends were snoring like old dogs in the other room. 'House is burning and idiots are sleeping... bastards' I too followed them, just to close the door.

'Sorry Boss,' Boss told me... 'Hotel rooms are not safe now-a-days. If you have any problem in Mandya, just tell to Mahesha. I will manage it'

What an offer from a gangster!

They crossed the gate and Boss closed it without any noise. Mahesha started the bike and he was in a hurry to transport her away.

'I will not go by this bike,' she was reluctant to sit on it.

'Don't talk... just go by this bike,' Boss caught hold of her hair in anger.

Somehow, she managed to release her hair from his grab and ran towards the ground in darkness. Boss followed her and tried to pull her back to the bike... But, she started shouting bad words.... Might be out of fear... Boss kicked on her lower abdomen, so merciless he was, that the entire housing colony woke up of her screams... Luckily, she didn't faint...

'Shit,' the Boss ran towards the bike and they vanished in the dark.

'Bastards... Sons of bitches,' she continued shouting while writhing in pain. My friends woke up.

'What happened?' Vinod asked.

'Can't you see?' I was mad with anger and hunger. Bastards slept off very well and now asking: what happened! He she kept on cursing and local people started gathering. They were looking us with contempt... God!

'Sons of whores... who drank my blood the whole night... how can he kick me so brutally? I just asked for a single favour... It is not safe even for a prostitute to sit alone in that Bus stand. Every male is a sex maniac... Bastards... Bastards,' she kept on shouting in pain.

At last, it was 6'O clock in the morning and slanting rays of morning Sun fell on her face. She was around forty and her face was yellow in colour... Turmeric paste? Of course, she had to heal the scratches on her face... Her life was eaten away by Vultures!

Then our cook Maheswari appeared for making breakfast. Somehow, she came to know everything.

'These boys are innocent... You also know that... Now, leave this place... Those guys are gangsters... They used to do this in other houses too where students are staying alone... see, they may want to kill you if you don't leave,' Maheswari threatened her.

'Let them kill me,' she sat on our door step.

The people who had gathered dissolved for their daily routine and Maheswari went to the kitchen. The other woman didn't even move from the steps. She sat on the white tiles. Red Sari and white tiles... what a contrast!

We were not in a position to explain what happened. At last Vinod asked her to leave raising his voice. Snoopy and Reddy joined with him.

'It's not our fault,' they tried to explain.

'It's your fault only... then, why did you open the door? You are also a part of this game,' she shouted while pressing her abdomen. 'If I tell the Police that you all had enjoyed me... then imagine what will happen...'

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Sudha stopped her bicycle in front of our house and our eyes met. I could see the clouds of contempt even on her face. She sped away in disgust. Malligai was watching that... Can she understand my plight?

'God! I lost everything... food, sleep, honour and at last love! Sudha, please... please don't misunderstand me,' unknown feeling were doing 'thandava' (cosmic dance) in my mind. My friends, everyone, failed to plead her. Sadness started flooding on their faces. They looked at my face... Were there a silent request? Premji, do something...

Her eyes resembled that of a stuffed animal.

?

'Akkaa' (elder sister), I started talking with her. She was shocked as if touched by a hot metal. 'You know the truth... that we are innocent... last night, we were totally helpless... Akkaa, Vinod is a patient and that's why we took this house for rent... Now, we have to leave this place also... I know... you can understand our plight.... Akkaa, Please leave... Please don't put us in more perils'.

She looked at my face for some time, all the time her left hand pressing her lower abdomen.

'Akkaa, do you want something to drink?' I asked.

She nodded her head.

I handed over a cup of hot coffee to her and she drank peacefully. We were looking at her face. She avoided my friends purposely.

'Thammaa, (younger brother,' what is your name?' she asked me.

'Premji'

'Prem, Last night... I was listening to you, talking with Mahesha.'

'But, you were sleeping.'

'I haven't slept for the past 17 years'. A drop of tear started rolling down through her cheek. 'You had a free chance to have it with a woman... but, you denied it straight away. Why? Because, you respect women... If the man whom I loved... at least showed a bit of that... then I wouldn't have been like this,' she started crying and her tear drops fell on the floor which split into millions of tiny droplets... I felt, my mind crushed like minced meat... She handed over the empty glass to me.

'Prem... nanna Thammaa... (My brother)...I am so sorry... don't worry... my boy... I am leaving.'

'Thanks Akkaa,' my friends thanked her immediately. Bloody opportunists!

She walked away slowly and my friends ran to kitchen.... to have their share of Coffee... At last, she vanished from my vision... I felt very thirsty as if I was trapped in a desert for days...When I was about to close the front door, I felt like, she was sitting there on the steps.

There was nothing.... except a pool of blood...

God! What should I call her?

WORLD IS BLIND (Short story)

WORLD IS BLIND

Faith... What does that mean?

It is a very poignant question, being asked from the very beginning of the social life of human beings. God constructed his worlds, whether material or spiritual, on the strong foundation of faith. Are we missing that now? a-days? Are we trying to break that faith every moment?

From the very beginning of my career in Government service, Ramu was a part of my life and I am very proud that I was his trusted friend. Ramu was our office peon - an embodiment of innocence. He was from very poor backgrounds as his parents belonged to scheduled caste, previously treated as untouchables. His small family comprised of Kausalli: his 'Hitlerian' wife and two boys, almost nearing the end of their teens.

Even though, I had to travel around 120 km, up and down, every-day, I used to be the first man to reach our office in the morning. Ramu was the next guy to reach there.

'Sir, please put a big dot at the centre of my column,' Ramu told while handing over the attendance register. 'I can't see properly... from childhood.' He smiled innocently.

'Ramu, you better buy a reading glass'

'Sir, that's very costly'

'Who said that?'

'Kausalli, my wife'

'It costs just hundred rupees... You better buy a pair of specs'

'Sir... Regularly, I hand over my salary to her... She will not spend money for unnecessary things.'

'My God! Then, what will she do with your salary?'

'I don't know... Kausalli pays me just... enough money for bus fare... and for two cups of tea daily,' he smiled again innocently.... 'Sir, newspaper'

I buried myself deep into the cruelties of news-makers... 'A minor girl sexually abused by more than two hundred people... Father acts like a pimp... Mother spreads the bed rolls.' The female news-reporter introduced the story so spicy; it could give an immediate erection even to an octogenarian! Rotten media bastards....

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Ramu started his career as a last grade servant during his mid-thirties... that too from an educational institution in Cochin (a metropolitan City now)... Thousands of naughty students, most of the belonging to rich families, they utilized every opportunity to harass him... Mud heads... He didn't curse or complain...

World remained as blind as ever... None knew the pain of his heart... Four hungry stomachs,

including himself... Two small boys and their mother... Nothing to eat... no home...Ramu transformed into the synonym of nothingness! Poor guy was forced to stay in an unused class room where stinking bats were his partners... Public works department had been busy constructing a dormitory for people like him in the Moon! (Not yet over!). At last, even his wife was forced to go for work in nearby paddy fields when her younger son started sucking blood from barren breasts.

Krishnan Nair, then time office Superintendent, a kindhearted man himself, showed some personal interest to regularize his appointment. Poor guy was overwhelmed with happiness when he got his salary and arrears, that too after three months of appointment. Within no time, his soul was bathed by the fresh scent of those red notes with denomination of twenty rupees... Can it clear the known smell of tears and hunger?

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Ramu was capable of defeating Carl Louise, the Olympic Gold medalist, on that special day! He stood there in the post office, panting, with a money order form and post card in hand. But, what is the use? The curved letters on that money order form grinned at him like wild monkeys.... later they dissolved into thick fog... But, God the merciful, appeared before him in the form of a well-dressed Medical representative, with a huge shoulder bag full of sample medicines. He entered into a counter to send some material through registered post.

'Sir... Will you please help me to fill this form up?'Ramu requested him.

'Sure,' the gentleman replied in a compassionate voice. 'O.K... tell me the address'

'Kausalli, Cheruvayal house, kunnathanam, Kottayam' Ramu felt his voice sweeter than that of anyone. 'Money.... Rupees six hundred... Sir, please write a letter also to her,'he said while handing over the post card.

The gentleman handed over the duly filled money order form and post card. Ramu ran to the nearest hotel immediately after completing the procedures in the post office. Boiled rice, fish curry... ahhaa...soon, he became the embodiment of taste... Later he took half day leave... to transcend... He slept peacefully like a new-born... The money order receipt fluttered like a butterfly, above his chest in the intermittent gale from his huge nostrils... He danced with Kausalli in the evergreen vales of sleep, and that too to the fierce tune of snoring!

Three days later, Ramu saw the last dream of his life... Location: an air-conditioned room in Sealord hotel, Cochin... Hero: our handsome medical representative... Heroine: Saumya, one of the expensive prostitutes of Cochin, nearing voluntary retirement! She too wanted to settle in life! Action: 'DADDY-MUMMY GAME!'

Poor Ramu was not all aware of the 'occasionally synonymous' words: 'dream and reality'!

Since then, Kausalli remained his post office, with just only one provision... to deposit! Dreaming was also termed as sin!

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Heavy rains turned the Solar calendar to July. I noticed a boy, nearing twenty, standing there in the vehicle shed in front our office. He was standing there from the morning. My colleagues were busy standing in the queue to collect their monthly salaries.

'Who is that boy?' I asked Sam, another peon in the office.

'Sir, He is the elder son of peon Ramu'

'Why does he stand there?'

'Don't you know that? He is there to collect his share from his father's salary'

His reply really shocked me.

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'Sir... Rajendran... my elder son... he doesn't go for any job... he simply moves around with friends, day and night... Now, it seems he needs three thousand rupees... to buy a big music system... with large boxes... He loves music... But, we need money to thatch the house... If I give money, Kausalli will not give me anything to eat... Sir, my situation is really bad... How can I give him money? He is very angry on me... Sir... Only rich people can enjoy music,' Ramu opened his Pandora's Box.

'Boys, now-a-days, don't understand the problems and pain of parents,' I said.

'He will kill me... Sir... He will kill me,' Ramu started crying.

'Ramu, please wipe your tears... he will not do anything like that.'

'No, Sir... he will kill me some day... Yesterday also he told me like this... 'I know the shortcut, how you got your job''

'Ramu, will you please elaborate?'

'My father expired while he was working in government service as a last grade servant ... That's why I got his job... they call it 'job on death harness grounds'... Sir, he will kill me to get my job,' Ramu was trembling with fear... 'I have only two more years of service... He will kill me some day...he will'

'No... Ramu... he won't... after all he is your son.'

Ramu walked away on his trademark 'slow strides'.... without even hurting the blades of grass!

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Five days later...I was discussing some official matter with our Principal in the corridor... Ramu ran towards us crying aloud, with his usual bag in hand.

'Ramu, why are you crying like this? What's the matter?' Principal asked.

'Sir, my big brother is no more... he passed away, early in the morning.'

'Then... why did you come to the office?'

'I have no leave... If I take leave, my salary.....She.'

'Shit... O.K... You come after three days... I will not score your column in the attendance register'

'Thank you... Sir.'

'Now... run to your home.'

Within seconds, Ramu transformed himself into a happy teardrop...

?

One month passed...

'Rhythms of life'... I was busy reading the poetry anthology of noted poet Mamta Agarwal... What a well-designed book it is! And well written poems...

'Affluenza... innovative penning, brimming with philosophical astuteness, as well as generous dose of old fashioned cleverity, like the title.... quite creative': Frank James Ryan Jr.'s comment was there

in the back cover. FJR knows the true soul of poetry!

'Mamtaji, who designed this book? It's really beautiful,' I asked her over mobile phone.

'O... Thanks Premji... It was designed by husband... He did a wonderful job for me... and that's what husbands are meant for,' she laughed...

'Mamtaji, tell me about the sales?'

'Sales? Poetry? Are you joking, Premji? Poetry doesn't sell... Poetry doesn't sell at all now-a-days... '

Was there deep anguish behind her words? The crest jewel of art is heaped unsold in the dusty racks... later dumped into the darkness of warehouses... Culture too...

My mobile started pestering again... Sam was on the line...

'Sir, Ramu is no more?'

'Did he?'

'No, Sir... It was a heart attack.'

?

I went to his home on the very next day... I don't prefer to watch dead bodies because I like to treasure only their live faces in my mind... Rajendran, his elder son, was standing near the fresh grave.

'Rajendran... O! What to say?' my voiced choked... 'Anyway he is no more... You must find some alternative to look after the home'

'O.K... Sir.'

'You come to our office immediately after the ceremonies are over... Our principal will move all the official papers in favour of you so that you may get his job... Please try to collect his death certificate as soon as possible.'

'Sir... I am ready to toil for all life... but.'

'But?'

'I don't need his job... I don't need,' poor boy started crying aloud... 'He told everyone that.... I will kill him for his job.... What a punishment Sir... what an insult, Sir... I don't want his job... Some crooked people injected that venom of fear in his mind.'

'O.K... Rajendran... I can understand your pain... But, you have to face real life... You have to look after mother and your brother.'

'Sir... He was living with hypertension from the very day of his elder brother's death... That killed him... Not me,' poor boy sank into his knees near the grave.

Only three cents of land... Ramu slept there eternally, congested, beside his small home...

Premji

WOUNDS OF MONSOON (Short story)

WOUNDS OF MONSOON

20th August 2018.

It had been raining heavily for many days, precisely - from 8th August.

The sun remained untraceable as if he was found missing forever in the turbulent flood waters. I was watching the morning news on cable TV, all the while my younger son was standing beside me to snatch away the 'remote control' to tune in his favourite cartoon program.

Kerala, the south-western state of the Indian Union, was very slowly recovering from the devastating floods caused by the extra-ordinary south-west monsoon. Twelve out of fourteen districts were on high alert since the 72nd Independence Day of India. But, the unprecedented rains declared their independence in the most devastating manner.

Hundreds of landslips, nearly 500 deaths, 4000 relief camps, many people were still missing, more than a million people were displaced. Kochi International Airport was in shambles with an estimated loss of around \$ 40 million! It was the hell of our times!

?

"Drning... drning...." the age old calling bell of our ancestral home started making its usual creaky noise...

"Just check, who is at the door-step..." I told my younger son and he walked away quite reluctantly.

Father Sylvanos and a small group of his associates entered into our drawing room. He is a very pious clergyman in our local parish. People from all walks of life respect him the most. He has only two pair of clothes and not even a single time in life he had accepted gifts or pocket money from public. He lives in a small room with very limited facilities. He cooks for himself, washes his clothes, and keeps himself away from all sorts of luxuries. He prefers to move around in an old Hercules Bicycle - which doesn't even have a lock or brakes- in search of the needy, irrespective of their cast, creed and religion...

"Even a single act of kindness, can change someone's life more than we can imagine..." he used to repeat this line, at least ten times, every day and he lived up to that!

"Welcome Father..."

"Thanks Prem..." He sank into one of our strongest chairs as his huge body resembled a naughty little elephant. "How are you?"

"I am alright," replied while I switched off the TV.

"Hi little one... You can continue with your favourite cartoon show... But, keep the volume a bit low... OK?" Father Sylvanos caught hold of the remote control and handed over the same to my younger son.

"Thank you Father..." he replied happily.

Soon, a lot of silent monsters started flooding on the huge TV Screen. Cartoons convert children to

little monsters! Parents too!

"Hundreds of thousands of our people have taken refuge in relief camps... It is our duty to support them in every possible way, we can," Father Sylvanos continued. "Prem... We are on our humble mission to collect relief materials for the most needy..."

"Father... I would like to support your noble mission... Shall I pay some money or...?"

"Let's forget about the money part, my son... You know, money corrupts... Why don't you get some blankets, baby clothes, sanitary napkins, toiletries etc.?"

"As you wish..."

"God bless you... Anyway, why don't you join us?" Father Sylvanos asked me.

?

Though I am one of the residents of that small town in central Travancore, many of the small places around my house were quite unknown to me. There might be many reasons, right from educational profile, to jobs at distant places. To be very frank, I was re-inventing my own whereabouts, that too after many years of silence.

We started walking through a small road beside the paddy fields, which were almost submerged in water. 'The group' of Father Sylvanos contained people from different faiths and political outlooks. But, all of them had only one thing in common, i.e., the absolute faith in humanity...

"They could have easily avoided it...", said Mr Kurien Joseph, an officer retired from Revenue Department. "Improper dam water management is the real culprit... They opened the gates of almost all the dams which had dangerously high water levels... that too without prior intimations at the worst flood-hit places..."

"At least, 25000 crores is needed to rebuild Kerala." Another member said.

Father Sylvanos and I walked along with this sort of heated up discussion...

"Please stop your silly arguments... At least a million people had lost everything... Most of them are still in relief camps... They need good food, clothing, drinking water, medicine, sanitary pads and many more things... Let's collect the maximum relief materials today itself..." at last, Father Sylvanos too was forced to break his silence before entering into a palatial mansion, where we were welcomed warmly....

?

Two or three rooms full of relief materials collected, remained unsorted in the nearby school owned by the parish. Vibrant youth, both boys and girls, were very active in sorting out the materials received. They made separate bundles of clothes suiting different age groups, medicines, rice and curry powders, vegetables and many more. It was quite amazing to watch that none of them ever touched their smartphones! It was these youngsters who saved thousands by converting their mobile phone and social media platforms as control rooms to co-ordinate the rescue operations.

"The youth... they are the ones who reduced the scale of this grave disaster," Father Sylvanos told me. "But... Soon, they will start asking new questions... Why did this disaster hit Kerala? What are the reasons? Who are the real culprits? What plan do you have to rebuild Kerala? They are not going to be silent anymore..." Father Sylvanos rode his thick fingers through his untamed beard...

Finally, a truck full of relief materials was ready to leave for Pathanamthitta, one of the worst flood-hit districts of Kerala. Father Sylvanos flagged off the truck and the people who were already exhausted by a day's hard-work dispersed slowly.

"Come... Let's have some coffee..."

When we were about to leave for the small cabin where Father Sylvanos used to live, there appeared an altar-boy with a small bagful of rice, hardly around two or three kilograms...

"Thank Jesus... Who sent it, O little one?" asked Father Sylvanos while accepting the same with great care.

"Father... It's sent by 'Pantham' Chechi... You know, she can't walk now-a-days... She is so sick..." he replied while taking out a small grain of rice trapped in his T-shirt... "Probably, this could be the last grain in her home..." And he walked away...

Father looked deep into my eyes as if he was blasting open the doors of my hidden memories...

?

Our ancestral house stood beside a huge paddy field spanning for several acres... The lush green of paddy fields were one of the most captivating features of our village. Now, they remain empty stretches of land lying fallow for many decades. Agriculture, especially paddy, is a losing proposition now. Cash crops have eaten away the glory of 'rice' cultivation, the staple food of Kerala.

It was really wonderful to watch people walking away with lighted 'Panthams' ? torches made out of dried coconut palm leaves - amid the huge expanse of the darkest nights. And, she was the last traveller.

"How come she is moving around at late nights? Why do they call her 'pantham'?" I asked my mother one day.

She didn't give an answer till today!

?

'Pantham Chechi' was a very beautiful woman in her youthful days. At least, she had a name of her own at that time! She lived with her ageing mother who was suffering from a multitude of real and imaginary sort of illness. Chechi (elder sister in local language) was in love with a peon who was working in a government office nearby. In the course of time, she had to tighten the chord of her skirt mercilessly to hide up the advancing stages of pregnancy. Her lover got a transfer to the farthest corner of our state when she was nearing seven months. The poor woman was brutally ditched, which resulted in the birth of a stillborn. Her mother too passed away on the very same night. Honour is a very strange feeling for those who care it!

?

Circle Inspector Soman Pillai was quite notorious for his crazy attitude towards culprits, especially members of the mafia syndicate. Many of them had 'premature death' through the 'sugar treatment' given during the course of interrogation. Two kilograms of sugar dissolved in almost same amount of water, with fresh lemon to taste, was given to them in a short span of two days, so that even bones would become spongy and death would embrace them in thirty days, that too without any doubt or outcry from the public! He was a terror among the goons and gangsters. He had at least twenty 'transfers' in his seventeen years of service.

It was nearing almost nine in the evening. Soman Pillai was just back into his office after solving a high end communal riot. He was so tired like dead meat.

"I am leaving," he told his deputy and started walking towards his official vehicle, a Jeep, parked outside.

"Sir, we have booked a man and woman for immoral traffic..." Constable Manoharan informed him politely.

"Where is she?"

Head down, a woman around twenty-seven was standing along with a 'seasoned' truck driver. It

seems they were playing the funny game of 'nude beauty and the beast' ? something like 'snake and the ladder' - in the nearby tourist home. Constable Manoharan booked them just to impress the newly joined Circle Inspector Soman Pillai.

"Pataaaaaaar", Soman Pillai had undergone sudden metamorphosis into the cartoon character of 'Phantom' and the truck driver had to collect a couple of white teeth sparkling in the dim light as a souvenir of the 'first encounter of the last kind!' "Now... Get lost, you bastard..."

His body jerked just like the clutch pedal of his truck was quickly released, and lost in the darkness.

"Where is your house?" He asked the woman without any name... But, she remained silent.

Constable Manoharan had to send her in the last bus towards the small city surrounded by paddy fields. Nobody had ever raided or booked her again after that incident.

?

"Why did you send her away?"

"What else could I do other than that?" Soman Pillai replied his wife. "She is one of the finest human beings I have ever seen..."

"What? How can a prostitute be a Saint? You are crazy..." She got up quickly and sat on the bed as if she was going to torture him alive...

"Yes... Now, get lost to sleep..."

"You may be the Circle Inspector at your office. But, I am the DGP here! Director General of Police!" She started shaking his body with such a force that even his bones would leave his body and run away forever from her vicinity.

?

A couple of years back...

Circle Inspector Soman Pillai had to complete the proceedings of a post-mortem of a sensational 'honour killing' at the District Hospital. A poor boy was murdered by the relatives of the girl with whom he had an intense love affair. Almost all the gates of the District Hospital were closed as the agitated crowd standing outside were ready to burn everything. A lot of POLICE personnel were deployed and Mr Soman Pillai was in charge of everything.

When things were slightly under control, he lit a cigarette, standing beside a huge tree. Excessive tensions in job had already made him a chain-smoker. Suddenly, something flashed on his weary eyes. It was the same nameless woman, who used to walk 'to and fro' between 'seven and nine' in the evening, to pick up a customer and end up the act of disgust before the last bus towards her village was ready to move.

She had a lot of regular customers and most of them considered her as a lover or wonderful companion. She knew the intense secrets of everyone as she was their one and only counsellor! And they were the people who protected her every time.

The nameless woman was sitting near the counter where medicines were distributed. Unfortunately, the pharmacists were helpless most of the times as the commonly available generic medicines were usually clay-balls without any medicine content in it! Most of them were made in 'single-room factories' at Pondicherry or in the slums of Mumbai! Most of the company owners used to be the relatives of Health Ministers and they used to win tenders because of price advantage and diplomatic immunity! Soman Pillai knew this simple fact better than anyone.

An old woman too, was rejected from the medicine counter because of the non-availability of the free-supply of psychiatric drugs for her younger daughter who would go violent without medicines on time. Tears started rolling down her eyes as she had no money to buy even some food.

"Please wait here," said the nameless woman and she walked away with the prescription, which was torn at many places. She was back within four or five minutes, it seemed that she might have been running. The old woman blessed by hugging her tightly and walked away with the big packet of medicines. Fortunately, the packet contained some fresh currency notes too.

Again, the nameless woman took over the same seat near the medicine counter. She helped the poor till the last penny with her was exhausted. Nobody showed any discrimination to her. Only money and vane pride can create discriminations. The poor are free of that!

?

"I am sorry, dear," the poor wife started rubbing his hands.

"Shit! It's something like saying 'sorry' after crushing someone's balls to pulp. Get lost! I lost the sleep too..." Soman Pillai got up from the bed and started walking inside the dimly-lit bedroom like a caged tiger.

"Shall I get you some hot water?"

"My foot!" the poor man opened the bedroom windows wide open and took a deep breath of cold air. She walked towards the kitchen.

"Please have it."

The poor man emptied the whole glass in a single gulp. It went through his oesophagus like molten lava.

"What the hell is this?" he asked while rubbing his throat.

"You needed 'a drink' very badly!"

"But, it was a 'double' without water!"

"Might be... See, I didn't work in any bar so far!" she replied with a naughty smile.

And for the first time - in the past fifteen years of his married life- he felt the 'nameless' in her! Soon, she was thrown into the whirlpool of passion.

"Window is open and the light is on..." she said naughtily.

"So what? I will kill you if you utter another word..." he covered her lips with a warm kiss...

?

The nameless woman, walked alone through the narrow borders of the paddy fields with a burning torch made out of dried coconut leaves. She used to make them herself by tying a bunch of dried coconut leaves tightly at short intervals.

"Why don't you buy a torch? Or shall I get you one?" asked one of her clients. But, she remained silent.

She started waving the burning torch back and forth to re-kindle the flames and she knew, it's the only protection that she was having!

Yes... I am the 'Pantham' - burning torch...

I have to burn, before the fire dies down to embers....

?

Father Sylvanos looked deep into my eyes, all the time he was holding the small rice bag so close to his heart. Quite unknowingly, a cute smile appeared on my face and the same got transferred to him too.

"Prem... What made you smile young man?" he asked.

"Nothing... Father..."

"Shall I tell you?"

"There is... nothing...Father..."

"O K... I shall tell... 'Pantham chechi' and I, if we both die together, can you tell me who would reach the heavens?" Father Sylvanos asked.

Though, it was the same question haunting me for many years, I remained silent.

"I am sure, she will only reach the Heavens!" Father Sylvanos looked up with extreme devotion.

"Prem, we give only a portion of what we have. We keep only a small share of our earnings for kind acts. But, you know, her kindness is spontaneous! It is absolute surrender! It is the highest level of sacrifice! She never worries about the future, for she has the unending faith that 'He' would take care of her every moment!"

Soon his tear drops started wetting the rice bag which he held tightly around his heart.

And an unusual glow covered both of us...

?

Premji

3/10/2018

WOUNDS OF SPRING - THE LAST DAY OF ROMANOV

WOUNDS OF SPRING

It was a cold evening in the spring of 1918, precisely July 16th. The city of Yekaterinburg* remained in total darkness as the Czech contingent of the White Army* were fast approaching.

"Take all Nagan revolvers from the guards," ordered Commandant Yakov Yurovsky, the Ural Cheka chief (secret police) to Pavel Medvedev, one of the sentries, guarding Ipatiev House: the house of special purpose, where the Tsar family was under secret confinement. And within less than two minutes, twelve revolvers were brought into to the commandant's office.

"The White army is desperately in search of Romanov*," told Yurovsky while examining the revolvers. "Don't you hear the gun fire?"

"You are right, Comrade," said Pavel Medvedev.

"It's already 8. P.M... We must finish them tonight," a crooked smile appeared on the wicked face of Commandant Yurovsky.

"The Tsar?"

"The Tsar family... None should remain alive," he had a gulp of Vodka... "Notify the guards, not to panic, when they hear the firing," he started pulling down hairs from his shabby beard.

?

Shortly before midnight, two members of the Extraordinary Commission of the Yekaterinburg Soviet reached the Ipatiev House.

"Comrade Yurovsky, the situations are getting worse... We should not provide the Whites even the slightest amount of hope," one of them said.

"If the Whites could release Romanov, then revolution is gone!" said the other Jewish revolutionary. "Try to minimize the number of Russian soldiers.... they would not shoot the Tsar... Particularly his beautiful daughters!"

"Russians still believe that Tzar is sent by God to rule over them!" Commandant Yakov Yurovsky said.

A grim smile appeared on their faces...

?

It had been seventy eight days, since they were staying in the Ipatiev House. Everyone was fast asleep and the Empress Alexandra tightly held the feeble hand of Alexei, the heir. Tsar Nicholas-II opened the door responding to the continuous knocking on the bedroom door.

"Nicolai Romanov, wake them up and get ready soon," ordered Commandant Yakov Yurovsky. "You

are being shifted from here"

?

Within less than an hour, all were ready for the journey. Like every responsible father, Emperor desperately wanted to avoid every possible opportunity that the Bolshevik Jews, whom he hated the most, could insult his beautiful daughters. Tsar and Alexei, the heir, they wore soldiers' shirts and caps. For one second, Tsar's weary eyes met those of Olga, his elder daughter.

"You could have got married to that foreign prince... Dear Olga..."

"Forgive me... Dad... I am Russian and wish to remain so," she pressed her father's hand tightly.

"Now, let's move," told the Tsar while carrying the heir in his arms.

"Where are we going?" asked Alexei, the heir in sleepy tone.

"To the basement cellar, for taking a photograph..."

?

The Tsar family, the maid, the doctor, the cook and the waiters soon left their rooms. Anastasia carried her small dog of Japanese breed. Yurovsky, his assistant and the two members of the Extraordinary Commission of the Yekaterinburg Soviet followed them and at last they entered the ground floor of Ipatiev House.

"Bring some chairs," ordered Yurovsky.

Quickly, his assistant brought in three chairs to the cellar room, which were offered to the Tsar, Empress, and the Alexei, the heir. Tsar's daughters, all of them carrying small pillows, stood behind the empress. Doctor Botkin stood behind the heir. Anna Demidova, the maid, stood beside Anastasia, the fourth daughter of Tsar and the two servants Alexei Trupp and Ivan Kharitonov stood against the wall.

"Good... Now wait here," his words hailed out a chilling silence!

?

Commandant Yakov Yurovsky returned quickly, after making sure of the truck to transport their bodies, leading the execution squad. They were the notorious operatives of Ural Cheka... G. P. Nikulin, M. A. Medvedev (Kudrin), P. Z. Yermakov, S. P. Vaganov, A. G. Kabanov, P. S. Medvedev, V. N. Netrebin, and Y. M. Tselms, were some of the known members of the eleven members sleuths.

The Tsar family could easily guess their ill-fate, but none of them betrayed their dignity.

"Nikolai Aleksandrovich Romanov, in view of the fact that your relatives are continuing their attack on Soviet Russia, the Ural Executive Committee has decided to execute you..." Yurovsky read out the order issued by the Ural Executive Committee:

"What? What?" Tsar was stunned.

"Ilyich decided it long back, Nikolai Romanov," he repeated the order.

"Jesus," the empress tried to cross herself though desperately she wanted to remind her husband, "You are the Tsar..."

For one second, their eyes met. And for Yurovsky, it was the finest opportunity to avenge countless

Jewish pogroms conducted in Tsarist Russia and to the Emperor, it was the utmost insult: getting butchered by a Jew, whom he hated the most!

In a quick move, Yurovsky raised his Nagan revolver firmly and the Tsar and Empress were shot almost point blank range. The Sovereigns dropped dead together.

The execution squad began firing uncontrollably. A gunshot pierced the head of Grand Duchess Olga... Her golden-brown hair and beautiful blue eyes were soon drenched in hot blood...

"Good-bye heir," Yurovsky, as if demon possessed, pumped two bullets to the head, right behind the ear of Alexei. Another bullet from his gun, through the back of her head, killed Tatiana.

The closed cellar was filled with smoke and the burnt smell of human flesh.

"Some of them are not dead," said one of the executions.

"Shoot them again and do the bayonets charge," ordered Yurovsky.

Anna Demidova, Alexandra's maid, was stabbed to death with bayonets though she tried to shield herself with a small pillow carrying expensive gems and jewels. The young girls were shot again and again... P.Z.Yermako stabbed them repeatedly as bayonets could not pierce some of their corset, to stop their violent shrieks... Anastasia was brutally finished off with the bayonet stabs, together with her cute little dog. Some other executioners found extreme happiness in crushing their cherubic faces with gun-butts... The precious diamonds, hidden inside of their clothes scatted all around the blood-soaked cellar.

"It took hardly twenty minutes," said Yurovsky while opening the window. He picked up two blood soaked pillows, upon which the Tsar and heir sat earlier. "The last remains of Monarchy... It belongs to the revolution..."

?

Their bodies were transported to an abandoned mine shaft. The execution squad stripped their bodies to confiscate even the last grain of riches. Their lustful eyes roamed through the torn bodies of the empress and her daughters.

"We could have killed him before her eyes," someone told while pouring Sulfuric acid on the face of Alexei, who was still bleeding...

Then he proceeded with the "acid anointment process" on the naked bodies of royal girls... The smell of burnt hair started spreading inside of his lungs... He inhaled more and more of it with increased animosity!

Their bodies were later abandoned, deep, in the mine-shaft.

?

1.3 kilograms of diamonds and precious stones retrieved from the clothes of Anastasia, Tatiana, Olga, and Maria and the personal writings of the Monarch were spread upon the discussion table of Yekaterinburg Soviet.

"Relics of Monarchy," opined one of the local Bolshevik leaders. "What are you going to do with these, Comrade Yurovsky?"

"We will send them safely to the Central Committee... But, there are possibilities that the Whites might find out the dead-bodies," Yurovsky raised an element of doubt.

"In that case, let's retrieve the corpses within two or three days and dump them in some secret place," a senior Bolshevik replied.

And at last, the Tsar family found solace inside of a shallow pit. Alexandra, the Tsarina slept with absolute sadness as her dearest son and a precious daughter were missing!

Soon after the execution, the city of Yekaterinburg fell to the White Army and the precious diamonds disappeared in the secret accounts of Swiss Banks!

?

Trotsky was unaware of the execution of Tzar Family as he was away, busy with the formation of Red Army in places far away from St.Peter's burgh.

"Illich decided it long back," one of his comrades informed him after a couple of weeks. "The decision was taken in haste."

"It is not Illych who decided the fate of Tzar!" Trotsy smiled.

"Then?"

Trotsky didn't reply anything.

?

Richest banker of the United States put a red 'into' (X) mark upon the black and white photograph of Tzar Nicholas in royal regalia as he was the first American who was informed about the brutal massacre.

?

"You know not what you do," Tsar Nicholas II used to appear regularly in the nightmares of Yakov Yurovsky, a corruption-free Bolshevik!

?

Premji

WRATH OF LETTERS (Short story)

WRATH OF LETTERS

Two weeks long study leave for students.... actually it is a period of relief for lecturers like us. I logged into poetfreak.com and started reading the wonderful poems of Bono. 'She writes only about love,' some poets used to criticize... But, how difficult it is to write every poem about love, keeping on finding out the immense untouched aspects of love? That nobody considers at all! Really cruel, even the poetic world!

'Sir....,' my concentration was distracted by a first year student. His appearance was something like that of lamb trapped in front of a hungry lion. 'Where is our Chemical Engineering HOD?

'I don't know.... He might be there in the canteen'

'He is not there, Sir'

'What's the matter?'

'My elder sister wants to meet him'

'O.K.,' I called him over mobile phone and he appeared in two minutes. His sister, she looked like a Bollywood heroine, sat before him. Suddenly, clouds of fear rushed into the face of that young boy of sixteen. He was getting more and more pale. He was fed up of so much uneasiness...

?

'Hey... you... stand outside,' HOD told him mercilessly and started talking with her. He, she and me... only three people remained in the office and I was the sole witness...

'Sir, I am Sandhya.... Akhil, my brother, is not attending classes now-a-days.,' she said.

'I have noticed that... That's why I summoned for you... What's the matter?'

'Sir, he says, he is afraid of the senior boys... and he cannot understand Mathematics... But, Sir, he was a very bright boy during school days.'

I could see him standing out though the window.... Alpha, beta, gamma, delta... differentiation... signs of integration... all were moving through his mind like mating venomous snakes... Where to hide? He didn't know....

'Poor boy,' I felt pity for him.

'Seniors... they will not treat him bad... There must be some other reason...' HOD said.

'No specific reasons, Sir... He says that he won't be able to learn engineering.... But, an Engineering diploma is nothing for his caliber. He is very afraid of writing exams...'

'O.K ... You leave that matter with me... I will help you to find out someone to give him tuition.'

'Thanks Sir'

She was about to leave, but the admirer of beauty in him didn't allow her to go.

'What are you doing?'

'Sir, I am a software professional at Techno-park. My husband is also working there. My father got retired as chief engineer and my mother is still in Government service... an under-secretary'

'At secretariat?'

'Yes Sir... 'Sandhya, you groom him to a wonderful Chemical engineer...' those were the last words of my father... I have to do justice to him... I can realize that with your help...'

'O, she cares me much...', HOD thought... Poor man was not aware; she was simply blowing up his ego! The conversation went on for almost one hour and all the while he was enjoying her beauty like a leach, which hadn't seen blood for several million years!

Premji, please call him inside,' HOD told me.

?

Head down, Akhil stood before them. He was almost trembling with fear. Poor lad...

'Akhil, from today onwards, you will attend your classes regularly,' HOD warned him. 'No seniors... Nobody will threaten you... If at all any such things happen, you come and tell me... Understand'

'Yes Sir,' his words were not clear as he didn't have the most importance of all things... Self-confidence...

Suddenly Principal called HOD through the intercom.

'See... I have an urgent meeting with our Principal.... O.K. Sandhya... There is nothing to worry... He is a nice boy... He will attend classes regularly and write down examinations,' HOD went out immediately. She too was about to go happily.

'Excuse me Madam... Can I speak with you for a moment?'

'Sure... Sir'

'Akhil, you please wait outside'

He went out and she took her seat immediately opposite to me.

'Mrs. Sandhya... Is he suffering from any sort of mental depression?'

'No...No... but, how do you know that?'

'Just by watching his face, I could understand that... What I have to say is this... Just leave him... Let him learn whatever he wants... Or if he doesn't like to learn, don't pressurize him... He is not confident enough to learn Engineering.'

'How can a lecturer like you give an advice like this? Are you going to ruin the future of a student? It's a matter of our family's prestige...', she got angry.

'No... I am trying to save his life...'

'H.O.D knows how to manage guys like him.... Sorry, I don't require help from a less experienced lecturer like you,' she walked away, burning with anger.

Anger makes women more beautiful and the men mad!

?

Semester examinations started and I was in charge of conducting exams. It was a Friday and there were no examinations in the afternoon. I was a bit relaxed while sorting the answer scripts of Mathematics Exam, which we had conducted in the morning.

'Premji, we have to go Ulloor, a place near Trivandrum,' Principal told me.

'Why Madam?'

'We have to attend a funeral... One of our students had committed suicide in the morning,' Chemical Engg HOD said. 'You know that boy... He and his sister came to meet me two weeks back... Do you remember?'

'I remember... But, I would like to ask you something... Sir, did you know that he was a mental patient?'

'Yes'

'Then... I am not coming....'

'Why?'

'Because... you killed him...'

'Premji, you better keep quiet... If anyone comes to know about your statement... that's all... they will burn this college,' our Principal told in panic.

Premji

ZERO-BASE MANAGEMENT (Short story)

ZERO-BASE MANAGEMENT

The central hall of IIM (Indian Institute of Management), Calcutta was almost full and an unusual silence encompassed the audience. Top achievers of year 2012 were being facilitated in that well organized function. I was sitting along with Mrs. and Mr. Vincent George, my colleague for the past ten years, that too in the prestigious second row.

"And 'The Rising Star Award of Academic Merit' goes to...," Chitra, the beautiful girl who was compering the event, waited for the response from the audience. "Mr. Sam Vincent, from Kerala," the crowd shouted aloud.

?

Sam Vincent, the elder son of Vincent George was adjusted the Calcutta IIM topper of 2012 and he was readily offered with the highest pay package that a fresher could get in India, by an Internet giant... a hefty sum of ten million Indian rupees per annum!

The function went on as decided and at last Sam was asked to share his experiences with the public. He thanked almost everyone, from the faculty to the Canteen boy.

"Sam, who is your role-model as a manager?" asked Chitra, the beautiful young compere, she was also a junior student whom had an eye on him.

"My role-model as a manager?"

A cute smile appeared on his face and it got transferred to her heart instantaneously!

?

Eight years back...

It was a fine Sunday and I went in search of Vincent as I had nothing to do in that morning. To be very frank, I needed a change desperately. His house was situated in a local village, nearly twenty kilometer away from the heart of the city. Though we had been working together for the past two years, I didn't get a chance to visit his home.

"Hi... Premji... Please come in...," he welcomed me to his family...

I wished to spend a whole day discussing the present literary scenario in Malayalam as he is a voracious reader.

"Premji... let's go to my orchard... You can discuss whatever you like and simultaneously I can complete my job too... I have to apply some Eco-friendly pesticides," suggested Vincent.

"Multi-tasking!" I replied.

?

It was one of the finest orchards I had ever seen in my life, which spanned around three hectors. A bio-fence, made of bamboo trees, protected the orchard from animals as well as the naughty wind. And the next layer was made of two hundred Rambutan Plants, traditional varieties, not genetically modified, directly imported from Malaysia, lifted their heads up proudly with huge clusters of red fruits. Coconut as well as Arecanut trees stood, heads high up, like sentinels of nature and pepper

plants adorned them. Innumerable varieties of Zapota, Mango, Mangosteene, Clove, plantains, jack fruit, Coco-plants, Custard apple, Fig, Orange, Grape-vine, vegetables, special varieties of rice and many other known plants and known unknown to me, embellished his precious garden. I was so exhilarated by the freshest air!

"Why do you prefer the traditional varieties, Vincent?" I asked.

"They do not attract pests as they are naturally healthier..."

"Is it?"

"Whenever you are behind over-yield, you have to pay for that... Every disease you get is the bi-product of that... There is every facility in our nation to prevent food adulteration... But, there is no measure to reduce the use of pesticides which is the root-cause of every disease..."

"So... you mean to say "Green revolution" is a farce?"

"Absolutely... It killed the agriculture as well as the bio-diversity of our nation... For some high yielding GM varieties, we were forced to sacrifice our seed diversity..."

"You are a rare breed! Dear Vincent..."

"We must be... otherwise, what's the point in living! GM food is a great weapon for mass externalization, designed by the financial elite!"

"Nobody tries to study the ill-effects GM crops on human body..."

"I think, it is the root-cause of increasing mental disorders among people...It is and it will be a real threat to mankind."

"So, the purity of genes are more important rather than modified?"

"Absolutely... That's what Lord Krishna told us through Bhagvad-Gita (scriptures)... mixing up of genes could be detrimental..."

"Vincent, why do you prefer mixed crop agriculture?"

"If there is a fall in the price any one crop, some other can manage it and ultimately agriculture remains profitable," Vincent replied while cutting open new channels to the many shallow pits made for rain water harvesting..."Not even a single drop should be wasted... They should reach the lower-depths... the water table is getting deteriorated everyday..."

There was a huge man-made lake in the middle of the farm where he cultivated the tastiest fishes available in the state. In-order to improve the fertility of the land, several small cows were kept inside his backyard.

"They are Kasargodan Dwarf, a rare variety of cows... it doesn't need any special food or attention! I use their dung to prepare a special bio-fertilizer that can improve the nitrogen content in soil... Desertification of the soil is the largest threat of our times..."

Soon, Sam Vincent, a sixteen year boy, joined us with his new-born puppies...

"Lovely," I told while patting one of them.

"I bought two dogs to protect the orchard from thieves... And Sam started his business from there! He has already raised funds for higher studies..." Vincent laughed.

"Congratulations Sam..." I told.

"Thank you Uncle... You know, I have a huge collection of pets and rare-birds...", said the little entrepreneur in him!

Mrs Vincent was running a small plant for converting their aggro-yield to value-added products, starting from many varieties of wines to many types of food preserves.

"Don't you have any sales outlet, other than here?" I asked.

"Those who want our products will come to us!" Sneha, Vincent's elder daughter, laughed.

?

"Vincent, why do you want to join Sam in our polytechnic?" I asked.

"He can join directly to the third semester of Bachelor of Engineering if he completes a diploma. Sure, he can apply for jobs based on both the qualifications..."

"Great idea!"

Time went on and the valuation camp started. We were allowed to value only thirty scripts a day. Since many of the valuers were absent as vacations were going on, the camp officer was getting crazy. And on the closing day, Vincent collected thrice the amount as that of mine.

"I took some of the answer scripts to my home... Little boys should also learn the art of evaluation!" Vincent laughed... "If you teach them the art of evaluation, they will write their exams better!"

?

"Something is stinking like hell!" girl students started crying out in the morning.

Dead-body of a stray dog was lying near the main gate, with maggots all over, for the past two days. And the situation grew worse.

"None is ready to bury it... What to do? I am ready to pay how much ever it costs!" said the Principal.

"I will manage it... But, it will cost you around Rs.500... Is that O.K?" Vincent intervened.

"Done!"

And within the next ten minutes, the matter was settled.

"How did you manage it?" I asked him in the evening.

"Someone was cleaning the nearby drainage... I paid him just a hundred and fifty rupees! And he did the rest... Premji... You should never miss the right opportunity to make some money!" Vincent laughed loudly.

"Then why did you pay for my lunch?"

"Because, you are my dearest friend!" he laughed again. "Man should make money... but his mind should outgrow it..."

?

"Premji... are you coming with me? I am going to Munnar tomorrow...", asked Vincent.

"By bus?"

"No... We shall go by my car..."

"Are you serious?" I had a solid doubt as he used to take out his car only during Sundays, to too to the church!

It was a memorable journey in all ways. He picked me up straight from my home and we headed towards the hill station. The rear seats were mysteriously missing from the car.

"Speed up... man..." I was fed up of his 45kmph speed...

"No... no... You will maximum mileage only at this speed..." he laughed.

We went to many places and from almost every place he purchased something and dumped into the car... from seeds... seedlings... organic pesticides and so on... And finally the car transformed into a

station wagon.

"We have to cover one more important place," Vincent told while stopping the car and the last destination was a tea-estate named Kannandevan, owned by TATA group. "We have to buy some 50 kg special quality tea..."

"50 Kgs! What do you mean, dear Vincent?" I couldn't hide the element of surprise.

"Ha... ha... ha... It's for my neighbor, a tea-stall owner in the city... You know he pays for ten litres of petrol!"

"O.K... You are a genius..."

"Premji... You teach industrial management, unaware of its practical applications... Whenever I plan for a journey, I plan each and every minute thing that I have to fulfill weeks before... distance... timing... fuel... food... climate... what all things to be purchased... how to use the space effectively... I plan everything, friend... and the most important thing is: "I stick on to my plan at any cost..."

"Really great!"

"Did we even a cup of water from outside? No... That's Vincent..." he laughed loudly.

"You are the grandfather of FW Taylor, the father of modern industrial management! And your theory is..."

"Maximum utilization theory!"

?

"Are you coming with me?" Vincent asked me. "A sale is going on at the City Center..."

"How come you know all these?"

"Every floor manager in every textile shop and other branded shop is my personal friend... my clients too!"

"Interesting!"

"Premji... One should never spend your hard-earned money unnecessarily for unwanted vanities..."

?

"My Dad is the best manager I had ever seen...", declared Sam.

"Great! Then, please share us something... how do you plan to manage your high profile job? Have you developed any special strategy, dear Sam?" said Chitra.

"Strategy? Yes... yes... I am very happy to announce that I am not going to join for my promised job..." Sam told the audience with a naughty simile.

Everyone assemble there were shocked to the core, except Vincent! The young woman who was compering the event couldn't speak out for the next two minutes...

"Dear friends, please imagine this situation..." Sam started speaking... "If every talented student from this nation prefers to work only for private firms, then who will work for this nation? If every talented student, who attains their coveted degrees with our own tax money, prefers to work for US and UK, what will happen to our nation?"

The crowd started listening to his words eagerly.

"He is up-to something," I told Vincent.

"May be," replied Vincent.

"Hundreds of thousands of important posts remain vacant in the armed forces where we need great brains urgently.... We need millions of people with high academic excellence for the posts of efficient

teachers... We are in need of great social as well as educational activists... We are in urgent need of millions of agricultural geeks to ensure food security of our nation... We are in need of extremely talented people... and fortunately, I am also one among them..."

"Are you really serious, dear Sam?" asked Chitra, the compere.

"Absolutely..."

"O.K... then, please share with us your plans for the nation?"

?

"Dear friends, do you know which the longest line on earth is?" Sam asked the crowd.

"Equator," someone from the crowd replied.

"Certainly... but, unfortunately, it's called the poverty-line... If a man has an earring of half a dollar every day, he is above the poverty-line in our nation! How ridiculous is the concept of defining poverty! Can such a man buy a cloth for his wife and children?" the crowd started listening to him eagerly. "Majority of our people live under the poverty-line... Can it be possible to cloth them all in a short span of a year?" He asked the crowd.

"I don't think so!" replied Chitra.

"It's possible if we start a nationwide network for the distribution of used cloths lying unused in your homes... What do we do with them except shamelessly selling in retail chains like Big Bazaar? It's high time to stop that practice. Twenty percent of our population is rich enough to cloth the rest... All we need is to share... Share the least valued thing in your home to the neediest folk... You know, every celebrity in this nation is capable of doing the same! But, unfortunately, they are not taking up that responsibility. I would love to start "Community Cloth Movement...to cloth our nation... And I will realize it with zero expense from my pocket... Will you be with me?"

The crowd cheered him with heavy heart.

"And your next project?" Chitra became more curious.

?

"Our education sector is getting more and more privatized every day! Parents and students are being forced away from the public schools due to the stupid reforms of status-quo education. Education has become a high-rewarding business now. And naturally, the people who run the private academic institutions make an unholy nexus with the government policy makers! Every moment, they try to reduce the syllabus... They insist on liberal valuations in-order to manipulate the results and in certain states, a student capable of copying down the question papers can easily get through secondary school leaving certificate examinations! Where do we head towards? When our governments take loans from World Bank, Asian development Bank etc, they are forced to implement more unreasonable educational reforms insisted by them. We reap the worst fruits right now! Education, without basic human values, is mere waste of time! How can we save our nation from this kind of educational disaster? Any idea my friends?" Sam stopped for some time.

"Do you have a solution for that, dear Sam?"

"Yes... We should start "Community Educational Movement (CEM)" Every person from the community to transform himself/herself into an educational activist. Most of the elders, whether working or non-working are capable of imparting knowledge to children with much ease than their teachers since they belong to the old school of education. I.e, education with human values... CEM clusters should be set up in every wards of every village of our nation and they should be networked so that we can convert education as a mode of celebration. Peace blooms only in a dynamic society..."

"And how will the students contribute in this project?" asked someone from the crowd.

"They can do re-generative teaching... you know, a student can teach his/her junior students... I dream for a nation in which everyone is a teacher as well as a student..."

?

"And?"

"And there are many more projects, you can realize without much investment... There is no point in joining for a job... What makes education really important when one is capable of creating job? Job seeker or job creator, who is the better one?"

"Certainly, the second...", replied Chitra. "If the government of India needs your expertise, what would you prefer to do for them?"

"If given an opportunity, I would love to convert the poorly managed waste disposal in or nation into a five billion dollar profit making industry so that it can save another five billion spent for prevention of epidemics created by the same..."

?

"Will you be with him Premji?" asked Vincent.

"I am him, for one can realize everything without even spending a penny from his or her pocket!"

?

PREMJI

RAW YOUTH (Short story)

RAW YOUTH

It was around eight o'clock in the morning and I was standing at the bus stop near the newly constructed house of Jayesh. At last, his head appeared at a distance and I started walking toward him.

Pundits were chanting Sanskrit Mantras, sitting near the sacred fire and the house warming function was going on quite well. Friends and relatives were busy moving in and around the newly constructed house and children were playing Cricket in the courtyard. They never fail to utilize every opportunity to play even in light drizzle!

Jayesh took me inside and started showing each and every facility incorporated, proudly. Suddenly, my eyes were stopped by a wonderful painting hung on his study room.

'Jayesh, did he allow you to take a canvas print of his painting?' I asked.

'This is not a print... original... man... this is original,'

'Impossible,' I couldn't believe my ears...

'Premji... Saju came here yesterday evening, and presented me this... You know... he was so happy yesterday... You will also get one... he told me...'

?

Saju was busy packing his paintings using huge brown papers when I reached his home. His personal gallery looked almost empty.

'Hi... Premji, how are you?'

'Fine... What about you?'

'I am alright... Come, let's meet Mom... She will give you some Coffee,' he told pleasantly.

'Not now'

Slowly, I walked toward his huge library. Pretty rich parents he has... that's why he could spend a minimum of five or six thousands every month to purchase new titles. So possessive he was, on his personal belongings as he never allowed anyone to lend a book from that library.

'Raw Youth,' a novel by Feodor Dostoevsky, was lying on the table. I had to complete that book just by sitting there years back!

'To Premji.... With Love... Saji,' it was written so artistically on the front page. I couldn't believe my eyes!

'Premji... It's for you!'

'Saju... when did you become so generous?'

'Just yesterday!' He started laughing. 'I will present one of my paintings also to you... My masterpiece... What do you say?'

'Sounds great'

'That's Saju... Saju the painter!'

'Saju... let me ask you a simple question,' I stopped in the middle...

'Go forward'

'So... When are you going to do that?'

'What?'

'Suicide!'

?

Saju and me... We are friends since childhood... He joined Fine Arts College to fulfill his dream and I had to end up in an Engineering college though my mind was busy with unwritten characters.

During my first semester vacations, I went to his college. Young boys and girls were busy sketching nature using charcoal.

'Premji... meet my friend... Niru,' Saju introduced a beautiful girl. 'Nirupama'

'Hi,'

'Hi Premji... I know everything about you,' Nirupama said.

'What is your specialization?'

'I prefer applied arts,' Niru replied.

'And you... Saju?'

'Why doubt? Painting... painting... painting!'

I could see his excitement in her eyes!

Yes! Her eyes were his biggest canvass! They were madly in love!

?

Four years disappeared like four months... Niru was selected by O&V, one of the leading advertising companies of the world, and was appointed in their Bangalore office. She emptied almost half of her salary just for recharging her 3G mobile phone to call Saju. In the meantime, Saju was completely engaged with new paintings... He never wanted to leave his parents as he was completely aware of his caliber! Someday, I will also become a known painter!

Gradually the number of calls and e-mails dropped drastically.

'Colors don't have the same vibrancy as of earlier,' someone started telling him. A causeless uneasiness started tormenting him.

?

They were sitting inside a star hotel in Bangalore. She was enjoying different layers of Cassata ice-cream... First layer was over... First layer of life!

'Saju... I have been selected for O&V's overseas assignments... I have to be there in California by Thursday...,' Nirupama said calmly.

'nhum,'

'And I am not sure when will I be back,'

'nhum'

'Will you come with me?'

'No... Why can't we stay in Trivandrum itself?'

'That's impossible... My career will then be in gutters!'

'Then?'

'Then what? No more emotional commitments, Saju! Bye forever!' Nirupama told boldly.

?

Saju started crying like a child, hugging me tightly. The iron fist of depression started strangling him again and again...

'How did you know that?' he asked through unending sobs.

'Because, I am your friend... Your eyes can never lie with me'

'Premji... I am so fed up... so drained... Take me somewhere,' he requested me.

'Loss of love' is the short-cut to madness...., his sleepless eyes silently told me.

?

Sushama was standing in the midst of some aged women, like a Lily among thorns, near that palliative care center when we entered into the campus of Regional Cancer Center.

'Hi Sushama,'

'Hi... Premji... How are you?'

'Fine... Meet Mr. Saju... You know... he is a wonderful painter'

'Is it?'

'Yes.'

'Thanks God! Mr. Saju... will you be able to help me? See... one of our patients... a very bright girl child... She likes to paint, a lot... but, I was not in a position to....,' Sushama asked him openly.

'Surely,' he replied immediately.

'That can help her to recover fast,' she said. 'Medicine is for the body... But, faith is the best medicine for mind, which only cures every ailment!'

'Faith!'

?

His painting camp became an instant hit among young patients. Their laughter could easily bring back the colors of his life.

'If you don't like to live for yourself,

Then, why can't you try to live for others?'

His mother showed me a piece of paper, which she got from his room.

'He has become a poet now!' we laughed.

?

Two weeks later...

Saju and Sushama were coming down, all alone, through the lift.

'Shall I marry you?' he asked her.

She remained silent for a moment.

'What do you know about me?'

'I know only this... that you are the woman whom I love!'

'I am an orphan'

'So what?'

'I was a Cancer patient once'

'So what?'

'I can't bear you a child'

'Anything more?'

'Nothing'

'Then... Nothing to worry...dear... We can adopt a child!'

'Saju... every problem has a solution... the only thing is ... we have to find them out in the right time,' she smiled. 'You are alright now'

He hugged her tightly like a raw youth! He could see warm rays of a new colour emanating from her lips!

Is that the colour of hope?

PREMJI

LIFE-SKILLS (Short story)

LIFE-SKILLS

'Premji... Please tell me, your frank opinion about your Sony HD handy-cam,' Dr Prashanth, my psychologist friend, requested through mobile phone.

'Superb video quality... Do you plan to by one?'

'No... no... Be ready with that, by 2 pm...Today.'

'I am not free today... You know... its November... All of my casual leaves are over'

'No more explanations please... I will come to pick you up,' he cut the phone.

Friends are real traps sometimes!

?

Dr Prashanth parked his brand new Toyota Innova at a lone corner of that expensive private management school and we walked straight into the Principal's chamber.

'Good afternoon Sir,' Prashanth greeted him pleasantly.

'Good afternoon Doctor... Please take your seat'

'Thank you... This is Premji.... O.K... Let's get into the matter'

(I am just a spectator here!)

'See Doctor... I am quite new to this institution... We have a boy named Sameer Mohan, studying in ninth standard... He is a real headache for everyone... Our whole staff wants him to be dismissed... His class teacher Ms Sheela Devi threatens me... If I won't dismiss him, she will submit her resignation... But,'

'But?'

'But... I am against his dismissal.... It may spoil the reputation of our school... You better counsel him once... We will decide later...'

?

We selected an air-conditioned room for counseling.

'Video-taping a counseling session is a crime against that little boy...' I said.

'I know... But, it's done on his mother's request...' Dr Prashanth replied.

I kept the handy-cam hidden among the long books in the shelf in video capture mode.

'When this rubbish is over, just make a missed call,' I told while getting out.

'What did you say?'

'Rubbish!'

'Now get out,' he laughed.

'Wind up as early as possible...'

?

Sameer Mohan entered into the counseling room with his parents and his most hated rival, his class teacher, Ms. Sheela Devi. He was a tall, handsome boy around 14. The elders sat on the front row and Sameer sat in the rear.

'Sameer Mohan, are you comfortable?'

'Yes Doctor'

'Now... Tell me... What is your problem?'

'I have no problem'

'That's a common answer... See... I am here to counsel you... why? You know, very well, that everyone in this school has complaints against you'

'That's not my problem... Even I can simply raise a complaint against you... Can you do anything?'

Doctor Prashanth was shell-shocked for a moment.

'See Doctor... This is his problem... He doesn't care anyone,' his mother interrupted in the middle.

'Madam... What are you doing?'

'Doctor... I am Dr. Maya Mohan, associate professor at Government Medical College'

'O.K. Madam... then, you might know more about child psychology?' Dr Prashanth said.

'Whatever written in psychology books may not be applicable sometimes in day-to-day life...'

'Do you teach your son?'

'How is that possible Doctor... I have private practice till 10 pm everyday... I am a known Neurologist... My husband is free by around 4pm... But, we have arranged the best teachers for giving him tuition...'

'Why don't he teach him?'

'See Doctor... My husband is having a PhD in Quantum Mechanics... He doesn't like to come down to the level of Sameer the boy...'

'Don't talk rubbish,' Mr Mohan, her husband interrupted. 'Do you want to insult me?'

'I don't... But, I told the truth,' she said burning with anger...

'Sir... This is my problem... My parents are my real problem... They don't throw away their positions and knowledge in their workplaces...,,' Sameer declared his stand. 'What do you call this --- professional jealousy or intellectual intolerance?'

?

'Ms. Sheela Devi... Why are you so adamant on dismissing Sameer?'

'Doctor... He doesn't have any manners... He never listens to anybody... He doesn't even allow his classmates to learn happily... He is a real trouble-maker,'

'Do you think that he can't be corrected?'

'No way'

'In that case, who is the failure? Either you or he?'

'I can't answer it... I cannot tolerate a student, who does deliberate copying during examinations,' her face turned red.

'Excuse me... Doctor,' Sameer broke his silence. 'Even, I cannot tolerate a teacher who is a

role-model for copying!'

'What do you mean Sameer?'

'Sir, she cannot even derive a simple equation or solve a silly problem without referring to either notes or textbook... How can I respect a teacher like her? She has no knowledge... only degrees she has... She has nothing to inspire me as a student'

Ms. Sheela Devi sat there, so pale like the fallen leaves of autumn struck by a sudden lightning!

'I don't care anybody who is not a friend of mine... parents... teachers... or anyone.... Why should I waste time for strangers?'

'You...,' Mrs Maya Mohan was about to slap him, but, doctor didn't allow her.

'Today... you can hit me.... But, one day, I can throw you into an old age home too,' Sameer told out of anger. 'If she doesn't have time to care for me, why should I care for her?'

'O.K... Enough... enough... Please calm down Sameer... calm down everyone... Just relax,' Dr Prashanth said loudly... Suddenly office boy entered in with hot coffee... 'You came in the right time' ?

'Right... I hope everyone is relaxed now... So the 'know me' session is over... Do you know the difference between 'I' and 'Me'? O.K... Let me explain... 'I' means... what I know about myself... and 'Me' is what you know about myself... So what is 'know me'? It is nothing but 'I' + 'Me'... So, to understand yourself more and more, you should disclose more and more about you and get feedback about you from others who know you... It is through asking and telling that our open pane is expanded and that we gain access to the potential within us represented by the unknown pane. As you all know the plus and minus of yours, it's time to move on to concrete decisions,' Dr. Prashanth said calmly.

'Doctor... I am going to stop my private practice since my son is the most valued one in our life,' Dr. Maya Mohan stood up from her chair and moved towards Sameer.

'I am going to cut all of his tuition teachers.... We can handle any of his subjects till he reaches his degree classes.... We don't teach him anything.... We will just enjoy life,' Mr. Mohan said with lot of happiness...

'I am sorry Sameer... You have opened my eyes... I will not touch text books anymore...' Ms. Sheela Devi apologized with tears.

'Madam... Are you going to trouble me again?' Sameer asked innocently and Sheela started laughing loudly.

'No... Sameer... I am capable of teaching anything straight from my mind... So that you can also write any examination without copying... Is that right?'

'Great... Thanks Mam'

'See... Students are like taps... Parents and teachers are like overhead tanks.... If water doesn't run properly, it is not the fault of the tap... just clean up the tanks... that you can only do... then everything will be alright...,' Dr Prashanth told while searching through the mobile call list.

Everyone was silent for a minute. The very purpose of life is pursuit of happiness!

'Then, what about you Mr. Sameer Mohan?'

'What about him? He has already been corrected!' I said while entering into the room.

'O.K. Then... Thank you all,'

'Thanks Doctor...'

?

I walked near the cupboard when Sameer and parents were about to walk away.

'Premji, let that be there for five more minutes,' Ms. Sheela Devi said. 'Excuse me Sir, Excuse me Madam... Please stay here for five more minutes'

'O.K. Madam,' they sat back again.

'Dr. Prashanth... I wish... if you could have peeled, at least, a big onion... or scraped half coconut in the kitchen... or you could have helped the kids in their studies... then, I wouldn't have been insulted like this today, my dear husband...' Ms. Sheela Devi ended her stubborn words. 'With all of your permission, I am going to upload this video on youtube... What do you say Dr. Prashanth?'

'That's the need of the hour...' Sameer Mohan laughed loudly...

CANDLE IN THE WIND (Short story)

CANDLE IN THE WIND

'Mind of a modern man is a lifelong porn serial. He is the hero of every episode and almost every woman he sees, are his new heroines.'

What a truthful comment! Sumangala thought while going through a comment by a prominent cultural leader. Every page of every daily tells the stories of sex abuse of poor minor girls.

Every sex maniac spends money for personal enjoyment. But, every newspaper owner mints money just by running filthy stories in pretext of news! Client and the pimp! What kind of dirty world is this? Its better abstain from reading to avoid hypertension in every morning!

'God! What is happening to me? What is irritating me just like a grain of sand trapped inside an oyster?'

'Write... write... write it out,' her inner voice commanded. She picked up her daughter's writing pad. Words started flowing like a torrent.

'Every woman has to resist the attacks against her. She has to groom herself to face any tough situation in life! The woman of seventy five years, raped by her blood relative of thirty five... The five year old minor girl whose body was hidden inside a hole in a tree trunk... what resistance can they offer? So the argument on resistance is baseless'. Her pen started flying like a meteor approaching Earth with immense velocity. Go... hit... and powder everything...

'How to groom a woman? The world has been discussing this matter from time immemorial. It's enough... Let's stop all discussions... She doesn't need any of your suggestions... advises... Let her groom her life... Let her be free from chains...

Now, there is immense material available to corrupt our boys... internet, movies... advertisements... let's start discussing how to groom our boys... just to avoid innocent minor boys ending up in jails for attempting sex abuse.'

O! What a relief! Artists are the luckiest people for they only can enjoy absolute happiness... Bliss after the pain of creativity... Sumangala understood that simple fact immediately before closing her pen.

?

It was a lazy Sunday and I was still on bed. My wife was busy surfing in the internet for some information for a student project. Suddenly my phone started ringing.

'Suma is on the line,' my wife told while handing over the phone to me.

I switched on the loud speaker after watching the curiosity on my wife's face.

'Hello'

'Hi Premji... Good morning... Sumangala here'

'Hi Suma'

'Are you sitting in front of your laptop?'

'No. But, why?'

'I have posted my first article on facebook'

'That's interesting. One minute Suma'... I told her to hold the phone and collected the laptop from my wife. Immediately I located her post.

'Premji, did you go through it?'

'Yes'

'How is it?'

'Interesting thought.. Being the father of two naughty boys, sure, I will accept your suggestion. Anyway, congratulations! Someday, you will become a wonderful writer'

'You are flattering me!'

'No way'

'Premji... You know one thing... While I was writing this article, my daughter... she started pestering me... Mummy... Mummy, shall I go and play with the next door boys? I let her go. But, thoughts about her were ruling me while I was writing... You know, she is just five years...

Which game are they playing? Who all are there to play with?

Premji... you know some sort of anxiety... some sort of uneasiness... I don't know how to name it... See, I know every boy near my house... They all are well behaved, very nice boys... children of very reputed parents... still that uneasiness... it continued till she came back. It starts from the very moment she goes out any day.'

'Tell her, it is called 'mother syndrome'... the oldest of all syndromes,' my wife laughed while watching our sons, playing outside, through the window.

PREMJI

BIRTHDAY INSIDE AN EXPRESS TRAIN (Short story)

BIRTHDAY INSIDE AN EXPRESS TRAIN

Mondays... Now-a-days, I hate Mondays!

'Mom.. Please wake me also up along with you in the morning,' my eight year old elder son pleaded last Sunday night.

'Me too...Mom,' my younger son too joined him.

'O.K... done,' she told while giving them good night kisses.

'Thanks Mom... Good night,' they both slept off soon.

'Premji.... Our boys are really missing us... When will we both get transfer to Trivandrum city again?'she asked painfully.

'Soon dear,' I consoled her. Even we had to store love for another week!

?

Alarm, set in the mobile phone, started ringing exactly at 3 am. These machines don't have souls! Love too! She woke me up and we both got ready soon to leave for our destinations where we both work. She is staying there in college hostel where she works as an assistant professor and I am staying in an old house with my friend where I work. A family is torn into three fragments as our sons are staying with their grandma!

And one last look... Both the boys were sleeping peacefully and I could find a cute smile on the younger one's face.

'He is dreaming of some Tom and Jerry cartoons,' I said.

'No... he is dreaming of me,' she said.

We both wanted to kiss them. But, we couldn't... a kiss may wake them up.

'If I can see you both leaving in the morning, I won't be feeling so sad in the morning,' my elder son's words started reverberating in our ears.

?

Somehow, we managed to get into a small van, traveling to the city regularly in the early morning, jam-packed with fishermen about to go for fishing in the dark Sea. Life is a journey for daily bread for you and me, dear brothers! But, how many of us understand this simple truth?

?

She ran towards Trivandrum city bus-stand and I transformed to another Usain Bolt to the nearby railway station. It was sheer luck... I could manage to jump into the moving train... Venad Express at 5 AM... Lucky I was, as I could save another half day casual leave! I bought some newspapers from a vendor and started turning pages to find out the reviews about our literary festival... Trivandrum literary festival, concluded on last Sunday. Deccan chronicle, they gave us wonderful coverage, Indian Express too...

Within no time, I slept off like a new-born... The past four days, we were running like greased

machines to realize our dream... the literary festival... a festival for the lesser known and of the lesser known Indian English poets!

?

Chenganoor Railway station @ 7.30 AM...

Who made me wake up when the train reached the penultimate train stop I had to get down?
Thanks God! I cleaned my face with some sweet smelling tissue papers to wipe away the fragments of sleep.

'Good Morning, Sir,' a teenage boy sitting next to me greeted me.

'Thanks... Good Morning'

'Sir, will you pass on that daily?'

'Sure'

He returned it back with an innocent smile on his face within two minutes.

'He wants to talk to you,' my heart told me.

'Sir, today is my birthday,' he told while handing me over a toffee.

'Many... many... happy returns of the day... young man'

'Thank you... Sir'

'By the way, what is your name?'

'Graham... Sir, I am studying for Civil Engineering in Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Technology at Kottayam'

'Sounds great'

'Chechee (elder sister), today is my birthday,' he told the girl sitting immediately opposite to me while handing over a toffee. Soon he started issuing toffees to almost every passenger in that cabin.

She started crushing the toffee in between her fingers...

I was watching his actions with immense curiosity. What a lovely boy, he is! But, soon his face started darkening like a black hole...

Nobody... nobody in that compartment put those toffees in their mouths! Nobody!

'What kind of stupid world is this,' I thought while putting that peeled toffee into my mouth. 'Idiots! After all, he is a small boy... not at all going to steal any of your valuables, just by giving you a toffee.'

Suddenly, morning Sun rose up on his face like a blossoming Lotus!

What a smile! What an aura!

You gave the smile of my life! Toffee too!

Thanks... Jesus... Thanks... My human God!

?

I stood there in the platform watching him moving away with the speeding train. I started walking light-hearted.

I picked up a crushed toffee from the empty platform and I could feel it, so heavy like those thirty silvers!

Premji

AKELAMA (Short story)

AKELDAMA

Gautama Buddha stood near the corpse of Judas Iscariot.

Hot blood was still gushing out from his broken skull. The potter's field remained like a red painting made of blood and his bowels, gushed out, looked like mating pythons.

'One-day, this place will be known as Akeldama... the field of blood'; Gautama told himself and sank into deep meditation.

Jesus was sitting beside him in tears when he opened his eyes...

'Why do you cry?'

'Sacrifice recognizes sacrifice,' replied Jesus.

Buddha smiled and that smile got transferred to Jesus, for true smile is made of sacrifice!

Premji

SCHOOL RAGS (Short story)

SCHOOL RAGS

Sabu and his beloved wife stood near the altar of that ancient church, consecrated in the name of St. George. None of his relatives were present during the baptizing ceremony of Annie, his one and only daughter, except me.

'Sabu, bring her up like a devout Christian....,' he tried to recollect the only request put forth by his mother in law, that too in her death bed. 'Let her grow up as a God fearing girl....,' poor woman closed her eyes.

He was forced to do so since he is a Hindu and Suja Xavier, his beloved wife, is a Christian. She is working as a highly paid nurse in one of the high profile Hospitals in Florida. He didn't have a permanent job and poor man was donning days just like a parasite.

'Stupid love affair!' he cursed his financial insecurity....

Poor man was completely aware of the secret dream of his wife, unfortunately it coincided with her mother! It took nearly five years for a simple, but, crucial decision! Unfortunately, they were forced to return in connection with last days of his mother-in-law, that too after seven years of marriage.

'Tell him not to worry... even, I too am an outcast like him!' St. George* told me silently.

?

Father Zacharias started reciting some stanzas from Holy Bible. With utmost love and care, he sprinkled holy water on the five year old Annie's forehead.

'Are you pouring cold water on my head? You idiot!' the little girl started shouting aloud and everyone was shocked of her unexpected move, resulting in pin-drop silence.

'Ha... ha... ha..., at last I could meet an intelligent kid,' a retired Vicar proclaimed happily. 'Let her be in our school, till she is leaving for US.'

?

'Premji, you must meet me today,' Principal of the school, where both of my sons are studying, demanded over phone.

'Sir, I will make myself free so that I can meet you on Saturday... You know, my casual leaves are already over,'

'No excuses Mister... You must be here in my office on or before 3PM... today....,' he slammed the phone.

'Shit'

?

Five year old Annie sat on the front bench. Amar, my younger son, a notoriously mischievous lad, sat next to her.

'Hello,' he greeted her with great enthusiasm and to his distress; she didn't care him at all.

'After all, she is from America,' Father Zachariah felt a pinch of happiness deep within and a crude smile appeared on his face.

'Fatherrrr..... I will teach you a lesson,' Amar was deeply hurt.

He sat closer to the little girl, and kissed her beautiful left arm, in a quick move!

'Chee!' a voice of protest escaped from her angry mouth and she wiped her left hand on her long skirt, again and again; later with a hand kerchief...

'There is no point in wiping your hand..... That kiss will remain etched on your heart, forever! ,' Amar told her like a 'loving' villain in a romantic movie.

'You deserved it, young lady,' Father Zachariah couldn't control his laughter.

PREMJI

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS (Short story)

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

"Your new creation is lovely! Is it a Caterham 7 replica?" A news reporter from city news channel asked me.

"Yes... It is based on the Lotus Seven ? a light weight sports car...My students made it using components picked up from scrapyards..."

"Now... tell me frankly: do you teach them anything?"

"I am afraid ... no!"

?

Often, people go on pilgrimage when they are at a crossroads in their lives, even I not an exception. I had been busy with teaching engineering, especially Automobile Engineering, since the early years of the new millennium.

I have always felt a steep decline of quality among students, right from the very next year of joining into government service. There could be many reasons, like over-protectionism by parents, educational liberalism by governments, and excessive sympathy through child protection activism etc. Whatever it is, I had been undergoing some horrible sort of monotony. I found it very difficult to face students with lack of interest.

"Why don't you go on a pilgrimage?" my wife asked while handing over a steaming cup of coffee.

"What?"

"You are undergoing a change in your life's direction... It's time to take a proper decision, whether to continue or take up something new..."

"Yes..."

"But... It will be quite difficult to take up something new... See, you are not a young-man in your twenties... And of-course, you have to take care of our little boys too..."

"But, where can a teacher go on a pilgrimage?"

"Where-else other than the footsteps of a great teacher...", she replied casually.

?

It was nearing two o'clock in the afternoon...

Mr Krishna Iyer, a retired Professor, from a reputed government aided college, was about to have his usual afternoon nap of two hours. Being one of his craziest students of yesteryears, I had the freedom to meet him at any time. But, I never misused it since his precious time belonged to immense number of students.

"Forgive me Sir... I had to interrupt your afternoon nap," I said while touching his swelling feet for blessings. Guru will remain above God always, that's the Indian way of belief.

"That's OK... Young-man..." he replied while touching my head with immense kindness. *"Did you have anything in the afternoon?"*

I remained silent.

"We don't cook anything now-a-days... We pick something from the garden and eat..." Mrs Iyer appeared with a huge piece of ripe Jack fruit. *"You know, man is designed to eat what-so-ever suitable for him in its raw form..."*

"Leftovers by the nature!" Iyer Sir completed.

His kind voice was sunken by the wild noises made by a group of parrots whom were busy attacking ripe Guavas. The pale red plum bulbs of Jack fruit with extreme sweetness dissolved into my soul like sweet memories of begone years.

I separated the long, lean seeds... They are the ones who carry the same genetic purity as their mother-plant...

?

Mr. Krishna Iyer was the finest Mathematics student of that college which stood above a small hill owned by Christian Management. Arch Bishop appointed him as lecturer in Mathematics on the very day he completed his Master's degree. It was quite an unusual move that the teachers working there were devout Christians.

"Can you replace him with another great talent from our own community?" he asked openly to the persons who whimpered against his decision. They didn't have an answer. *"We run this college not for Christianity alone... It's for humanity... See, education has one and only religion and that is human dignity..."*

Arch Bishop was quite right in his decision. Within two or three, their Mathematics department became quite famous all over our little state popularly known as *'God's own country!'*

And there was a transformation in his name too... Everyone started calling him *'Iyer Sir'*. Transformations are always associated with pain. But, he accepted it happily. After-all, what is there in a name?

?

Iyer Sir sold his family property worth around several millions that too some thirty year back, to purchase a huge strip of land in the foothills of his college. He constructed a simple house with a huge hall in the ground-floor where at least a hundred students could be seated. It was not any sort of *'private tuition'...*

It was public tuition! And I was one among his earlier students. Mrs. Iyer was a very beautiful woman with extreme kindness. Unfortunately, they didn't have children after many years of married life.

Iyer Sir and wife didn't have much visitors from among their relatives, mainly due to their unconventional way of living. Their house was open to all which made 'them' call it a *'Satram'*. (Shelter for travelers). The *Brahmin* clan, they both belonged to, were quite rigid on their beliefs, rituals and other religious practices and were most comfortable to mingle with their community alone. Iyer Sir and wife, they both were very progressive in every action.

Mrs Iyer used to supply us butter milk, kept in a huge earthen pot, flavored with chilies, ginger and curry leaves, but with very less amount of salt.

"Please don't waste food," she told us just only once.

We were so careful enough not to spill even a single drop of it... We were so careful enough not to waste a single drop of it... We cleaned the class-room and which all places we used without any shame... We helped Mrs. Iyer in every possible way we could to maintain the harmony of that place. Young girls brought seedlings and saplings of various beautiful plants and created a small garden with great care.

"What are you doing?" Iyer Sir asked me.

"Planting some Jack fruit seeds... Sir..." I replied politely. "Your future students could relish the ripe fruits someday."

"We will make it into a jungle..." friends shouted happily.

"O... That sounds great... Why don't you plan a bit and create a forest with flowering trees?"

"Surely!" someone replied.

And he is one of the finest architects in India today!

?

"So... What's the purpose of your visit?" Iyer Sir asked.

I poured out the gush of my own afflictions and they both listened to me with utmost care.

"There are no bad students... only bad teachers... If they don't listen to you, it means, you have nothing to inspire them..." Iyer Sir began to speak. "Now, tell me, why did you love to learn Maths?"

"Because I love you..."

"Yes... If you like a teacher, you will learn his or her subject very well... Love your students unconditionally... Then, they will follow every word that you speak... Make them feel, they are the most important people in your life... That's it!"

"Of-course, I love them... but... I am not getting good results!"

"Prem... Do you have a role in enlightening, influencing, and encouraging the next generation?"

"Of-course, I have..."

"If you do, your examples and instruction will shape the future of your students..." Iyer Sir said.

"Not only of your students, but also of their homes... You can even influence our nation..." Mrs. Iyer completed her husband's argument.

"Of-course, you are right..." I agreed.

"Prem... Did you ever try to create an all new vehicle to influence your students?" Iyer Sir banged my head with a sledge hammer!

"No... but, that's beyond their syllabus..." I was getting uneasy.

"The word 'Syllabus' is a meaningless one in the new world! It's time to get out of your zone of comfort... think differently... unconventionally... from a new perspective..." Iyer Sir said calmly. "Think out of the box to bring out the best from your students..."

"Possibilities are there that you may have a lot of foes in future," Mrs Iyer laughed.

?

PREMJI

Note: We made these 2 cars in our college campus...

I AM YOURS

I am yours,
I will embrace your religion
if you tell me
the religion of
love,
lust,
hatred,
thirst
and hunger...
I am yours,
if you answer me...