
love is a story
Seetha Ray | Muthal Naidoo

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Seetha Ray

Meera

Like a huge iron monster, the train roared into Howrah station, Calcutta. It squealed to a stop and spat out its passengers onto the platform. Red-shirted porters rushed forward to carry luggage to and from the train.

"Come on, let's get in before all the seats are taken," Shomir urged Meera, who squeezed her way in with the crowd and managed to get a place by the window.

Shomir was helping the porter to put their suitcases on the rack above the window, when a big, fat woman flopped down on the seat beside Meera. Shomir quickly paid the porter and sat down opposite his wife.

As the train slid out of the station, she fidgeted with the border of her sari. How thankful she felt to be sitting next to an open window. She could look out and watch the trees slipping past against the clear blue sky. She could avoid the inquisitive gaze of the other passengers. Most of all she could avoid looking at Shomir – her husband.

How strange the word sounded. Was she really married to him - and going on a honeymoon? Two weeks seemed a long time to spend with someone she didn't even know. She stole a quick glance at him. He was smoking a cigarette and gazing lazily out of the window. She hadn't realized before that he smoked.

Turning once more to the window, Meera tried to concentrate on the scene outside, but she was acutely aware of Shomir, sitting across from her. The day that she first met him was clearly imprinted on her mind.

It was on a Tuesday, 17 July 1970, exactly twenty days ago. Rain had been falling steadily all morning.

Her mother had come into her room. She put her arm around Meera and confided to her, "We are expecting some visitors this evening. A young man and his family are coming to take a look at you, and if they are pleased, they may make a proposal of marriage."

"But you and father will refuse it, won't you? Just like you did the others."

"I don't think so. You've just passed your M.A. It's time you were married, don't you think?"

"Why do I have to get married? Don't you want me anymore?" Meera had burst out, clenching her hands in fear.

"Of course we do. It's because we want to see you comfortably settled and married into a good family, that we are keen on this match. Your uncle knows these people, the son has just returned from England after spending three years there."

"How do I know if I'll like him?" Meera had demanded.

"Don't worry, if your father and I are impressed with him, I am sure you will be too. If we aren't satisfied, we'll refuse the proposal. After all, we do want you to be happy."

"But I'm quite happy here with you," Meera had said.

Her mother had laughed, "Come now, be a good girl and find something pretty to wear for this evening - maybe your green silk sari, and don't sulk."

After she had left, Meera had thought about what her mother had said. She knew that she would not disobey her parents because she loved them too much. She had always been a dutiful daughter and would do what was expected of her, even if she didn't agree with them at times.

How nervous Meera had been that evening as she sat close to her mother, her trembling hands folded in her lap.

Mrs. Banerjee and her eldest daughter had asked her so many questions, "Can you sing? Do you play any musical instrument?"

"Yes." "No." She had answered in monosyllables, her voice sticking to her throat. Shomir had spoken to her father at the other end of the room. She had been overcome with shyness and had not looked at him once.

Next to her, the fat lady coughed loudly breaking into Meera's reverie. Startled, she looked inside the train and her eyes met Shomir's. He smiled at her, but she did not respond. Instead, she turned to the window, but not without noting how attractive he was and what a nice suit he was wearing – dark blue.

She didn't remember what he wore at the wedding or the reception. They had been surrounded by relatives all the time. Even this morning, what a big crowd had been waiting to see them off on their honeymoon. Meera thought about it again. How she

had clung to her mother and wept.

"I don't want to go, Ma, I'm afraid. Please let me go home with you," she had begged.

But her mother had whispered, "Hush, my child, you are married now. You must go with your husband and be a good wife. I will miss you too."

Her eyes had filled with tears as she bid Meera good-bye.

In the taxi, Shomir had tried to console her. "You'll like Digha," he had ventured. "It's not so crowded at this time of the year. I guess people don't want to be caught in the Monsoon rains."

But Meera had sat silently, looking out of the window and dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief from time to time. She felt a little foolish now, as she thought of her behaviour this morning. *What must Shomir think of her?* she wondered unhappily. *Did he think she was childish?* In spite of feeling uneasy at being with him, Meera was experiencing a kind of excitement, too, which was so new to her. She didn't know why, but it was important to her to know that he approved of her.

An hour later, the train pulled into Karakpur station. They sat at a table and sipped hot tea in the station restaurant while they waited for the bus to Digha.

"Tired?" Shomir asked gently.

"No," she lied, staring into her cup.

"We'll have a good rest when we get to Digha," he smiled kindly.

Toying nervously with her cup, Meera did not answer. As Shomir left to see if the bus had arrived, Meera watched him furtively. How tall he was - at least six feet. She liked the way he walked - with an easy confident stride.

During the long bus journey they sat together; Meera was tired of looking through windows. Self-consciously she played with her gold bangles. After a while Shomir said, "Look through the window."

The trees and bushes had given way to the sandy beach. Soon the blue-green ocean came into full view. A little gasp of pleasure escaped Meera's lips as she took it in. She had never been to the

sea-side before.

Moments later the bus stopped. As she climbed out, the wind caught at her rosy silk sari, exposing her painted toenails and slender feet in their red sandals. Using both arms, Meera held down her billowing sari as she walked towards the white, two-storeyed hotel with a neon sign over the entrance which read 'Aloka.'

Shomir joined her after taking care of their luggage. They walked up the black stone stairs to their bedroom. Shomir closed the door, took off his coat, and flung himself down on the bed. "Phew, that feels good."

Meera looked at him, then at the other bed. She wanted to lie down, too, but she felt awkward with him there. She had always had a room to herself at home.

"Shall I order some lunch for us up here? I'm starving aren't you?"

"I think I'll have a shower first," Meera murmured. She felt so hot and sweaty after all that travelling. Her mouth was unusually dry, too. How self-conscious she felt as she walked to pick up her suitcase. But Shomir was there before her.

"Let me do that for you. It's quite heavy," he said, putting it on the bed.

Then he turned towards Meera. Cupping his hands around her face, he kissed her on the lips. She looked at him for a second, her brown eyes wide with surprise. No one had ever done that to her before. She rushed out of the room and stood gripping the white balcony. The sea stretched out in front of her. A fresh breeze fanned her burning face. She felt a slight movement behind her.

Shomir had come out. He lit a cigarette. "I'm sorry if I upset you just now." She could hear concern in his voice. "Would you like to go down to the beach after lunch?"

Meera smiled slowly and nodded.

Later, they lazed on the sunlit beach teasing tiny little crabs which sidled cautiously out of their holes in the sand. When Meera or Shomir gently threw pebbles at them, they scuttled back into their holes, only to venture out again a little later. How Meera and Shomir laughed when a big wave caught them unawares and splashed them.

Meera was surprised to find that she was enjoying herself so much. Shomir was good company, too.

He told her about England. "People are very polite there. They don't shove and push to get into a bus or theatre, like they do here."

"Why did you leave?" she asked shyly.

"I got homesick. I missed the crowds in the streets, my family, my friends and the sunshine." He smiled at her, "Now that I know you, I'm even happier that I came back."

Meera felt herself blushing. She looked towards the sea. The blood was rushing through her veins just like the waves rushing towards the shore. She didn't feel afraid anymore, but she did feel her body tingle like ice one minute and burn like fire the next. It must be the sea air, she rationalized to herself, I've heard people say that it affects one this way.

That evening after dinner, they strolled along the beach. Day became night. The water turned from blue-green to a dark mysterious presence. Big clouds were massing in the sky.

"It looks as if it might rain," Shomir murmured, "let's go back."

Once they were safely back in their room, Shomir asked suddenly, "You don't feel unhappy anymore, do you? I mean being here alone with me?"

"Oh, no I - I ...," Meera's voice trailed off into silence. She couldn't explain how she felt to Shomir. She even found it difficult to explain to herself.

Shomir came over to her. He tilted her face up so that their eyes met. "I'm going to kiss you again," he warned. "Promise you won't run away this time."

"I promise." Meera heard her voice say with an eagerness she could not believe.

A new Meera seemed to be in control of her, someone she did not recognize - someone who appeared to be completely unpredictable.

Seetha Ray

Monkey Business

Tum-te-tum-tum-tum, tum-te-tum-tum-tum, throbbed the tiny drums in Ananta's deft hand as he tramped along the busy main street of Belpara, a little town in West Bengal, India. His other hand clutched two long leashes attached to his trained monkeys, Jinku and Tinku.

Jinku, debonair in his red velvet jacket and cap, his long curly tail waving in the air, frisked alongside his trainer looking this way and that. Tinku, big black eyes sparkling mischievously out of her pert little face swirled around in her yellow, floral dress.

A man lounging in front of his store called to Ananta and putting fifty paisa into a mug which Jinku was holding, said, "Let me see the monkeys perform."

At once a crowd of grinning people surrounded them on the pavement. The monkeys danced to the drumbeat and acted out a mime with great finesse. Everyone applauded when Tinku shook her hips and beat time with her foot to Ananta's drums.

Not to be outdone, Jinku suddenly put his hands over his tummy and groaned and moaned loudly. Then staggering backwards, he fell flat on his back and 'died'. Some folks burst out laughing, while others clapped and yet others made sympathetic noises.

Tinku went over to Jinku. She put her ear to his chest, listened, and then burst into sobs, her little body rocking back and forth while she covered her face with her hands.

The onlookers cheered and applauded wildly, but as soon as the act was over, they dispersed like magic – leaving the monkeys with empty mugs and drooping faces. Ananta's tired voice grunted, "Come on, let's go."

Dragging his feet around a corner into a secluded street he sighed. "What can I buy for fifty paisa?"

When he looked up, he saw a handsome two-storied white house. All round it ran a red brick wall. Two wrought iron gates, heavily padlocked, were attached to the wall.

Through these gates the approaching trio stared. Mangoes, litchis and bananas dangled alluringly from the trees. Before Ananta could tear his eyes away, the monkeys slipped through the gates, sprinted across the lawn, and sprang into the banana trees. Pulling off bananas from the laden bunches, they jumped down,

peeled fruit and ate ravenously. With his mouth hanging open, his eyes bulging, Ananta watched. Then beckoning frantically with his hands he called in a stage whisper, "Jinku, Tinku, come away – at once!"

Instead of obeying, Tinku scampered up a tree, broke off a banana and brought it to him. Ananta hesitated a moment, but his growling stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten all day. He grabbed the banana, tore off the skin and took a big bite. Hmm – how good it tasted!

Tinku was already racing back to the tree when the cook rushed out of the kitchen brandishing a brass spoon. "Thieves, robbers!" He screamed at the monkeys, who quickly climbed up a tree.

Hearing the commotion, two servants came running out, followed by their employer, Mr. Banerjee, a wealthy merchant.

"What is all this about?" thundered Mr. Banerjee, his eyes taking in the monkeys in the tree and the quaking Ananta at the gate still holding on to his half-eaten banana.

Without warning, the monkeys bounded to the ground, and prostrated themselves at Mr. Banerjee's feet. Then Tinku sat up and started sobbing piteously while her big black eyes pleaded with the merchant. Unable to resist her, his stern face broke into a smile. "All right, I'll let you go this time. But I don't want a repeat performance," he warned.

"Thank you, Sahib, God bless you!" Ananta spluttered, bowing to Mr. Banerjee, who let the monkeys out by the gate which he unlocked with a key from a huge jingling bunch.

Several weeks later, the full moon singled out the figure of Ananta and his monkeys trudging heavily down the main street of Belpara. Turning the corner into the next street, Ananta's eyes lit up as he recognized Mr. Banerjee's house. But what was that 'thing" suspended across the wall? As they approached it, the "thing" kicked its legs up and down in the air. "What are you doing there?" Ananta cried.

"Get me off! Get me off!" groaned a voice. Ananta took hold of the feet and pulled the "thing" down.

"But Sahib, what were you doing there?" he gasped in amazement as he recognized Mr. Banerjee.

"I forgot my keys inside the house this morning," he confessed. And anticipating Ananta's next question he explained, "My family and all the servants are at my brother's house two hundred miles away. They are helping with the preparations for my niece's wedding in two days time. I will join them tomorrow night when I have finished going through some work," he confided to Ananta with a worried frown, "but I don't know how I'm going to get in the house."

Ananta looked absently at his pets. Suddenly an idea struck him. "Sahib, are any of the windows open?"

"Why yes, the cook always leaves the kitchen window open, but that's too small for anyone to go through. Besides, there's a burglar guard on it."

"I know, but Jinku and Tinku can squeeze through it. Won't you let them try, eh, Sahib?" coaxed Ananta. The desperate merchant agreed.

Ananta urged the monkeys through the gate. Next he hoisted his slim body onto the wall and leapt down to the other side, landing on his bare feet. With the monkeys at his heels he made for the kitchen wall and stood under the window. Taking the key to his shack out of his pocket, he dangled it in front of the monkeys. "Go inside," he ordered, pointing to the window. "Fetch the key," he stressed, holding his key and shaking it at them.

The monkeys sprang onto the window-sill. They squeezed themselves through the iron bars.

Ananta ran back to the merchant waiting anxiously at the gate. "Where did you leave your keys, Sahib?" he panted.

"On the table in the dining room, just across the hallway from the kitchen."

When Ananta reached the kitchen window once more, he pressed his face to the bars, "Open the door Jinku," he yelled, pointing to the inside door of the kitchen. Jinku smartly turned the door-knob and opened the door.

Standing outside at the window, Ananta could see right through the kitchen door and into the dining room where the keys lay on the table. The sharp-eyed Tinku spotted the keys before

Jinku. Hopping across the hall on all fours, she entered the dining room, jumped onto the table and scooped up the keys.

Shaking them at Ananta she skipped to the kitchen, slid through the bars at the window and handed the keys to him.

Mr. Banerjee was so grateful to get his keys back that he took out his wallet and gave Ananta twenty-five rupees.

"What treasures those monkeys are!" he marveled. "Go on, get some fruit for them. Take as much as you want. Come whenever you like and pick fruit. I'll tell the servants."

"Thank you, Sahib. You are very kind." Ananta smiled as he and his monkeys sped toward the trees. They plucked the delicious fruit and had a glorious feast in the moonlight, while Ananta planned on the new clothes he would buy for all of them, and the scrumptious meal he would prepare for them the following day.

The next morning, the inhabitants of Belpara missed the familiar beat of Ananta's drums and the antics of his pets. Everyone went about their business as usual but as the day wore on, there was still no sign of the monkeys.

As evening approached, people were startled by the sound of the animated thudding of drums, followed by the appearance of our famous trio, resplendent in new clothes.

Jinku strutted along in a gold jacket and cap while Tinku, in a scarlet dress shimmering with gold sequins, rode on his back, stately like a queen.

Not to be outdone, Ananta, in crisp white punjabi and pants, marched along proudly. He did not stop, but the folks of Belpara gazed with wonder at the departing trio.

Muthal Naidoo

Romance and Reality

desire
growing
in eyes
flowing
through flesh
flooding
erogenous zones
exploding
in consummation;
is
it
love?

1

DURBAN

"Abortions?"

It had finally occurred to her, after her niece's inquiry – *decades after the fact* – that there could have been *an* abortion, and then to be informed that there had been more than one was shocking – not the abortions – but – that she had not been aware of any, not even one. Was it true? As her mind was closed to sensuality, Jaya was aware that she instinctively shut signs of intimate relationships out of her consciousness. Still, she could not believe what she had just read about her sister in her niece's letter. She had never seen any signs of illness in Kantha; surely there would have been some. Abortions! No, there could not have been any … well …perhaps? … one? … after she had been imprisoned and Kantha was on her own for a few months? Then she left the country to make a new life for herself in London.

Why did she suddenly leave?

Did a pregnancy force her to flee the country? Did she finally realize that her lover, a married man, had no intention of getting a divorce?

Who had been there to help her?

Jaya suddenly saw that she had failed her sister; had been blind to what was happening – not just to the affair which had been obvious to others but more significantly to her sister's suffering. Kantha had never revealed the anguish of her life to her because Jaya realized she had been unapproachable. Locked inside her own aversion, she had not been aware that Kantha was being cast adrift and would become a loner too, like her, but unlike her, not

by choice; and unlike her, a loner in the midst of family. Kantha had had to face tremendous personal obstacles – entirely on her own.

Now, an old woman, Jaya, having been made aware of a possible abortion, could see that she had been obtuse and insensitive. In obliterating sexual intimacy from her consciousness, she had not been aware that in doing so she was abandoning her sister to a life of private suffering.

Jaya had almost been abused a couple of times as a child and that had frightened her off any kind of physical contact. She had walked away from one attempt by a nervous young man; she instinctively knew it was wrong when he began touching her inappropriately. The other, a teenager having a wet dream near her, was jerking off by himself. Her parents had found him and taken him away. Even though she had been asleep, unaware of him on the floor next to the mattress on which she slept, her mother had blamed her and could not look her in the eye. When she was brushing her teeth in the bathroom, her mother, standing behind at the door, had said, "You go on like that and you will get a baby," and then disappeared. She could not bear to look at her daughter.

Having no idea what her mother meant, Jaya knew only that she was her mother's curse. She was a really naughty child, a bit of a tomboy, a petty thief, quite disobedient and one who answered back. Her mother saw her as "fast" – that is what precocious girls were called in those days – so she blamed her for what she thought had happened. And her aunts, her mother's sisters, took pleasure in disparaging her. One of them wrote in her autograph book: "Whistling woman, crowing hen, neither good for God and men."

Quite sure Jaya would bring shame on the family, her mother was not aware that her fear – even more, her revulsion – was filling her daughter with abhorrence of any form of physical intimacy. It was that, her mother's loathing – not the attempted abuse – that would freeze her; make her averse to physical contact. And when her mother whisked her and her sister, Kantha, out of the Tamil school, after one of Jaya's classmates fell pregnant and was suddenly married to a teacher – Jaya, who had no idea how babies

were conceived, was confirmed in her belief that it was something shameful.

Jaya grew into an introspective teenager, not interested in boys; in love instead with the untouchable heroes of movies and fiction. And being in a girls' school, while her classmates were excited by boys walking past on their way to the boys' high school, she lingered in the safety of her fantasy world. She tended not to make friends and was much despised and resented by her classmates who thought her aloof. Had she been an average student, they could have ignored her but she was always top of her class.

As a mature adult, looking back on her progress through life, Jaya had no regrets about the way in which she had developed. Others saw her as abnormal and she came to regard that as a compliment. Those two inept attempts to seduce her as a child had given her a shield that protected her from the normal and as she grew, she developed the ability to look beyond convention and was discovering that nothing is one-sided. She was being made aware that she had choices, and she began to repudiate norms that would impinge on her independence of thought and action.

But she had failed Kantha. Despite her acceptance of human ambivalence, she had been blind to her sister's needs.

When they were both in their early twenties, her sister, though younger, had attempted to turn her into a normal person. Kantha had needed a normal sister – one with whom she could share what was happening to her as a woman. But, like others, Kantha had found it impossible to penetrate the shield.

One young man, whom Kantha knew had come hoping Jaya would accept him as a suitor, was forced to abandon his quest on account of Jaya's obtuseness. He had begun by asking how a man would know he could approach a woman; how he could tell if she returned his interest.

And Jaya, who had no idea that he was implying an interest in her, launched into an explanation that he would know – instinctively. She sat there like a wise old bird, giving advice from her great understanding of romantic love – gained from Jane

Austen, the Brontés, Charles Dickens, etc. As the conversation was going nowhere, the prospective suitor gave up and left. Soon after, he found himself a girlfriend and married, and Jaya felt justified in the advice she had given him.

Kantha was frustrated; she was unable to find a way to break through Jaya's reserve. For Jaya, no flesh and blood young man could compare with Mr Darcy, Mr Knightley, Mr Rochester, Daniel Deronda, Arthur Clennam, Gabriel Oak, etc., etc., etc. And Kantha needed her in ways that Jaya could not understand.

Living in South Africa, in an Indian ghetto, Jaya was not aware of how she was being conditioned to repudiate her ethnicity and the Indian culture. Growing up in a country that fostered belief in a racial class system, she was being programmed to view everything Indian as inferior.

Perhaps, it would have been different, had she been brought up speaking Telugu or Tamil. Her father was Telugu, her mother, Tamil. Her father believed he was from a superior culture and would not allow his wife to speak to the children in Tamil. As she could not speak Telugu, her only option was to speak to her children in English. So they never learned to speak an Indian language. They spoke English; listened to the SABC English Programme on radio, with its huge input from the BBC, and saw British and American films at the cinema. Their school education was in English and they learned to read and write in English. They were being inducted into European cultural norms and subconsciously began to reject their ethnic background.

They attended the Tamil school in the afternoons. Living in this predominantly Tamil community in the Asiatic Bazaar in Pretoria, their father had, to some extent, overcome his prejudice – but his children had little commitment to learning the language. They were imbibing racism in a subtle form that was turning them against themselves.

Jaya, who could only relate to heroes of Western novels and movies, had no consciousness of her innately racist attitude. When she attended services at the Tamil temple, she stood there as an outsider. And when people went into trances, she was repelled. She looked with European eyes and saw disgusting spectacles. It

turned her against religion.

And she became the perfect product of prejudice. No Indian man would ever have a chance with her. Actually, after the attempted abuse, no flesh and blood man would.

2

Kantha, two years younger, unlike her sister, lived in the real world. As a child she had been frail and of poor health, and no predatory uncle had cast a lascivious eye upon her to make her look away from it.

And she was a very good little girl, honest and truthful. She would admonish her sister for her petty thieving and her disobedience. Kantha never stole pickles from the bottles on the shelves or coins left lying around. Kantha never climbed the Syringa berry tree in the corner of the yard with the boys, clambered with them onto the roof, ran along it, slid down onto the wall near the kitchen and jumped down from it.

Respectful and obedient, Kantha was her mother's favourite. As she grew older, she became her mother's confidante and was made aware of her father's peccadilloes, his little affairs that made her mother so unhappy. She was a comfort to her mother and they were very close.

Kantha had her mother and Jaya had her books.

But when Kantha was sixteen, her mother, going through the menopause, became very ill. She, with Jaya, who had just enrolled at a Teacher Training College, had to take on the housekeeping. Their mother was in and out of hospital for a whole year and did not survive the change of life. Devastated, Kantha dropped out of school. Their father, who had lost his job soon after his wife became ill, was now employed somewhere in a menial capacity and they were struggling. They had barely enough for essentials, and could only look forward to when Jaya would complete the

two-year teachers' course and begin earning. In the meantime, they had to learn to make do. The girls looked for bargains at the Indian farmers' market and in all the shops. And they took up sewing and made their own clothes.

After Jaya qualified as a teacher, she was appointed to a primary school that was within walking distance of home. Her salary of £21 went towards household expenses. So she took on tutoring adults at a night school to pay for her sister's and her personal needs. She also enrolled in part-time studies at university; she had won a bursary and that took care of the fees. One would imagine she had no time for a personal life. Not so. It was taken care of in her studies. Jaya was walking out with many lovers – Shakespeare, Dickens, Aristophanes, Sophocles, Molière, Joseph Conrad, Gerard Manley Hopkins …

In the year after her mother died, Kantha enrolled at the M.L. Sultan Technical College to complete her high school education and was in a completely different environment from the girls' high school that she and her sister had attended. She was now in class with boys as well as girls. And her education took a great new unexpected turn.

Unlike her sister, she understood when boys began to chat her up. And she changed – out of a closed bud came a fragrant blossom. Her hair no longer confined in two straight plaits, now flowed out in waves that framed a face, alive with expectation and large taunting eyes that surveyed the world with an amused twinkle. She knew, for the first time, that she was attractive, *very* attractive – boys were swarming around her. She reveled in the attention and was learning that she had power over them. No longer mother's little girl, she was becoming a woman in her own right. It was exhilarating. Touching and feeling took on electrifying meaning and she looked forward to new encounters every day.

Her sister, dreaming of Heathcliff, noticed nothing.

Kantha felt sorry for her and tried to awaken Jaya to the wonders of a physical reality. She brought home a young man whom she had carefully instructed and introduced him to Jaya. He promptly sat down on the sofa close to her and attempted to kiss her. She pushed him away in disgust. Both the young man

and Kantha tried to persuade her to relax and enjoy the moment but she was nauseated, would have nothing to do with any of it, and walked out.

Kantha was very disappointed. She had assumed that once Jaya had experienced a close embrace, she would succumb to its pleasures and she too would be able to enter into relationships. Her sister was her best friend and she wanted to be able to share with her the wonders of intimacy that she was discovering. She needed to share – for she was vaguely aware that she was being drawn into situations that challenged convention and all she wanted was her sister's approval.

But it was hopeless; she was on her own.

Encountering heroes working through moral and social issues in novels and films, Jaya was discovering that social norms are only guidelines for living; they are not absolute but are treated as such because that is the human way of dealing with human ambivalence. One often hears, "We cannot make exceptions; if we do this for one, we will have to do it for everyone." And she was learning that rules, regulations and laws are carriers of social norms that impose standardized ways of behavior. In nineteenth century novels, there is strong demand for conformity, even to the way one uses one's soup spoon, and she was glad she lived in the modern world with its emphasis on individuality and its questioning of convention.

She understood the need for a certain degree of conformity but, in her mind, total submission to societal norms, simply turned one into a robot. And she came to admire mavericks; they reach for a higher reality not encompassed in norms. They see that norms represent relative not absolute truths and cannot cater for anything out of the ordinary; that rigid adherence to norms often leads to inhumane and cruel behavior. Heroes in novels and films are almost always non-conformists in some way or other; they do not let stultifying norms stand in their way. That is how they capture hearts, and they had captured hers – totally.

If she could have related to real live men, she would perhaps have discovered, as Kantha was finding, how little prone they are to following rules, especially in their pursuit of sex.

For Kantha, who suddenly found herself in situations that

challenged accepted social norms, it was exciting and she was beginning to venture outside the constraints of propriety. The feel of a boy's hand in hers, a totally new sensation, sent a thrill though her body that filled her with a strange longing.

Touching was a new, delirious experience. The only touching that had happened in the family had been in the form of punishment. Children had been smacked or had had their ears twisted and the boys had even been beaten. Hugging and kissing were not Indian; but as the community continued to adapt to the predominantly western culture of South Africa, it would become normal – for the next generation.

So for Kantha, caressing touches were a new, exhilarating experience. And she wanted more. She felt sorry for her sister; for her inability to allow herself the warmth and pleasure of a close embrace. Kantha could see that they were in pursuit of different realities and though they were close, she would never be able to confide in her sister.

Jaya was immersed in the literary world of romance; Kantha in the reality of here and now.

After Kantha matriculated, she enrolled at the Teachers' Training College. There were few options for Indian girls in those days. Syllabuses were limited to what apartheid authorities believed was appropriate for Indian education and career choices were for the most part restricted to education, commerce and health care. Parents with means sent their children out of the country for a more comprehensive and better quality education.

Kantha, like her sister, had chosen to be a teacher. She was still responsible for the meals at home; her sister for the housework. Their father was often away, visiting friends. That gave the girls a little freedom; the cinema was just up the street and they went whenever they could.

Unexpectedly, they were given notice to move. They had come to live in this two-bedroom house when they had returned to Durban after ten years in the Transvaal. Their father, a policeman, originally from Durban, had been transferred to Pretoria as a court interpreter just after Kantha was born. When the apartheid government came into power ten years later, he decided that they

would be better off back in the "English" province of Natal.

Now their house and the houses on either side were to be demolished to accommodate a Medical Centre. Dad found a flat in a different part of town and they moved.

Soon afterwards, his older son, Ruben, who had been living and working in another town, came back to announce that he wanted to get married. Kantha's brothers had left home some years before. On the family's return to Durban in 1948, they had applied to Sastri College, the only high school for Indian boys at the time. Though Ruben and Satha were bright and had excellent reports, their applications had come too late – the school had no more places and they did not gain admission. So Dad found jobs for them in a dairy and set them on the difficult road of the struggle for survival. They had to give up their dreams and ambitions and had to try to find themselves in the world of menial work. It was demeaning and eroded any sense of obligation to the family that they may have had. When they became a little independent, they went off on their own.

So when Ruben came back to announce his intention of getting married, it was quite unexpected. Dad was being made to undertake his obligation as a parent. In Indian custom, parents chose their children's marriage partners. As Ruben had chosen his bride himself, his father went, as a formality, to meet her parents and to seek their consent.

It was also the custom for the bridegroom's family to organize the wedding but Dad had no money. Nevertheless, he felt honour bound to provide as tradition demanded. He went out buying and making arrangements all on credit and built up a huge debt that would take his daughters several years to settle. Dad did try to keep expenses down; but having to conform to the requirements of custom was costly. In a sense this was retribution for his earlier exploitative neglect of his sons – but it would be the girls who paid.

At the wedding, Jaya was told she had to stand behind the couple during the ceremony, holding a tray with a little lamp. She objected; she wanted to know why this was necessary and was told that it was the custom. She found it absurd, resented it,

but complied. She felt like a fool and viewed the whole wedding ceremony as a spectacle. There they were performing for an audience. A wedding was simply a performance; she would never allow herself to be on show in such a situation ever again.

After the wedding, as was the custom, the bride and groom moved in with the groom's family. They brought the bride's sister with them.

Then Dad consulted with his daughters and asked if he could bring his mistress, Marie, a widow, to stay with them. Jaya was alarmed, her earnings were already being stretched to the limit, but she and Kantha, realizing that their father needed companionship, agreed. Marie and her teenage son came to live with them in the flat. Jaya was now providing board and lodging for a large family. As the girls were out of the flat most of the day, working and studying, they did not eat meals at home and really only came home to sleep. So they did not develop close relationships with all the people now living with them.

And Marie, who felt very insecure because she did not have the legitimacy of being a wife, took this as disapproval of her situation. She began to run up huge bills in the shop downstairs – buying ingredients for goodies that she prepared in order to win the good graces of Jaya and Kantha. She didn't understand that in giving their consent, they had indicated that they accepted the relationship; that she did not have to ingratiate herself with them. After Jaya and Kantha explained to her the need to economize, she still went on spending indiscriminately and that led to resentment on their part. And again Marie misread the resentment as disapproval of her relationship with their father. She could not see that Jaya was struggling to make ends meet. In her mind, Jaya, being a teacher, had to be earning good money.

After Ruben's first child was born, Dad decided to relinquish the flat to his son and daughter-in-law. He found a two-bedroom flat for himself, Marie, her son and his daughters, in the Indian area near the Greyville race course. There were two flights up to their flat and climbing stairs everyday was bad for Dad's weak heart. But he did not complain.

Then one of Dad's brothers came with his young son to ask for accommodation in the flat. Dad knew it was not possible to accommodate them but this was his brother and he could not tell him so himself. Instead he called Jaya, explained that his brother wanted to stay with them and asked her to make a decision. And it fell on Jaya to refuse her uncle. Though she knew him to be something of a freeloader, it was still not a pleasant task but she did it. She was beginning to be seen as a cold-hearted bitch; perhaps she was becoming one.

The sisters were glad to be out of the flat for most of the day. And at night, Jaya attended part-time classes offered by the University of Natal to non-white students at Sastri College, the boys' high school in town. She learned that it was a Dr Mabel Palmer who, in 1936, had made possible university education for non-whites. She had forced the University of Natal to accept black students. The University authorities had conceded but had insisted on separate facilities; non-whites would not be allowed on the campus at King George V Avenue.

Now twenty odd years later, in the 1950s, a decade of political protest that had been stimulated by the Passive Resistance of 1946-7 and would end with the Treason Trial, Jaya was hearing political activists at Sastri College criticising Dr Palmer for having set up separate facilities. As far as Jaya was concerned it was Hobson's choice – separate education or no education. They lived in separate racial areas and went to racially segregated primary and secondary schools – all established under British colonial rule – so, as far as she could see, separate development was a *fait accompli*. She was glad to have the opportunity for further study and was very proud that it was a woman who had made it possible. And given the times, it was still a strike against racism.

Kantha was now at the Teacher Training College, where she became involved with Yusuf, a Muslim student, and was not overly beset by home circumstances. She seemed happy and was even contemplating marriage. She was aware, however, that religious differences were a complication – not on her side. Though she was not a declared atheist like Jaya, she had no serious religious affiliation. She could adapt. But Yusuf did not have the courage to

break with tradition and it was an uneasy relationship that would end in a messy break-up once they had qualified.

Dad was out every day, working; they had no idea where. He did not discuss his work with any one and made no financial contribution to the home that they were aware of. They suspected that he was unemployed and simply went out each day to give the impression that he was working.

Then one evening, after struggling up the stairs, he suffered a stroke and went into a coma. He was taken to King Edward Hospital. And the girls were on the bus every afternoon to be at his bedside, but he never recovered consciousness. He died after five days. Though he had not been a model father, his children wept bitterly at his passing. Both his sons came to help the girls with arrangements for the funeral and cremation.

After they had cast their father's ashes into the sea, the girls, still in a state of mourning, were suddenly beset by Marie's loud and frantic lamentations. She bewailed her misfortune to all and sundry; cried out to the whole world that she would now be turned out and left destitute. Jaya and Kantha were shocked; it had never occurred to them to desert her. They tried to reassure her but that only amplified her dreadful cries and appeals to all who passed by.

And that – put the notion into their heads.

They had nothing in common with her and as she expected them to desert her, they did. They had spent all their young lives providing for others; suddenly, they could see freedom beckoning and could not resist. They walked out on the woman and her son, who had to go back to their previous home and family.

The girls knew that what they had done was cruel, but they too wanted a life. And at last it was possible. Marie had made it possible. Long afterwards Jaya realized that Marie had acted in that way to shame them publicly so they would not have the courage to abandon her. But her actions had had the opposite effect. Had they considered such a thing, they probably would have been ashamed and would not have abandoned her.

But it was she who had put the idea in their heads.

3

Jaya and Kantha rented a small apartment attached to the owner's house in the small Indian settlement of North View, a wooded area with houses nestling among trees. In their new home, free at last of responsibility for others, they could give themselves entirely to their own interests.

Jaya had obtained a first degree at the University of Natal at the time that the Separate Education Bill was being passed. Once it became law, Jaya did not continue with her studies as the university was not allowed to continue to cater for black students—even in separate venues. And it was the general view that the government's provision of separate racial universities for Africans, Coloureds and Indians would offer inferior education.

But Jaya's education was continuing – in a new and subversive direction. She had joined the Natal Indian Congress in which her uncles, MD and MJ, were prominent leaders. She was learning about revolutionary theories and movements and was becoming involved in anti-apartheid activities. As a teacher, a government employee, she was putting her job at great risk, but her principal, Mrs Morel, a Jewish woman, who belonged to Alan Paton's Liberal Party, was also anti-apartheid, so she was shielded.

Only vaguely aware of her sister's undercover activities, Kantha, a teacher at Springvale Primary, was totally involved in her pupils' development and progress. Kantha was in a mixed school with a staff of men and women. The males on the staff eyed her with inviting looks and she enjoyed teasing them. One or two made approaches, but she was no longer a teenager blinded by lust. They did not appeal to her. They joked and laughed but their humour was rough and crude, their conversation mundane. And she was still recovering from her experience with Yusuf.

She decided to study part-time at the newly created separate University for Indians. Anti-apartheid activists, like Uncles MD and MJ, were calling for a boycott of these institutions on the grounds that they would provide inferior education. She heard from Jaya

that members of Congress, under the leadership of Uncle MD, had set up an alternative – the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED – pronounced SAK-HEAD). SACHED had sought affiliation with London University and was offering correspondence courses. But it could not compete with the bricks and mortar provision of the government. The majority of black students seeking higher education, and that included Kantha, enrolled at the separate universities. Hobson's choice – again.

The Indian University was situated on Salisbury Island, a naval base, modified to provide facilities for tertiary education. Students boarded a ferry that took them to their lectures on the island in Durban Bay – very separate indeed! For Kantha it was an arduous business to get from her school, in an Indian area outside the city, then to the University and then make her way home at night. All her travelling was by bus – six different buses a day. It was a great strain. It did not allow her sufficient time for assignments and she was not coping. After several months, she gave up university and devoted all her energy to teaching.

Being a lively, vivacious person, and highly innovative, she involved her pupils in all kinds of activities, provided them with a variety of learning aids and turned learning into a hands on experience.

As she cared for her pupils and respected them as individuals, she learned a great deal about them and about this Indian township of Springvale. Some of her pupils, about seven of them, were from the poor section of the community. Their uniforms looked worn and they always needed writing materials. Some were listless, one was rude and disruptive and others were diffident.

When she realised that they were always hungry and did not carry lunches, she knew what she had to do. She packed sandwiches and a couple of flasks of cocoa in a basket, caught an earlier bus to school and fed these children, whom she had carefully instructed to come straight to the classroom before school began. She was doing her best; but, when children from other classes began to present themselves for the breakfasts and lunches that she provided, she found she could not cope.

Realizing that this was a school-wide problem, she brought it up at a staff meeting and presented a proposal for the provision

of meals at school. One or two supported the proposal but most were against; it would require too much extra time and effort. This was a matter that should be brought to the attention of higher authorities. Kantha argued that this was a matter that needed immediate attention and could not be subjected to bureaucratic hesitation and delays – these were starving children. All that the staff was being asked to do was to help create a feeding scheme at the school. Once it was set up, it would simply be a matter of supervision. The principal, Mr Maharaj, agreed that there was a problem but as they were at the end of the school year, they would look into it in the following year.

Kantha realized that nothing would be done.

At the beginning of the next year, a new vice-principal, Mohan Singh, arrived at Springvale Primary. The former vice-principal had been promoted and was now the principal of a school in another Indian township. Tall, lean, with an air of authority that commanded immediate respect, the new VP, a man from the local Hindustani section of the community, was known to the Hindustanis on the staff. Only those like Kantha, not of the same ethnicity or of this township, had to be introduced.

At the very first staff meeting, it became clear to all that Singh was a very capable man. Even his friends on the staff wondered, with a little trepidation, to what extent they would be shaken out of the comfortable routines into which they had fallen. Only Kantha was indifferent. If this man was anything like the principal, he would be a chalk and talk traditionalist and would not understand her methods. He too would probably let her be as long as she produced good results.

She went on feeding the poor children in her class, but it was becoming a real problem. Other children, hanging around her classroom door were becoming belligerent, but she did not have the means to help them all.

One morning, when a boy from her previous class saw her coming, he ran up to her on the veranda outside her classroom and began begging her for something to eat. Some of the children from her present class yelled at him when he tried to grab her basket. A couple of the boys pulled him away and a fight broke out. While

she was trying to get control of the situation, the new VP appeared on the other side of the quadrangle. He hurried over, yelled at the boys, put an end to the commotion and sent all the children away.

Then he went to find Kantha who had escaped into her classroom. She expected him to upbraid her for her inability to control the situation, but instead he seemed quite concerned about her.

"Are you all right? That was quite a mob out there. What happened? Why were they fighting?'

She pointed to her basket and he raised a quizzical eyebrow. Then she explained what she had been doing; it had raised expectations in children from other classes but it was not possible for her to feed them as well. When she had started, she had had no idea how widespread the problem was.

He frowned, "So why all the secrecy; why didn't you get the staff involved? Even Mother Theresa gets funding from Europe."

At that she had to laugh. She explained that she *had* put it to the staff. She searched through the drawer of her table, found her proposal and handed it to him. He paged through it; said he would like to study it carefully and asked if he could take it with him. Her eyes widened in surprise and all she could do was nod her consent. He smiled and left; it was nearly time for assembly. Her heart was beating wildly.

Then her breakfast group came in. She settled them quickly, told them they could miss assembly and went off to stand with the rest of the staff as the children recited the Lord's Prayer.

Kantha was anxious to see what the VP would make of her proposal but he was busy sorting out a problem with book suppliers and she did not hear from him. She was still having to deal with hungry children from other classes. She could not provide for all of them and it wrung her heart to see their wistful little faces.

Then one morning, a couple of weeks later, when she arrived at school, she was surprised to see children sitting in the grounds eating and drinking. A food vending vehicle was parked near the gate with children lined up in front of it, collecting cups of milk and buns. She stood there staring in amazement; she felt her heart

would burst. Then the VP appeared from the side of the vehicle. He saw her and, smiling broadly, came over to her and she burst into uncontrollable sobbing. He put his arm round her, took her basket and led her to his office. He waited till she had calmed down, then poured out a cup of coffee and put it before her. She gave a wan smile and took a sip.

"Well," he said, "all these tears; I thought you'd be happy. Can't stand the competition, hey?"

And she laughed. "It was just so unexpected … you never said a word … "

"I've been meaning to but with the book problems and getting this organized, I was just too busy. This is only a temporary solution. I like what you put in your proposal about building a kitchen and dining hall and employing a cook; but we will have to get funding for that. This," he pointed out the window at the vending vehicle, "is a temporary measure. It took a good deal of arm twisting to get the principal to agree to finance it out of school funds. I had to promise to pay it all back. That means a huge fund raising drive."

She was shaking her head and looking at him in wonder. "I don't know what to say … thank you … thank …"

"No, no …thank you." She was about to protest but he cut her short. "Don't think this is the end of it for you, Mother Theresa. I am not carrying this load alone; you started this; you have to see it through."

She laughed. "Ja, baas."[1]

Then the bell rang and they went off to assembly and today the Lord's Prayer had some meaning for her.

When she told Jaya what the VP had done, her sister asked what he was after.

"Is he trying to get on the new National Indian Council that the government is setting up to justify apartheid?"

"Oh for goodness sake Jaya, do you always have to be so cynical."

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[1] Afrikaans for "Yes , Boss"

Having joined the Natal Indian Congress, the organization established by Mahatma Gandhi in 1894 to fight for justice, Jaya was involved in political protest activities – some subversive and carried out under cover of darkness. The African National Congress had been banned; the Indian Congresses had not – the government had a perfect understanding of how to create division among its opponents – but the ideals of the Congress Alliance were still alive. Now, with the proposed National Indian Council, with the same acronym as the Natal Indian Congress, the government was also trying to create confusion.

Jaya was involved in the ideological struggle for survival; Kantha, in the human struggle.

At the next staff meeting, the VP announced that Kantha's proposal for a feeding scheme at the school had been approved and she would head up a committee to work on the project. He called for volunteers to assist her and three others agreed to join the committee. He would also be on it.

After the meeting, Vish Ramnath, one of those who persisted in pursuing Kantha even though she had discouraged them all, laughed derisively. "So that's how it is, is it? Trying your luck with Mohan? He's a married man, you know, with three children – but he likes dabbling. So he's got you on the hook now, has he?'

Kantha ignored him.

"Think you bleddy special, you with your speech and drama accent – trying to be white."

Kantha stifled a laugh as she walked away. Vish had majored in Speech and Drama at Natal University and he was the one who put on an accent.

In the next week, when the committee met, Kantha presented a list of areas to be covered in getting the feeding scheme underway. Mohan, the VP, volunteered to get funding for the project. He would approach the Education Department, though he did not really expect any help from that quarter. The Indians who were being appointed to head up "Indian" Education were all opportunists. Their main aim was to feather their own nests. That suited the government; it would deflect recrimination from itself.

Mohan would also approach business organisations and individual donors for financial contributions. Renuka Sewsunker undertook to organize fund-raising activities at school; John Pillay and Ahmed Khan would organize and oversee the construction and equipping of the kitchen and dining hall. Kantha was made treasurer and was to open an account at the local bank. She was also in charge of publicity – making the community and possible donors in the urban area aware of this undertaking. They agreed to meet regularly to evaluate the progress of the project.

Kantha was very excited. At last something was being done for starving children. And she owed it all to Mohan. Being on the committee was not merely endorsement; he was making it all happen. She was aware that the principal did not really support the project. At the staff meeting he had expressed strong doubts. She suspected that he had finally agreed because he could not see it materializing and its failure would curb his all too enthusiastic VP – and put him in his place.

Kantha opened an account at the Springvale bank with a deposit of R250; the members of the committee had each contributed R50. At their first meeting, she reported that they now had R5000 from small business contributions but they were a long way off their target.

John and Ahmed had presented a budget of R50, 000 for building and equipping a kitchen and dining hall. It was a bargain price; John's brother owned a construction company and had given them a huge discount. So had Ahmed's father, who would supply appliances and equipment from his store.

From individual donors, Mohan had promises of at least R20,000 to be paid in by the end of the month. He had written to big companies, known for their liberal anti-apartheid stance and was waiting to hear from them. He was confident that their donations would cover all costs.

Renuka reported that she was organizing a cake sale, fun day and a raffle. Kantha had sent in articles to the Leader and Graphic – the Indian weeklies – and to the Daily Mail, which explained the project and invited people to attend the cake sale and fun day. Mohan congratulated them on making the local community aware of the poverty in its midst and awakening it to its responsibility.

John would bring in the building plans for approval to the next meeting and Ahmed distributed brochures of equipment for them to study and decide on what they needed.

At the end of the meeting, as the committee members were walking out of his office, Mohan slipped in beside Kantha

"What's the matter? You don't look too happy."

Kantha sighed. "It's going to take forever."

"No it won't. We don't have to wait till we've collected the full amount. We can take out a bank loan and pay it off as we collect from the big companies. We should be able to get started in a few weeks." She stared in disbelief. "Let's go to the bank tomorrow after school and discuss this with the bank manager. I know him. He approved my loan when I built my house. I'll make an appointment."

She was frowning and shaking her head.

He laughed. "Tomorrow! It's a date." She stared after him as he walked back to his office.

The next afternoon, Vish was watching through the staff room window as Kantha got into Mohan's car and drove off with him. "Just look at that. She's a damn fool. I warned her about him."

John looked out and laughed. "She's only going to the bank with him – to get a loan for the building project. Give it up, Vish – she's not interested in you."

"Who said *I'm* interested! Stuck-up bitch!"

At the bank, when Mohan introduced Kantha to the manager, Abraham Fischer, she was pleasantly surprised. He was an Afrikaner and she had expected him to be cold and formal but he was jovial and charming. She had to remind herself not to think in terms of stereotypes, being Afrikaner did not necessarily mean racist. He listened attentively as she told him about the project, nodded once or twice in approval and then congratulated her on being proactive. Mohan explained that they were on a fund raising drive but as they wanted to begin building immediately, they had come to the bank for a loan.

Fischer saw that this was a worthy cause and as he knew Mohan to be a responsible and reliable man, he agreed to a loan that would allow them to begin work on the project almost immediately. Fischer knew he would have uphill getting approval;

he was not a supporter of government policy but he was the manager. He would argue it was good business and would win community support for the bank.

When they got into the car, Kantha, who had been struggling to control herself, burst into tears. Mohan put his arms around her to comfort her and gave her his handkerchief to blow her nose. When she had calmed down, he was shaking his head, "And here I thought you'd be happy. Some people are never satisfied."

She laughed as she wiped away the tears. How could he know how hard her life had been? She had struggled for everything she had and the kindness that she was experiencing now was new and overwhelming. And he was the author of it all. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Are you ready to go now?" She nodded. "Where to?"

"The bus rank, please."

He put the car into gear and drove off. "You have to take two buses to get home, don't you?" He was shaking his head.

"I'm quite used to it."

"It's about time you got yourself a car."

She laughed, "We could go back; ask Mr Fischer to finance a car, maybe an ocean cruise and a flight to Hollywood."

He grinned; "Is that an invitation?"

When Kantha got home, she found her sister in the kitchen, baking, not out at one of her meetings or distributing pamphlets. Kantha was glad to be able to share her good news with her.

Jaya was delighted. "That's wonderful. They are very lucky to have you on the staff."

Kantha sighed, "Without Mohan nothing would be happening."

"But it was your idea. I'm glad you're getting support at last.

When the bank loan came through, the committee brought in the construction company and work began on the dining hall. Meanwhile Mohan was following up on his applications to the big companies and was receiving assurances that funds had been allocated and would be made available before the end of the year. He was planning on investing some of the money and earning interest to keep the project going.

For the next six months, the committee was extremely busy. Renuka, John and Ahmed, who lived in the area, took on most of the responsibility. Once the architect's plans had been approved, John was on hand before and after school for delivery of building materials, and for consultation with his brother, Bobby Pillay, who personally supervised building operations. Mohan set up a cordon around the construction site and posted prefects around it to keep children away during breaks.

Once the kitchen and dining hall were up, Ahmed brought in the equipment and set up the kitchen. Renuka found a local carpenter who built counters, cupboards and tables with attached seating. Mohan found an electrician and a plumber to connect up equipment and organize the water supply. It took a couple of months before everything was in place and they could employ a cook and two assistants. Kantha kept everything rolling by making sure that funds were always available when needed. She was very grateful to Ahmed who drove her to and from the bank.

4

On a Saturday, at the beginning of the third school term, there was a grand opening of the new facilities. The whole community had been invited and among the guests of honour was bank manager, Abraham Fischer. The Principal welcomed the crowd and in his address, took sole credit for this initiative. Leaders in the community stood up to praise and congratulate him.

Mohan whispered to Kantha, "Now this is the time for your tears."

She laughed. "I couldn't care less. I'm just happy we won't have any more starving children in our classrooms."

At the end of the celebration, Mohan offered her a lift home.

"Oh no, I live too far away."

"But it's Saturday; not a good day for you to be traveling by bus. We owe all of this to you; it's the least I can do to show our appreciation."

"That's not necessary. Besides it's too far. I can manage."

"I insist. It's not you I'm really thinking of; it's the money you control."

She laughed and he drove her home.

When they arrived at the house, Kantha saw Jaya rushing along the road. She reached over and pressed the hooter. Mohan raised an inquiring eyebrow.

As she got out she said, "That's my sister. I want to introduce you."

Jaya, who was out putting flyers in postboxes, came up and was introduced. Jaya smiled, promptly put a flyer in Mohan's hand and went on her way. Mohan looked at the flyer – notice of a mass meeting to reject the government's plan to appoint a National Indian Council and to demand universal franchise in a unitary state. He shook his head, crumpled it and threw it away.

Kantha invited him in for a cup of tea; but he couldn't stay.

On the Monday following, Kantha left early for school – it was the first day of operation of the new dining facilities and the committee would be on hand to oversee its functioning. When she got to the dining hall, she saw that Mohan, John and Renuka were helping to serve little ones and showing older ones to tables. When Mohan saw her, he came up and offered her a hanky. She laughed and the tears that had been imminent were staunched.

Just then Ahmed arrived and they fell in with the others, helping to serve and find places for children. Other teachers came in to see how things were going. They were impressed and congratulated the committee on its fine achievement. After breakfast, it was time for assembly and classes as usual.

At lunchtime the committee was back in the dining hall, helping to supervise and keep order. Once a routine had been established, dining hall duty would go on the staff roster.

At the end of the day, Mohan invited the committee into his office for a celebratory cup of coffee. When they were leaving, he asked Kantha to wait a moment.

"Your work is not yet done, you know."

"I know. Lots of donations still to come in and payments to be made."

"And we have to find a safe investment that will finance the scheme and keep it going."

"I know and I am happy to go on working on the project."

Then he changed the subject. "Are you going to attend that mass meeting?" She was puzzled. "You know, your sister was handing out handbills …"

"Oh, no – I leave that to her."

"Well, that's a relief; can't have you detained by the SBs[2]."

"For attending a meeting?"

"This government is paranoid; any opposition is regarded as treasonous. And you're a teacher – a government employee …."

"So's my sister and nothing's happened to her."

"Not yet."

"Oh, go on … anyway I can't do what she does. I can't get involved in changing or manipulating the system. I only get involved in practical things – where I know I can make a difference."

"So do I. There are ways to manoeuver, even in a rabid system like ours."

"Yes, thank goodness for people like Abraham Fischer." She smiled and turned to go. "See you in the morning."

When Kantha got home, she changed, switched on the radio for music, and then went into the kitchen to prepare supper. She was an excellent cook and loved cooking. Her sister was hopeless, couldn't even scramble eggs, but she could bake. After supper, Kantha settled down to preparation of her lessons for the next day. She never waited to have supper with her sister. Involved in Congress activities, Jaya came home at all hours.

When Kantha got ready for bed, Jaya had still not come in. As she got in under her blankets, she wondered what little scheme to shame the government her sister was involved in tonight.

In the morning, she saw that Jaya was not there. She had not come back during the night. She did not know what to think; she had

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[2] SB Special Branch security police

no way of getting in touch with her. As she was getting ready for school, all kinds of horrible possibilities filled her mind. Had she been detained? There was this new thing now – detention without trial. That meant they could arrest you at will, put you in solitary confinement and torture you to get information. *Oh god, what if there had been a bombing, what if …Oh no! …* She made tea, forgot to drink it, grabbed her things and rushed off to school. Perhaps someone there would know – Ahmed's brother was also involved in anti-apartheid activities.

When she arrived at school, she went looking for Ahmed. He was not in the staffroom, not in his classroom, not at assembly. When she asked around, no one knew where he was. She went to Mohan. He told her that Ahmed had phoned to say he would be late – something to do with his brother. Mohan could see how upset she was and wanted to know what was wrong. When she told him, he said he would make inquiries. He gave her a comforting hug, told her not to worry and sent her off to her classroom.

While she worked with her pupils, she did her best to forget about Jaya. At tea break, she did not go to the staffroom but stayed in her classroom trying to figure out whom to contact to find out about her sister. She would not be able to phone or go to any of the people in the Congress – too dangerous. What was she to do? Perhaps she could phone her sister's school – find out if she had reported for duty. While she was sitting there worrying, Ahmed came in. She jumped up and fixed him with a concerned, inquiring look.

"I got a message from someone – didn't have a name. It said we should stay calm. They picked up a number of people yesterday; they call it preventative detention. The SBs had information that there would be another bombing, like the one that killed a few people at that railway station a few weeks ago. Nothing happened and they are releasing all the detainees this morning. They're all okay."

Kantha rushed home straight after school. When she opened the door, she found Jaya in the lounge, her head stuck in a book as usual.

"Well," she said dryly, "I'm glad things are back to normal."

"I'm sorry … I couldn't warn you … they picked me up as I

was leaving school …"

Kantha gave her sister a stern look. "Just one thing; tell me you are not involved in these indiscriminate acts of violence." Jaya's look of incredulity reassured her. "If you were, I would turn you in to the SBs myself."

Jaya laughed. "I may be an atheist but I am also a follower of Gandhi, who got his inspiration from Tolstoy, who got his inspiration from the *Thirukkurral*[3]; that makes me traditionally Tamil – no violence."

"Oh, don't show off. Dammit, I was worried. We are the only family we have. Give it up, Jaya; change will come from international pressure on the government. These racial councils, stupid as they are, are a concession to outside pressure. You don't have to put yourself at risk."

"If *we* didn't act there would be no international pressure."

"Oh, I don't care … just give it up …

Jaya put her book down and waved her sister to the kitchen, "Come, let's have tea. I baked scones."

"One of these days you're going to lose your job and then what will you do?"

"Jam or cheese? … On your scones?"

Kantha sighed and went off to change.

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[3] *Thirrukkurral*: the book of Tamil sacred verses.

5

MID-CITY THEATRE COMPANY

For the next few months, life continued along established routines and Kantha relaxed. One day when she got on the bus at the Indian bus rank, a young man whom she often saw on the bus, came and sat next to her. He was obviously also a resident of North View.

"Hi, Perry – Perumal Reddy – at your service."

"And what service would that be?"

"You name it, I claim it."

"Hmm, original but not very effective."

Perry fixed his eyes on hers and sighed, "I'm cut to the quick."

"Oh, cut the melodrama."

"Ah, she'll not be hit with Cupid's arrow; she hath Dian's wit."

"You must be a Speech and Drama student."

He assumed an amazed and injured air, "Oh no, Madam, I belong to a theatre company, I am an actor."

"At the Globe Theatre, I presume."

He dropped the pose. "Unfortunately, this is South Africa. And yes, I am an ex-Speech and Drama student but there are no theatres for non-whites. I belong to a homeless troupe; we rehearse in makeshift venues – perform in hotel lounges, community halls, social centres, on cinema stages – wherever we can find a playing area. It's a struggle but it's great fun and very fulfilling – couldn't do without it."

"And you only perform Shakespeare's plays."

"We sometimes do scenes from Shakespeare, but mostly one-act plays. Do you remember Mr N.C. Naidoo? He used to put on

performances of Tamil classics at the Durban City Hall -- *Kovalan-Kannagi; Nullathangal; Sathiavan-Savithri ...* there is a rich tradition of theatre in Tamil culture. I am a distant relative of N.C. Naidoo, and very proud to be following in his footsteps. But now we want to write our own plays, set in our communities in South Africa." Perry suddenly took her hand. "Why don't you join us? We need a leading lady and you would be perfect."

"I'm not an actress and I don't speak Tamil."

He laughed. "Neither do I; only the old people still do. We will write our plays in English, and they will be about us." She was frowning, but he could see she was interested. "Oh, come on; give it a go – I'm sure you'll be great."

"I don't know… I won't have the time …

"We're all working people so we meet mainly over weekends. Aruna Naidoo, our director, is a teacher at the M.L. Sultan Tech in town and we use her classroom for our workshops and rehearsals."

Not long afterwards, Kantha became a member of the Mid-City Theatre Company and was off on Saturday and Sunday mornings to workshops and rehearsals. The director, Aruna, was a woman, and there were two other women in the group – Saras and Gloria – but the group consisted mainly of men: Perry, Riaad, Barry, Nadim, and Dumisani, a fellow student of Perry's from his Speech and Drama days. There was also a gay white man who had repudiated his origins and renamed himself Ravi Shankar, after the famous Bengali musician and singer. Ravi was a dancer and had picked up popular Indian dance forms from Indian films.

It was a lively bunch, young, full of energy and good humour. At the workshops, conducted by Aruna, who had majored in Speech and Drama, they were being inducted into the arts of performance through improvisations based on real life happenings and on scenes from plays. They were discovering creative abilities that would eventually lead to the invention of original dramatic performances.

In the meantime, they were still dependent on established works. Though they were a non-racial company, their performances did not reflect a South African reality as they staged plays by foreign authors, mainly British. Nevertheless, with mixed casts

they were demonstrating a rejection of racism. In J. M. Synge's, *Riders to the Sea,* Dumisani, played the role of Bartley with Saras as his mother, Maurya, and Gloria and Kantha as his sisters. And when they took the play to a black drama festival and competition in Soweto in Johannesburg, it was awarded first prize. Though Aruna was pleased that the level of their performance had been recognized, she felt they had had an unfair advantage. The other contestants' original plays had had to compete with a play by a world renowned author.

At the end of the year, Aruna came up with the idea of doing a revue. They would call it *Christmas Nuts* and create skits with songs and dances. In one skit, a boxing match, Ravi was in the ring with Dumisani. Like everything racially mixed, mixed boxing was illegal. Dumisani and Ravi started off sparring and as they jabbed at each other, dance music began to play and the movement in the ring segued from the exchanging of blows to a sultry tango.

Kantha found it hilarious and loved the way in which it depicted the civilizing influence of music.

They were building up an audience, mostly of Indians, in the inner city. And that gave them the confidence to put on full-length dramas. They searched for new plays, not the usual offering of British plays common in South African theatres. Looking for plays at the public library in Prince Edward Street, Aruna had found anthologies of American plays and they discovered American dramatists. They read through plays and chose Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* and Arthur Miller's *All my Sons.* Kantha played Lorna Moon in *Golden Boy* and Ann Deever in *All my Sons.* Their performances were restricted to weekends. After a couple of performances in town, they took their productions to the outlying areas for Saturday night performances.

When they brought their plays to Springvale, many of the staff at Springvale Primary attended the performances at the community centre. On the Monday following, some teachers would clap when Kantha entered the staffroom and she would laugh and take a bow. And they teased her about becoming a Hollywood star. Only Vish poured scorn on the productions. He did not like the

plays, found the acting crude and the performances unpolished and most of all, the speech uncouth; the actors seemed to have no understanding of proper enunciation. Kantha ignored him as usual. She loved performing and was really enjoying herself. She was even beginning to write little one-acts. In her spare time, she jotted down ideas in a notebook.

Now it was Jaya who came home to an empty house over weekends. But she was happy to see how much her sister enjoyed being involved in theatre. The first time that Kantha had appeared in a play, Jaya had been there in the little community hall to mark her debut in show business.

The two Indian weekly tabloids, *The Leader* and *The Graphic*, gave the Mid-City Theatre Company plenty of publicity. Their reviews of the productions were always complimentary and Kantha often received an excellent write-up. Jaya was very proud of her sister but being an anti-apartheid activist she was incensed by the fact that only the privileged group had access to proper facilities. And seeing the newly established Performing Arts Centres for whites only, goaded Jaya and she threw herself into more aggressive opposition to the government.

6

One day, while Kantha was in the staffroom marking books, Vish walked in and stood there observing her coldly, his resentment of her fuelled by her new initiative. She was now working on a library project for the school. Her sister worked in the library at her school; not a proper library – simply a storeroom converted into a library with shelves and bookcases that stocked storybooks and textbooks. Kantha had realized that they could do something similar here. She had spoken to Mohan about it and he had found a space which they could use. Now Bobby Pillay, John's brother, and his builders were turning the space into a proper room and

Renuka had her carpenter on stand-by to come in and put up shelves. While all that was happening, Kantha and Ahmed were on a drive to collect books for their tiny library.

Vish saw their efforts as sucking up … he didn't say to whom. "So what's next on the agenda Madam? What new scheme will you be dreaming up?"

She smiled sweetly. "One thing at a time. I'll think of something once the library is ready – perhaps, a drama club after school. That would be right up your alley; with your experience in Speech and Drama, you could run the club. Perhaps you could organize a school concert."

"I leave that to you. I don't suck up to anyone." And he walked away.

At the end of school that day, she stopped at the VP's office but there was no answer when she knocked. She opened the door and looked in. Mohan, standing at his desk studying something, didn't hear her knock or see her coming in. She went up to him and tapped on his arm. He turned, his eyes lit up and he flung his arms around her, and pulled her to him as his mouth sought hers. And feeling his body against hers, she felt uncontrollable desire rising in her. They held each other in a passionate embrace. Then suddenly they were sneaking away to his car and driving off into the wilderness. In a remote spot, they tumbled out onto the grass, and in an ecstasy of exploring, discovering, locking into each other, they were lost to the world.

It was dark, by the time he took her home. They kissed again and she clung to him. At last she forced herself from him, got out of the car and went in.

Her sister, on the sofa in the little lounge, was locked into Tolstoy – reading *Anna Karenina.* She simply nodded at Kantha making her way to the bathroom to shower.

The next day at school was torture. He was there but it was agony not to be able to touch. Kantha had to concentrate hard to be her usual self with her pupils. It did help having to see to their needs, but, very unusually for her, she was impatient for the end of the day.

She was quite restless and at lunch time, took a walk to the

dining hall. On her way back, she saw him coming towards her. He told her to wait for him after school and moved on towards the dining hall.

That afternoon they drove off together again.

And soon the staff began to look askance at her. Kantha didn't care; she was in love. And it was wonderful. Love was natural. Only society put reins on love; tried to bring it under control. But it was natural; happened spontaneously. It was freedom, the most exhilarating freedom. Why imprison it in convention?

Looking at her eyes, grown sensual, and a face, more alluring, Vish felt impelled to smother the passion that they manifested. "So you've become his whore. Don't think he'll divorce his wife for you. He's just using you."

She smiled. "Oh no, it's the other way around."

He sneered and walked away.

John came and sat next to her. "This is none of my business, I know. But you are an excellent teacher and an innovator. You could apply for promotion. Why jeopardize all that?"

"Oh, John," she laughed, "perhaps I like living dangerously."

But Mohan was embarrassed. Some members of staff began in small ways to challenge his authority and he was forced to deal with them in a somewhat harsh manner – quite uncharacteristic of him.

That afternoon as he and Kantha were sitting on the beach, he told her that one of his friends on the staff had threatened to inform his wife about their liaison.

And Kantha surprised him. "Why don't you tell her? Why hide it? I love you. How can that be wrong? How can love be wrong?"

"Now you're being naïve."

"And you're being conventional."

"Okay, so what if I said I also love Renuka – let's make it a threesome?"

Kantha stared wide-eyed, "Do you love her?"

"Aha, now who's being conventional?"

She sighed, "Life's a trap."

"And we've broken out for the moment. Let's enjoy it while we can." He drew her into his arms and their doubts went out with the tide.

Kantha glowed with happiness, but Jaya could not see it. She saw her sister often in the company of Mohan, but it did not occur to her that they could be anything more than friends and colleagues.

Jaya had learned to drive, had bought a small second-hand car and was involved in helping targeted political activists escape the country. Deeply involved in these undercover operations against the government organized by Uncle MD, she was blind to everything else.

And Kantha, exploring the joys of life, was equally blind to her sister's activities.

7

When Aruna, the director of The Mid-City Theatre Company discovered the works of Molière, she decided on a production of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme.* She set it in modern times and Nadim was given the leading role of M. Jourdain. Saras played his wife, and Kantha, his daughter. It was great fun; audiences readily identified with M. Jourdain's pretensions to nobility – many Indians put on airs and tried to be white.

After the success of this production, they went on to Molière's *The School for Wives*. Aruna decided to give it an Arabian twist and dressed the play in kaftans, turbans and long flowing dresses over fabric pants cuffed at the ankles. Kantha played the role of Agnes and Perry was Arnolphe who loved Agnes in vain. Perry shook his head, "Even in a play you're beyond my reach."

The time finally arrived when the Mid-City Theatre Company felt ready to present original works. Dumisani was preparing a mime act; Perry, Kantha and Nadim had written one-act plays; Barry

had written a full-length play and would present extracts from it. They would put on a free performance of these original works for the following that they had built up. They would call it *Guest Night.*

Disguised in a wig and a sari, Jaya sneaked in, hopefully incognito, on that Sunday night to watch Kantha's play. Uncle MD, organizer of escape routes out of the country for targeted activists, had been detained and his drivers were in danger. Being one of his drivers, she had been advised to keep a very low profile. As she never wore a sari, Jaya hoped that donning one would be adequate camouflage when she went out at night.

So, on *Guest Night,* Jaya, with the end of her sari over her head, came in with the crowd. And she felt very proud when Kantha's play, *The Swindle*, was announced. It was about lovers who go on a holiday to Lourenço Marques[4] where the woman discovers that her lover has simply used her to get at the little fortune she has inherited.

Surprised, Jaya wondered what had inspired the play.

Though Vish was derogatory about the Mid-City Theatre Company, he attended all their performances and sent in scathing reviews to *The Leader* and *Graphic*. On Monday morning, after *Guest Night*, he walked with Kantha as they were going off to their classrooms after assembly.

"Saw your show last night. Your play, *The Swindle* – trouble in paradise?" She said nothing. "I did warn you."

She usually brushed him off; but this time his suspicions irked her; she was vulnerable. She had suddenly, unexpectedly been forced to face up to reality. Having entered into a relationship with a married man in defiance of convention, she was suddenly having to face the consequences. She had not planned or manipulated the situation. It had happened quite naturally – out of love.

How could it be wrong? All religions preach love – but only the kind that means brotherhood – they give that free rein. When it

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[4] Lourenço Marques became Maputo after liberation.

comes to romantic love, they confine and restrict it; give to temple and church the right to sanctify it by locking it up in marriage – a convention that she had blithely ignored.

And now she was caught in convention's trap, and was suddenly filled with feelings of guilt and shame – her defiance revealed as bravado. Her repudiation of marriage-bound love had come full circle to condemn her, fill her with confusion, and even shame.

Despite the precautions she had taken, she was with child.

And she was ashamed – not because she was pregnant but because she did not have the courage of women in similar situations, who accepted it, went on with their lives and survived in the face of social censure. But she could not; she was devastated. This was a threat to the life she had been building for herself.

Despite her declaration that love was natural, she was filled with guilt. How could she have been so foolish as to believe she could defy society's strictures without suffering the consequences? Her body was nurturing a life that would be scorned. How cruel! How could the creation of a new life be wrong? How could a life be declared illegitimate? She could be scorned because she had broken the rules; but to declare the life she carried illegitimate – it did not make sense; why should it carry a stigma? It was innocent!

She looked at all the little children working away at their desks. She loved them all; they were innocent; they were precious. How can a life be illegitimate? Don't we live in societies and families to protect and nurture life?

Families! Oh god, this was a threat to family; his family.

Love? Love? What the hell is love?

That afternoon, after school, she left without seeing Mohan, and rode the bus home worrying about what to do? Should she tell Jaya? Her sister had blocked such things out of her mind; she would be horrified. In any case, what could Jaya do? What could anyone do? Kantha would probably be dismissed from her post. She had defied convention; she would pay for it. He would get off scot-free. Men can't fall pregnant; if they could, there would be no Casanovas in the world, no extra-marital love, no rapists. As there are no consequences for them, they bear no responsibility for their

promiscuity. They are free – macho men. Macho indeed! How macho are they with built-in protection from indulgence?

When Jaya came home and found her sister there, she was surprised. "Hello, you're home early?"

Kantha studied her sister. Should she take her into her confidence? Jaya had no understanding of personal relationships; she couldn't even make friends. At a personal level, she was gauche; she repudiated conventional social norms and got on people's nerves. But her behaviour was simply eccentric compared to Kantha's, which, being outside convention, was considered immoral. Kantha felt certain her sister would be shocked. No, she could not tell her. At least not yet. She would have to break it to her slowly … let her absorb it gradually. It would be a challenge to her understanding of compassion.

It was also a challenge to Kantha's understanding of free will. She had always believed that as long as she harmed no one, she could do as she liked. She had harmed no one but her affair was a breach of the moral law; it challenged the notion of family upon which society is built. As a woman, she was not allowed this challenge. And she would be punished; he would not. There would be a few who criticized him; but most would blame her.

At school the next day, she kept out of his way and after school disappeared again before he was aware of it.

At assembly the following morning, he watched her and as she made her way to her classroom, he could see that she was consciously avoiding him. He was mystified.

After school that afternoon, he came to her classroom just as she was about to leave. He walked in and closed the door.

"Well?"

"Well what?" she countered.

"Why are you avoiding me?"

"Am I?"

"Hey, don't play games; I thought we were beyond that."

"Really? So this isn't a game? Does your wife know that?"

"What's the matter with you? What game are *you* playing?"

"You should ask yourself that? You started it. How does it

end?"

"Have you found someone else?"

She looked up in disbelief. "I suppose I deserve that. You don't really have any respect for me, do you? Underneath it all, you see me as a floozy – easy come, easy go."

"I have never thought of you in that way."

"Really, so what does that mean? Are you going to divorce your wife? Are you going to make an honourable woman of me?"

He stared at her in silence. "I can't talk to you while you're in this mood. When you come to your senses we'll talk again." And he left.

For the next few days, they were busy with end of term activities; writing reports, completing promotion schedules, and turning in text books. There was no informal contact between them.

At home, Kantha was still debating whether or not she should confide in her sister; but she noticed that Jaya was becoming quite jittery. After Uncle MD had been arrested, all those involved with him had come under strict surveillance.

In order to carry on with the work, Jaya had taken to wearing a sari and a wig when she went out at night and she used different cars for transporting those fleeing the country. She and Krish Pillay worked together, taking different routes and trying to create confusion in order to conceal their destinations.

Kantha had tried, in vain, to get her sister to give up these activities. She was simply thankful when she heard her sister pulling up in the garage late at night or early in the morning. She had no idea how Jaya was coping with her duties at school. Fortunately for her, Mrs Morel, her principal, was openly involved in opposition to the government.

It was the last day of the school term. After all the staff had rushed off, Kantha went to Mohan's office. He was still there filing away papers. He looked up and contemplated her uncertainly. After their last encounter, he did not know what to expect. She sat down opposite him. He was apprehensive and looked nervously at her

sitting there like a sphinx.

Then she simply said, "I am pregnant."

He sat back in shock and stared incredulously. Eventually he spoke, "I thought you were on the pill."

"I am, have been … contraceptives do not carry a one hundred per cent guarantee."

He jumped up and began pacing. Then he asked, "What are you going to do about it?"

She stared at him. "So this is my problem?"

He dropped into his chair. "What do you expect from me; you know I am a married man."

"And you didn't know?" He looked at her, confused. "You didn't know you were married."

They sat there in silence – she, regarding him; he, with a hand over his eyes.

"What do you want from me? You know I can't marry you." She sat there waiting. Eventually he said, without looking at her, "There's only one thing to do – you have to get rid of it."

She gasped in shock. "It! It! This is a child, my child, your child. This is a life. You want to murder a child, our child."

She ran out of his office. She could hear him calling to her to come back but she kept running. She ran out of the schoolyard and all the way to the bus rank. On the bus, she sat quivering in her seat. The words "get rid of it" kept ringing in her ears. She had not expected that – "get rid of it." She did not know what she had expected – but not that – the usual solution – to deal with a life …*a life* … a life that they had created.

Now she had to accept that she was on her own. What had they had together? Mere physical gratification? Not love? Was love simply an illusion? Though not allowed out of wedlock, it existed – outside of wedlock – free, independent, uncontrolled, until … "What a fool I have been. What a fool!"

When she got home, she sank on her bed and waited. She would have to tell Jaya. She dreaded that. Her sister had no understanding of romantic relationships. She would be disgusted. Kantha could expect little from her, but Jaya was the only one she could turn to

for help.

She got up, walked about trying to think of what she could do. She couldn't go back to Springvale. Thank god, it was the end of the term and schools were closed. She would have to resign her post and find some temporary job until the baby was born. She was not sure how Jaya would react to having a baby in the house, a baby that she would have to help support and bring up. As she waited and waited, her mind kept churning over the same things, over and over and over.

It was late and her sister had still not returned; she often came home after Kantha had gone to bed. But tonight, Kantha was determined to wait up for her no matter how late she was. She couldn't sleep any way.

She wasn't really worried about how Jaya would be with a baby in the house. Jaya was a teacher and she loved her pupils. Whenever she spoke of them it was with great affection and she was always looking for ways to involve them in fun learning activities. But she was uncomfortable around babies. Whenever parents offered her their baby, she backed away. She felt sorry for all women, especially the young girls on the street, who carried babies on their backs. She saw them as having been robbed of their own potential for life. Still, Kantha was sure she would come round when there was a baby in the house.

Kantha began yawning and looking at her watch saw that it was after twelve. Oh well, she would talk with her sister in the morning. She turned out the lights, and went to her room.

She got into bed and as soon as she switched off the bedside lamp, she heard a soft knock on the window. At this hour! She went to the window, stood to the side and peeped through the space between curtain and wall. She couldn't see a thing. Then another soft knock just there where she was at the end of the window.

She heard a whisper. "It's Krish … Krish Pillay."

Kantha knew him; he belonged to the Congress; he and Jaya worked together.

"Don't open the window. Don't turn on a light. They may be watching your place. I have bad news ... Jaya has been picked up

by the SBs."

She felt her knees buckle but pulled herself together. "Why? Why?"

"She was caught driving Mandla Khosa to the Lesotho border. They are both in jail; they will probably be transferred to prisons in the morning.

"Oh no, no …"

"I have to go …"

"No, wait. Take me to her. Please, take me to her."

"I'm sorry. I can't. They're looking for me. Besides, you will not be allowed to see her. I shouldn't be here. But I promised her that if ever she were detained, I would find a way to let you know." He could see Kantha's hand on the curtain. "Don't … don't open the curtain." Kantha stood there frozen. "I'm so sorry, but I must go now."

He crept to the back of the house and disappeared in the shadows. She stood there staring into the darkness. Then she collapsed.

When she came to, she found she was bleeding and did her best to bind herself up.

In the morning, she caught the bus to town and found a doctor. She was told that she was having a miscarriage and was rushed to St Aidan's hospital, where she remained for some days undergoing the necessary care and procedures. The perfect life that she had thought she had, had suddenly exploded into nothing.

When she was discharged, she returned to the apartment and began, mechanically, to discard the debris of that existence. She could no longer live here. Her sister was in prison and she had lost her baby – this place was now empty desolation.

She had heard that they were looking for teachers overseas – in London – where her aunt, Uncle MD's sister, lived. She had fled the country years before. She applied for a passport, and wrote to the aunt in London to ask for temporary accommodation when she arrived there. She mailed a letter of resignation to the Department and a copy to Springvale Primary. They would have to find a replacement for her. She packed up her sister's possessions and

her landlord agreed to store them for her.

She closed her savings account and as soon as she received her passport, booked her passage on South African Airways and left the country without saying goodbye to anyone. No one knew she was leaving. She would write to her sister from London.

8

LONDON

Kantha arrived at Heathrow airport at about four in the morning and took a bus into the city, to her aunt's place in Golders Green. She wasn't sure how she would be received. There had been no contact for many years. Her aunt had left the country with her two children after her husband had died in detention. She would probably be sympathetic but Kantha had no intention of explaining all her reasons for leaving South Africa. She would simply attribute it to her sister's detention. She would explain that she had come here to establish a safe haven for her sister on her release.

From the bus window, she could see a new and different landscape as she travelled to Golders Green and was captivated by a place so extensive and so green; with houses and buildings nestling in among trees. When she arrived at her aunt's home, a little cottage with a neat garden, she was pleasantly surprised to be so warmly greeted. Aunty Pat, short for Pathmavathy, showed her to her room.

After she had showered and changed, she was called to breakfast. Pat gave her some indication of the area in which she lived and explained how Kantha could get about. She had to leave for work; she was a secretary at a furniture store. She suggested that Kantha simply rest and relax; they could make plans when she got home from work.

But, needing an income, Kantha was anxious to start working again. She searched through the telephone directory to find the offices of the Department for Education. They were in Westminster.

She went out, asked around, found out which buses she could take and made her way to the DFE; in South Africa it was the DOE, Department *of* Education; *for* sounded less authoritarian. When she got there she filled out all the necessary forms and felt pleased that she had registered and was now in possession of a list of primary school vacancies.

When she returned to Golders Green, she walked around in the area and took in its tremendous variety. Her aunt had told her that this Jewish suburb had been built by Americans during the Second World War to shelter those fleeing from Nazi tyranny. Kantha went into shops and bakeries to acquaint herself with what they had to offer. The assistants smiled and were pleasant – so different from South Africa. And as she took in this exciting new environment, breathing in its exotic difference, all her troubles began to evaporate, and the vivacious Kantha began to peep through again.

She bought bagels and cream cheese and went back to her aunt's to have one with tea. She had also stopped at an open air market and bought meat and vegetables; she would prepare dinner for her aunt after she had written to her sister. Here she was experiencing a new freedom while her sister was in prison enduring the rigours of detention without trial. It was strange; while Jaya fought for freedom, Kantha took it for granted. She had lived oblivious of the restraints that government put on people; but she had not been able to escape the restraints of living in society.

When Pat came home, she was pleasantly surprised to find that she could relax while her niece fixed dinner. She changed, came and sat down at the kitchen table and smiled as Kantha poured out a cup of coffee and put a bagel in front of her.

Pat laughed, "How did you know I love bagels?"

After dinner, Kantha pulled out the list of teacher vacancies and filled out applications to several primary schools in the Greater London area. She would post them in the morning.

In the next few days, Pat learned about all the happenings in Kantha's life with the exception of her affair and her miscarriage.

Pat raised an eyebrow, "No boyfriends?"

Kantha shrugged, "Nothing serious."

Pat shook her head, "A lovely girl like you? My Veena had quite a following." She pointed to a photograph of her daughter on the mantelpiece. She was very beautiful.

Pat's daughter, who had died in an accident a few years before, had been with a modeling agency. It was clear she had a wonderful future ahead of her; but that was not to be. Unable to stop her tears, Pat would not let Kantha comfort her and apologized for losing control. She turned on the television to distract her niece.

Kantha had heard of television but had never experienced it. TV had not been introduced in South Africa for fear that it would prop up resistance to the government. Kantha was enchanted; she watched the news and an episode of *Coronation Street*. Pat gave her the *TV Times* and Kantha became quite excited; there were so many programmes that she wanted to watch. Pat laughed; she had been as excited when she had first come to Britain.

When Kantha saw the numerous theatre advertisements in the newspaper, she was bowled over. "Oh for goodness sake, this *is* Shakespeare land." And she was determined to visit every theatre in London. She invited her aunt to come with her, but, after a day's work, Pat preferred to get her entertainment from television.

Using the underground railway, Kantha found her way to the various theatres. She could travel alone at night – it was quite safe; so different from South Africa. She visited a variety of theatres and saw all kinds of productions from classical tragedies to vaudeville. At the National Theatre, she saw a production of Ibsen's *Ghosts* starring Judi Dench and at Her Majesty's Theatre, Topol, in *Fiddler on the Roof.* At the Mermaid Theatre she watched a modern version of the ancient Greek trilogy, *The Oresteia.* The Mermaid was like a miniature ancient Greek theatre with a low stage and seating for the audience rising away from it. Kantha was delighted to see Orestes riding onto the stage on a motorbike.

She spent every night of the next two weeks in London theatres.

Then she received notice of an interview for a teaching post at a primary school in Kenton and that brought her down to earth. But

she was excited and a little nervous, wondering what it would be like in a British school. She took the tube to Kenton, found her way to the school and was shown into the Principal's office where she met the Principal, Vice Principal and a senior teacher. She shared with them her experiences at Springvale Primary and her ideas about methods of teaching and learning. At the end of the interview, she was taken to tea in the staffroom while the interviewing committee sat down to consider her suitability for the post.

When she was called back to the office, the Principal was pleased to inform her that they were recommending her appointment to the school. She was then taken on a tour and saw that there was a dining hall, library, large sports ground, a music room and a school hall for assemblies, meetings, school social functions, school concerts and plays. She wouldn't have to fight to establish facilities here; everything was provided. She could simply concentrate on doing her best for her pupils.

Back in Golders Green, as she described the morning's events, Pat could feel her excitement. Kantha would be working with people for whom teaching was not just a job; it was a means to help children discover their interests and their potential. She had moved from a third world into a first world situation. In South Africa, it was the rule of fear, the great inhibiter that prevailed. Here she was in a forward-looking situation with people who were not afraid to seek and discover new ways.

She had come home.

9

At her new school, she was given a Standard Two class – lively eight-year olds who regarded her with great interest. As she was from Africa, they were eager to hear about her encounters with lions, elephants, gorillas and crocodiles. So she took them on adventures into Africa in their learning, and they began to gain an understanding of Africa and its people that went beyond Tarzan.

When Philip, a member of staff, saw pictures on her classroom walls of people and places in Africa, he mentioned that his uncle and aunt, who lived in Kenton, had spent many years in Nigeria. They had been part of a diplomatic corps and had brought back photos and all kinds of memorabilia of their stay in North Africa. She was excited, said she would like to invite them to share their experience of Nigeria with her and her pupils. Philip arranged a meeting and, after school one afternoon, drove her to his uncle's home and introduced her.

Delighted to be able to share their African adventure, Graham and Veronica Harrington were very pleased to meet Kantha. They showed her sculptures and other artifacts, clothes that men and women wore, and a *gongon* – a talking drum. It was shaped like an hourglass and had a baton, which looked like a miniature walking stick. Graham picked up the drum, held it against his body, beat it with the baton and Veronica began to dance to the rhythm. Kantha laughed, clapped in time to the beat and tried to copy Veronica's movements. After this bit of fun, they went into the dining-room for tea.

When Philip drove Kantha to the tube station, she thanked him for introducing her to his uncle and aunt. She knew they were going to be a hit with her class.

The Harrington's arrival at the school the following week caused a sensation. They were dressed Nigerian style. Veronica wore a *gele*, an elaborate cloth headdress, *buba*, a loose fitting blouse with long sleeves and an *iro*, a wraparound skirt, something like an Indian sari. And Graham was magnificent in an *agbada*, a robe, and *sokotos*, loose-fitting, drawstring trousers. They told the little standard twos about the people of Nigeria, showed them lots of photographs and a little Benin statue. Veronica had brought lengths of cloth that she tied into *geles* over the hair of two of the little girls and then wrapped them in *iros.* Graham put adult *agbadas* on a couple of boys, and the class had fun trying to find them under these tents. Then Graham picked up the talking drum and as he played, Veronica showed the children little dance steps and how to move their bodies and arms. When Kantha joined in, her pupils laughed

to see their teacher learning with them.

That was the beginning of a real friendship between the Harringtons and Kantha and they wanted to share their love of this great city with her. They took her on a few outings: a boat ride on the Thames, visits to Kew Gardens, Madame Tussaud's, Westminster Abbey and since she loved theatre, to the original site of Shakespeare's Globe.

When they offered her the little apartment attached to their house, Kantha asked Pat if she would mind if she moved. She would be nearer to her school and would be able to get more involved in school activities and functions. Though Pat had come to think of Kantha as the daughter she had lost and would miss her dreadfully, she gave her niece her blessing and put on a brave smile as she watched her go.

After she was settled in Kenton, Kantha decided to continue her own education. She went to the nearest adult education centre, collected forms and information and took them home to plan a course of study. She would enroll in an arts degree, with majors in English Literature and Art. The Harringtons had a library well stocked with the classics which she was welcome to use. Once her studies commenced, she often sat with them discussing the books she was reading. They also admired the drawings that she produced for her art classes.

Kantha was in such a caring environment, and would have been completely happy, but for the fact that her sister was still in prison. She wrote to Jaya about the happenings in her life but received no replies; she did not count on any. She wasn't even sure that her sister was allowed to receive mail.

Kantha was making friends at night school. There was an Indian in her art class. Ashok, a tall, very good-looking young man, an engineer, had been sent over to acquire new methods and techniques to take back to his firm in Calcutta. Painting and sketching were his serious hobbies and he was also a dedicated musician and singer. She was impressed. The moment he saw Kantha, he was smitten and began to court her. She was attracted to him but did not encourage him; she could not – she had a

history. But he would not, could not give up. He moved his easel near to hers and engaged her in conversation. He was charming, had a sense of humour and made constructive comments about her drawings. She was trying her best to resist him.

Then he invited her to a musical evening at his friend, Vinod's home. She asked if Veronica and Graham could come too. When she told them about it, and asked if they would take along the *gongon* drum and share their love of Nigerian music and dance, they were delighted.

That Saturday night, at his friend's home, Kantha introduced the Harringtons to Ashok and he introduced the three of them to Vinod and all his friends, Indian and English.

In the music room, they sat on mats on the floor. Vinod, explained the meaning of a song and, then sang it, accompanied by Ashok on the harmonium. Next was Ashok's item. He drew his sitar against him. "I'm not Ravi Shankar," he said, "but here goes." As he played and sang, he kept his focus on Kantha. There was huge applause after his performance. Vinod laughed, "Ravi Shankar watch out. Your crown is at stake." Then Ashok told them they were all going to learn a short Bengali song. He gave out copies of a four-line song, played the tune of each line on the harmonium and had them sing it. They laughed as they struggled with the words and when at last they had it, sang the whole song. They cheered and laughed at their accomplishment. Then it was time for Graham and Veronica to do their magic and they got the whole group moving and sashaying around. That brought the evening to a very enjoyable end.

There would be many more musical evenings thereafter.

Driving home, Veronica and Graham enthused about Kenton becoming a really cosmopolitan area and all the opportunities that would offer.

A few days later, when Kantha got back from school, she found Veronica working in the garden. She didn't have lectures that evening and after she had gone in to change, came out to see if she could help. She began clearing up behind Veronica, who paused for a moment and said, "I had such a good time on Saturday, I'd

like to invite Ashok and Vinod over to dinner some time. They're such nice boys; I'd like to get to know them better." Then she noticed Kantha's frown. "Why what's the matter? I thought you liked them."

"I don't want to encourage Ashok."

"Why not? He seems a very nice chap."

"I don't want to get involved. I can't." Veronica looked up expectantly. "I'm sorry, I can't explain. I … I have a past."

Veronica didn't pry. "Oh well, it was just an idea."

The next evening as Kantha was leaving the Education building after her English lecture, she found Ashok waiting for her at the entrance. He walked with her to her bus stop

"Look, they're showing *Romeo and Juliet* in town. Everyone is raving about it."

"Yes; it's a Franco Zeffirelli film."

"Go with me."

"Thank you, I can't; but you shouldn't miss it."

"It's Shakespeare …I won't understand a thing. You're studying Shakespeare… I need you …"

She laughed. "I've seen the film. I went with Graham and Veronica. Don't worry, you'll love it." And she hopped on the bus and was driven away.

A few nights later, while they were working on a still life, he asked, "What's wrong with me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why won't you give me a chance?" She went on sketching. "What is it? Tell me." She ignored him. He grabbed her hand and forced her to look at him.

"It has nothing to do with you. … I…. Just forget about me."

"How? I can't stop thinking about you."

She walked away; went off to the Ladies and paced about inside like a caged animal. When she knew the class was over, she went back, collected her things and left.

He was waiting at the entrance. She walked past him. He stepped up beside her, then suddenly took her in his arms, drew her into a kiss and all her resistance evaporated.

From then on they were constantly together and Veronica wanted to know if she now had permission to invite Ashok and Vinod to dinner.

Having spent almost three years, gaining new skills and methods in an engineering firm in London, Ashok was due back in India at the end of the month. As he and Kantha were walking in the park one Saturday afternoon, Ashok suddenly stopped, took her by the shoulders and said, "Marry me." She looked up in shock – not the reaction he was expecting. "Hey, this is a proposal."

She stood there staring at him. "I didn't expect this."

He looked at her in disbelief. "You didn't expect it?" They were lovers; it was the most obvious next step. "I don't understand. Am I mistaken? Isn't that what we both want?"

"I didn't expect this."

He frowned. "Why not? … What did you think? … I was just after a good time before going back home?"

"This is not about you … and perhaps I am … just a good time girl."

He was lost. "I don't understand. I thought you cared for me. Are you saying you just wanted a good time?"

"No, no, no."

"Well then … I don't understand."

"I did not expect you to propose." His look was incredulous. "You don't know me. You don't know … I have no right to enter into a relationship with you or anyone else. I have been weak. It was wrong."

He frowned. "Wrong! Don't we love each other? How can love be wrong?"

She broke into a bitter laugh. "I once asked that same idiotic question." She looked into his eyes and saw hurt. "Forgive me. I have been thoughtless, selfish. I should never have entered into this relationship. It was wrong of me."

"Why? Why? Why?"

"I am not innocent and pure; I am not worthy of your love and trust." Then she told him of her affair, her pregnancy and miscarriage. He sat there staring at the ground. "I didn't mean to deceive you. I hate myself for hurting you."

He said not a word, then suddenly stood up and walked away.

He wasn't at art class the next week. She felt wretched. She had ruined his last weeks in London. On Friday night, after class, he was waiting for her at the entrance. They stood there staring at each other.

"We need to talk."

She nodded and they set off in silence. They sat down on a bench near her bus stop. Then he told her he had been shocked by her revelation but he realized it was all in the past. She had left that behind her to make a new life for herself here. If she could forget her past, he would too. He had missed her terribly in the last week. "I want you to be my wife. I love you; I don't want a life without you."

He put his arms around her and held her close.

When she got home, she told Graham and Veronica that she had accepted Ashok's proposal of marriage.

Veronica hugged her, "Well, he's a lovely lad."

Graham wagged his finger at his wife. "I knew it. I knew you had your eye on that boy." Veronica threw a cushion at him.

"So, have you made any plans?"

"He's going back to India at the end of the month. I'm to finish up here at the end of the term and fly to Calcutta where we will be married according to Bengali custom."

"And what's that like?"

"I have no idea."

And they laughed.

"What about your studies?" Graham wanted to know.

"I'll find a way to continue when I get there."

Soon after Ashok left for India, Kantha received a letter from Jaya. She ran into the garden calling to Veronica and Graham. Waving the letter, she burst into tears. They put down their tools, rushed to her and put their arms around her while she pointed to the letter and sobbed. When they eventually got the gist of what she was

trying to tell them, they laughed.

"This calls for a celebration," Graham declared and marched them into the house for wine – or coffee.

Her sister had been released from prison and on her discharge had been given all the letters that Kantha had written her. Though out of prison, Jaya had been placed under house arrest and was still not free. So she was smuggled out of the country and was now in Botswana. She would apply for a teaching post and would make her home in Gaborone for the foreseeable future. She promised to visit Kantha as soon as she was able.

Kantha wrote back with the news of her wedding and her move to India.

10

CALCUTTA

Looking around as she made her way down the boarding stairs and then towards the airport building in Calcutta, Kantha saw the large open airfield of Dum Dum Airport and it's building with very limited passenger facilities. Ashok was waiting for her in the baggage claim area and they travelled into the city by bus.

Her first impressions of Calcutta were of crowded alleyways, buildings pushed together to hold them up and people camped on pavements. And rickshaws! She had last seen rickshaws in Durban. And she remembered that day in 1949, when as a little girl she had gone with her mother in a rickshaw to the farmer's market to buy provisions for all the people who had come to take refuge in their house when Zulus went on a rampage raping and killing Indian people. In making their way through the violence, the rickshaw puller, a Zulu, and her mother, were both defying the situation. They were very brave and somehow managed to evade the angry horde.

Ashok's family lived in a municipality in the north of Calcutta. Ashok did not take Kantha to his home but to his uncle Govind's place. He explained that the Bengali marriage tradition required many ritual observances in the bride's home so his uncle's had been designated as the home from which Kantha was to enter into marriage. When Ashok introduced her to his uncle and aunt, Kantha could see disbelief in the aunt's eyes.

They had been expecting a very young woman, like the

typical Bengali bride, but Kantha was thirty-one. They suspected that she was older than Ashok. He had told them she was highly educated, had university degrees, so she was a little older than the typical Bengali bride. But in his Aunt Pratiba's eyes, Kantha could see she was far more mature than they had expected.

In the next few days, she was put through all their usual rituals. Uncle Govind and Aunt Pratiba took on the functions of the bride's family. Before the wedding day, acting as her parents, they went to bless Ashok and Ashok's parents came to bless her. The next day was a ceremony in which the Aunt and her daughters rubbed Kantha's face with a turmeric paste to make her skin glow and look beautiful. She was aware of their awkwardness and the exchange of questioning looks between them and she felt like a fraud. But she did her best to cooperate even though she could not see the purpose of much that was required of her. Her sister, Jaya, would have laughed and called it mumbo-jumbo.

The wedding ceremony, a few days later, made Kantha feel worse. At weddings great emphasis is placed on the innocence and purity of the bride. In a Christian wedding, it is symbolized by the bride's white wedding dress. Here a bride wore a red sari in anticipation of the collapse of the hymen. And the wedding ceremony included tiny acts of initiation into consummation, such as covering the bride's eyes with *paan* (betel) leaves and then removing them to allow the couple to gaze into each other's eyes – a "first step" towards intimacy. And the all-night wedding festivities that accompany the act of consummation are a celebration of the loss of virginity. Looking at Kantha, however, there was a feeling that it was all sham.

Though Kantha was very uncomfortable performing all the strange rites, she co-operated fully and did her best to win approval; but she was aware of cynical, questioning, and suspicious looks all around her.

After the wedding, she went to live with her in-laws and from the beginning found herself inadvertently offending their sense of propriety. She had come from a home free of ritualistic gestures that symbolized respect, such as touching someone's feet. She

understood respect to mean responding politely to others and being kind and understanding. So she often offended because she did not use the correct form of address or the appropriate gestures and because she expressed her feelings and opinions without restraint.

She realized that she would never be able to conform to what was required of her. She had very little in common with this family, of which she was now a part. She came from a free culture and would always be in conflict with custom bound people. Such mindless conformity to tradition would mean giving up her independence, her individuality. This was the most oppressive situation she had ever been in – even in South Africa she had had complete freedom in her personal life.

It wasn't smooth sailing for Ashok either. He had lived in the UK for three years free of ritualized social conventions. It had all been different there; an adventure. And, Kantha, an Indian woman, so vital and independent, had personified excitement and freedom. But Calcutta was his reality and Kantha, out of place in it, was an embarrassment. He had gone against his upbringing and he had to admit he felt ashamed. In London, he had been intoxicated by the freedom and had forgotten himself.

His friends here laughed: "Hey Ashok, our Bengali girls not good enough for you, man? No experience, eh?"

As a daughter-in-law, Kantha was expected to cook for the family, so she had to learn to prepare Bengali dishes. She was a natural cook and accomplished that quite easily, much to the amazement of her tutor, Ashok's sister, Geeta. Fish was the staple diet and their favourite dessert was *rasgulla*; a dumpling made of cottage cheese and semolina, cooked in a syrup of sugar and left in it to swell. Her talents as a cook, excellent as they were, were simply accepted as part of her duties; she remained a disreputable outsider in their midst, too old and worldly.

To help her fit in, Ashok taught her Bengali songs and she sang with him to the accompaniment of his harmonium. She was not a confident singer and there was no sudden acceptance of her. She also took part in local festivities such as *holi* and *Durga Puja. Holi*, the festival of colours, is a celebration of the coming of spring.

People go out and throw powders of different colours over one another and turn themselves into laughing rainbow pillars. *Durga Puja,* the most important of the celebrations, is a commemoration of good over evil. Durga or Devi is the powerful Hindu warrior goddess who defeated, among other evil demons, the satanic *Mahishasura.*

Durga is revered and yet, from Kantha's point view, though her might is supreme, surpassing that of male gods, and is recognition of the power of woman, the culture as practiced, places women in subservience.

Kantha would never adapt to this situation; but she was expected to as she was of Indian origin. Had she been white, it would have been different. They would not have made any demands on her and would have allowed her to adapt in her own way. As in South Africa, she was being made to conform to the dominant culture.

She would not have felt quite so frustrated if she could have enrolled at a university and continued her studies. But she could not; she was here under false pretences. Before she had arrived, to make her more acceptable to his family, Ashok had told them she was a graduate. And now she had to live up to the lie; his choice of a wife had disappointed them and she did not want to shame him even more by exposing the lie.

In addition to the hostile environment inside the home, Kantha found the situation outside equally unbearable. Never before in her life had she been exposed to such poverty. She was horrified to see hordes of homeless people, poor, diseased and starving, living on street pavements. She admired Mother Theresa for having come here to minister to all these wretched of the earth. Mohan had once referred to Kantha as Mother Theresa, but a Mother Theresa she could never be. Trapped in a foreign culture, with little freedom of choice, no longer able to act with independence, she was a victim here, restricted and robbed of her resourcefulness.

Then she began to write stories about what she was observing around her – happenings on the street. One of her stories – about a rich Sahib who locks himself out of his beautiful home and mansion – illustrated the contrast between rich and poor in the

city. The Sahib tries to climb over his high iron gate, but he slips and hangs hooked on the gate by his clothes. He is rescued by a poor man who earns his living on the street with a pair of trained monkeys that sing and dance to the accompaniment of his drums.

The writing helped distract Kantha from the misery around her.

Her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, having established a kind of dour truce, left her to her own devices. And when she fell pregnant, they were interested only in the gender of the child. She gave birth to a little girl. Had it been a boy, it may, perhaps, have made a difference. But a daughter? They made Ashok feel as though he had lost his manhood.

Kantha's in-laws took little interest in her child. Baby Amrita was a little doll; Kantha couldn't understand how anyone could resist her. And looking at her sisters-in-law trapped in subservience, she became concerned about bringing up her child in this culture in which women were second-class citizens with little freedom. No, this was not for her daughter.

One day, as she was hanging washing on a line in the yard with Amrita on a little mat near her, Geeta came out to throw garbage into a bin. When Amrita saw her, she crawled towards her and tried to stand up. But she fell, cried and put her hands out to her aunt. Geeta just shouted at her and told her to stop making a racket. The child became hysterical. Kantha ran to her, picked her up and held her close. All the misery that had been building up inside Kantha, suddenly swelled into intense despair – the kind of despair she had experienced when she had miscarried in Durban and had fled the country. They could not go on like this. And in this moment of hopelessness, she could see only one way out. She and Amrita would be better off dead. She would wait till Amrita was sound asleep; then they would go to the river and end it.

But as she watched her child playing with the little blocks she had bought her, looking up and laughing, she knew that was a crazy idea. She was horrified that she had actually thought of taking their lives. Killing herself would be suicide, but Amrita – that would be murder. She had abandoned Mohan for suggesting abortion yet here she was thinking of ending this beautiful child's

life and her own. No, no, no! Not only was it wrong, it was cowardly.

But she could not go on living here. Even South Africa was better than this. And then she saw – she had fled once, from South Africa, she could do it again; go back to London; the Harringtons would welcome her return. She jumped up. Yes, that was what she would do! She would not remain here any longer. She would tell Ashok that she was leaving. It would mean divorce; strangely, not a shocking thought. He could find some young Bengali nymph and marry again. Suddenly she laughed; she and Amrita would be free.

She waited anxiously for Ashok to come home from work.

When she told Ashok, he was shocked. He said nothing and went for a walk to think. He began to wonder if perhaps it wasn't for the best. She was unhappy; he was unhappy; his family was unhappy. He could marry again; his parents would make a suitable match and the tension in the home would end.

Kantha would go back to London, back to freedom and the opportunity to explore, discover and develop. She came from a world that was moving and changing; but here, life was highly structured and a woman's place and function were set and fixed – in the home, where she was safe and secure. Why couldn't this satisfy her? After living in South Africa, this was freedom, but she could not see that. She said oppression came in many forms; having to live according to fixed formulas, whether racial, social or political, was a form of slavery.

She regarded his mother and sisters as slaves. That had shocked him. What rubbish! His mother was perfectly content. She had brought up her children with loving care and kindness, and was a wonderful homemaker and cook. She had given his father a comfortable life, and the freedom to enjoy good company.

Kantha's response: "And what about *her* freedom and social needs?

It had annoyed him. Damn it! His mother was a happy woman.

"And what about your sisters," Kantha had insisted, "never married … and *happy*? Where do they fit in? What does the social

canon provide for them?"

His sisters? He had never given them much thought. "There were no proposals; that was their bad luck."

"Their bad luck was that they were given only one option – marriage – and they did not have dowries that could attract proposals. So they are stuck here, slaves forever – despised because they are spinsters."

He had no response.

"I will never let that happen to my daughter. Amrita will know that she has choice. She can marry, or not, as she pleases; and she will know who she is, what she wants from life and how to get it. But that cannot happen here, so we must go."

As he was picking his way over the pavement crowded with the poor, starving and sickly, he saw a couple of his friends at a tearoom. They waved and he went to join them. They stood there chatting and then Gadhar asked, "And where's your lovely wife?"

Ashok ignored him and turned to Biju, who had just returned from abroad. "What was it like in … where was it that you were studying?"

"Detroit … Wayne State University. It was great – studying engineering right there … in Motor City – I could not have asked for anything better … great opportunities to observe and become involved in practical applications. Man, I loved it. I am going back as soon as I can. What was it like in England?"

"Like you say, there's nothing like going back to where it all started. You get all kinds of hands on experience."

Gadhar jumped in before they went any further. "And that's where Ashok found himself a wife."

"Ah," Biju smiled, "you married an English girl."

"Oh, no," Gadhar said, "she's Indian – Tamil, I think. Imagine that – he went all the way to England to find an Indian wife!"

Ashok shook his head. "Well, you were lucky, Gadhar, if your parents hadn't found you a wife, you would still be single."

"Well, at least my wife …"

Ashok cut in, "My wife and I don't plan to remain here much longer; we're going back to London."

"Hey man, why not the States? It's bigger and better … wonderful people … and a whole new way of life … I am applying to firms and companies there … I have a list of employment opportunities …I'm happy to share it with you." Biju's enthusiasm was infectious.

As he walked home, Ashok couldn't believe what had just happened. Where had it come from? The idea of leaving Calcutta – that was Kantha … and now …what a crazy idea … emigrating? "How could I have …?"

Then he saw that it *was* the answer. Divorce was out of the question. It would be an admission of failure. In a new country, in a free country, they could start over. All right; he would do as Biju had suggested – send in applications to engineering firms in the States.

When he told Kantha, she was glad but very surprised that he was willing to give up the life he knew for the challenges of the unknown. It would be a sacrifice for him. She had to respect him for his courage and was grateful for his support.

In the next couple of months, while they waited anxiously to hear from the US firms to which he had applied, they began to prepare for the big move. They applied for visas and even started packing. Whether or not he secured employment beforehand, they were leaving. His parents and sisters watched their preparations with mixed feelings. They were glad she would be gone, but they were very unhappy to be losing their son.

Then one afternoon, Ashok came home from work in great excitement. He had been invited to an interview with an engineering firm in St. Louis, Missouri. He laughed and all his misgivings evaporated; he was embarking on a great adventure.

His family said little; he was going away forever and they were losing him. It was all *her* fault. Privately, they cursed this woman who was taking their son from them. They became even colder towards her, but nothing could depress her now and she walked about radiant with joy.

She picked up the baby and hugged her. "Oh Amrita, we'll be free."

11

When they arrived at St Louis airport, they were met by Kevin Levine, the PRO of the engineering firm that had invited Ashok to an interview. Kevin took them to a hotel in town and told Ashok his interview was scheduled for the next morning; he would come for him at nine o' clock. Then he left them to rest and relax.

Kantha was smiling as she unpacked. "What a difference. It is a balm to be among people who don't constrain their lives with conventions for every simple aspect of living. I am beginning to feel alive again. Kevin is so kind and considerate. I hope you land this job."

"What shall we do today? Stay in and relax or would you like to go out and see what this city looks like?"

"After that long flight, I need a rest." She looked at Amrita. "And I think someone needs a bath and then a nap." She picked up her sleepy toddler. "Hey, Amrita what do you say to a good scrub, my darling."

While they were in the bathroom, Ashok went down to the lobby, got a newspaper, came back, stretched out on the bed to read and fell asleep. After Kantha had bathed Amrita and fed her, she put her down next to Ashok. Kantha showered and then got into bed with them.

When they woke up, they decided to stay in for supper. They ordered from the room service menu and watched TV; two comedy programmes, *The Carol Burnett* show and *Flip Wilson*. They laughed heartily — something they had not done in a very long time.

"I am so glad we are here. I was beginning to feel you didn't care."

"I was caught in between. If I had defied my parents and sisters, I would have made it worse for you."

"You could have defied them. You could have said, "Da devil made me do it."

And they laughed.

The next morning, after Ashok went off for his interview, Kantha,

carrying Amrita, went for a walk. She could see the gateway Arch towering over the city; had looked on a map and had seen that it was on the banks of the great Mississippi River. She wanted to find it, but was afraid of straying too far from the hotel and getting lost. Instead, she found a little shopping area nearby and went there to explore. What a relief to be able to walk along pavements not crowded with suffering humanity. On the way back, Kantha saw the small park opposite the hotel and took Amrita on a short ramble under the peace and calm of shady trees and a blue sky. Then she made her way back.

As she was walking up to the hotel entrance, a car pulled up below and Ashok jumped out, called to them and came running up.

"Kevin wants to show us some apartments. We will need a place to stay."

"You got the job!" She hugged Amrita. "Sweetheart, this is where we are going to live from now on."

Amrita blinked and said, "Teepy, teepy," – sleepy, the first English word she had picked up.

"Come on, let's go. The firm is giving me an advance to set up home."

Kantha was on the verge of tears; such generosity and consideration after the humiliation and distress of the last two years – she was overwhelmed. Ashok took Amrita from her, grabbed her hand and led her down the steps to the car where Kevin was waiting.

Seeing the tears running down her cheeks, Kevin ventured, "Tears of joy, I hope." She managed a crooked smile as she got in.

He drove them to the suburb of Spencer, to a company owned apartment complex just across the road from a shopping centre. The complex had terraces of six to eight apartments fronted by green lawns that flowed into wide green passages between terraces. And there was a swimming pool in the middle of the complex.

Kevin took them to an upstairs two-bedroom furnished apartment with an open lounge–kitchen area running the length of the apartment. All the rooms were carpeted and had built-in cupboards. The kitchen had a built-in dining bar table. In addition

to a bathroom, there was also a laundry room. Kantha couldn't believe all this; it was like a fairy tale.

Kevin lived in Clayton, a neighbouring suburb and said he would be happy to drive Ashok to and from work.

"Only until I get my driving license and buy a car, I promise," Ashok said. Suddenly he could see vistas opening before him; possibilities he could never have dreamed of and he was glad that she had forced him out of Calcutta.

Kevin drove them back to the hotel to collect their luggage and check out. Then he brought them back to Spencer; first to the shopping centre, where they picked up supplies for a couple of days, and then home, a new home, *their* home – and privacy!

Kantha was smiling. *We can become a family at last. And I can live again! Free of prejudice.* South Africa was the land of prejudice, but it was only in Calcutta that she had experienced it at an intimate level.

12

ST LOUIS

They were at the beginning of a new life. Ashok was working and learning to drive. Kantha and Amrita were exploring; first in the complex. In the attitudes of other residents to her and their children's attitude to Amrita, she saw that she and her little girl were not really free of prejudice. It was only with people like Kevin, confident, sure of themselves, that their difference, their colour and ethnicity, was of no consequence. She would tolerate these others, just as she had tolerated the situation in South Africa. They lived in the same complex but they would keep to themselves. She could still be herself and pursue her interests.

She bought a little swimming ring for Amrita and swim suits for herself and her daughter and they went to the pool which was generally empty in the late morning. Amrita loved the pool and they went swimming every day. Afterwards, they would walk across to the shopping centre or around in the neighbourhood. When they discovered the recreation centre with its Olympic size pool, Amrita immediately wanted to go swimming and it took her mother a long time to get her to understand that they needed her ring and their swimming costumes. Then they wandered off to the tennis courts where they watched people playing and Kantha promised her daughter that she too would one day be playing there.

Once Ashok had his licence, he bought a small second-hand car and they went for drives around the city. When they discovered the zoo, Amrita was excited to see the wild animals, but she wanted

them to come out and play with her. And she cried when Ashok told her that this was a zoo and animals had to be locked up.

On one of their drives, Kantha discovered the universities – Washington University and UMSL (University of Missouri St Louis). She was excited; she could now resume her studies. She had been so ashamed of the lie that she was a graduate that Ashok had told to make her acceptable to his family. At last she could study again and wipe out horrible feelings of hypocrisy and inadequacy that the lie had engendered. She decided on UMSL as it was closer to home. She wanted Ashok to take her there so she could pick up literature about admissions, enrolment and courses.

Ashok couldn't understand, "But there's no need now."

She was startled. "What do you mean 'no need now'? I want to study. In case you have forgotten, I was working on a degree in London. So this is not a new idea, I want to study. I need to study."

"But you weren't married then." She couldn't believe he said that. She stared and he hurriedly added. "And what about Amrita? Who will look after her?"

"I will find a good crèche. It won't be every day; only the days I have lectures."

"I don't like the idea."

"She will be with other children; she'll make friends. It will be good for her."

"What if they are nasty to her?"

"I'll find a crèche that has children of different races."

"I don't know; I don't think it's a good idea.

Then Kantha discovered she was pregnant and had to give up the idea – but only for the immediate present. She needed to study; she needed the intellectual stimulation for her own development. What kind of a mother would she be if she were just a cook and housekeeper? She hadn't expected Ashok to object.

In the mornings, after Ashok left for work, Kantha and Amrita watched *Sesame Street* on TV. Amrita was beginning to pick up English words and was learning to count. When they went shopping and she saw *Sesame Street* Books in stores, she laughed and clapped her hands. And when Kantha bought her one of the

books, she sat on the carpet with the book in front of her and, pointing to the characters, called out to her mother, "Look Bigber. Look Kermer "

Kantha took up her pencils again and she and Amrita spent time drawing together. Of course, being a speedy artist, it took Amrita only a few minutes to create the most abstract works of art with her crayons. Picasso was no competition. Her drawings came straight out of her imagination and were depictions of life on other planets out in space. When her mother put her first picture up on the wall, Amrita was inspired to create more and more wonderful works of art. But not everyone appreciated her genius.

When Ashok came home from work and found her drawings on the wall, he frowned. "What's all this nonsense; don't turn this place into a pig sty." When he pulled some of the pictures off the wall, Amrita screamed and ran to stop him.

Kantha had to explain to her daughter that they were going to put them up in her room and she took the scribbles down, gave them to Amrita to hold, then she and Amrita went into her room to put them up.

Ashok shook his head and went to make a cup of tea.

When Ashok heard that Ravi Shankar, the famous Bengali musician, had arrived in St Louis and was to perform at Washington University, he became ecstatic. He told Kantha and she was pleased for him and agreed that he should attend. She would have loved to attend as well, but she had to take care of Amrita and her pregnancy was at an advanced stage.

On the night of the concert, Ashok was exuberant and drove off in a state of joyous anticipation. Entering the university theatre, he saw that the audience consisted mainly of Americans; many were students of the university. It was not difficult to pick out the scattering of Indians in the hall. He found his seat in a middle row. As he sat down, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked back into the smiling face of a countryman who put out his hand.

"Jayram Patel – Jay." They shook hands as Ashok introduced himself. They were not from the same Indian states. Ashok thought Jay might be from Gujarat.

Jay laughed. "Isn't this wonderful? I never had the opportunity to attend a Ravi Shankar recital In India. I had to come all the way to St Louis to hear him."

Ashok smiled. "Well, you're in for a treat. I'm from Calcutta and have been to a few of his concerts."

When the audience began to clap, he turned to see Ravi Shankar and his drummer, Alla Rakha, walking onto the stage. They bowed and settled on the mats that had been laid out for them on the floor. Shankar played a musical phrase, called it a *raag,* which means colouring and is a musical theme that gives rise to variations that 'colour' i.e., awaken, the emotions. He pointed out the different parts of the sitar, his instrument, and gave the audience the opportunity to hear the various intensities of sound they produced. Then he played themes from one or two *raags* and explained that different *raags* were played at different times of the day. Indian concerts began in the evening and continued into the early morning, and the *raags* reflected the progression from the excitement of the night to the peace and calm of the early morning.

He introduced Alla Rakha, who would be accompanying him on the *tabla* – the drums that set the beat of the *raag*. As Alla Rakha demonstrated a few of the rhythms that he would be playing, the intricate movement of his fingers and the tremendous speed they achieved were amazing to watch.

Then Shankar and Rakha played an early evening *raag*. Entranced, Ashok was carried back into a Bengali music room.

During the intermission, Ashok and Jay got cups of coffee and Jayram steered them towards a group of Indians at the other end of the reception area. Jay introduced his friends and Ashok learned that they had formed an informal company of musicians that met regularly to play and sing together. When he said that he played the sitar and harmonium, they were delighted and invited him to join their group. They met over weekends at Madan's place; he had set up a music room in his home. Ashok laughed with pleasure; this was like being back home in Calcutta. The evening was turning out to be even more gratifying than he had imagined.

At the end of the concert, he said goodnight to his new friends and as he drove home, was humming the melody from the last *raag*

that Ravi Shankar had played. His heart was bursting with joy and he looked forward to the weekend with impatient enthusiasm.

When he told Kantha about the group of musicians he had met, she was happy that he would have the opportunity to play and sing again as he had at Vinod's house in London. But she would not be accompanying him this time. Now that she was in an environment where she could study again, that was all she wanted. But even that could only happen after the birth of her baby.

13

On the way to the hospital, Kantha explained to her little toddler that they were going to fetch a baby, a little brother or sister for her and she would have to help take care of the baby so it could grow up strong like her and be her playmate. After she was settled in a ward, Kantha insisted that they leave as Amrita was too little to be sitting around in a hospital. So Ashok took his daughter home. The baby was born during the night and in the morning Kantha telephoned to say that Amrita now had a baby brother. Ashok scooped Amrita up in his arms and danced around the living room, "I have a son, I have a son, I have a son." He had chosen the name Kumar for his son and he taught Amrita to say it.

When they went to the hospital to see Kantha and the baby, Ashok asked Amrita to tell her mother the name of her baby brother.

Amrita smiled and chirruped, "Kermer ... baby name … Kermer."

Kantha giggled, "You are going to call him Kermit?"

"No, no, she didn't say it right. It's Kumar. We will call him Kumar."

And Kumar was a happy baby, much loved and pampered, with a sister who kept him informed of all the happenings on *Sesame Street*.

When Kumar was a year old, Kantha decided to enroll at Missouri University.

Ashok frowned, "But Kumar! Who will look after him?"

"We will. I will enroll in evening classes and you will be here to take care of the children while I am studying."

But at Ashok's insistence, she found a babysitter to look after the children while she was at college. Ashok dropped her off and picked her up afterwards.

It was exciting to be studying again. And being a mature student, Kantha's understanding of the world was quite different from that of the young people around her. English Literature was her major subject. She was reading Jane Austen and her view of *Pride and Prejudice* was quite unorthodox. She found Austen to be a conformist and her view of humanity to reflect its intolerance and lack of compassion. It was Austen's treatment of Lydia that appalled her.

Lydia, the youngest of the Bennet sisters, is a teenager whose hormones are running rampant and she elopes with wicked Wickham. Darcy, on behalf of her family, gets her married to Wickham. Austen presents this marriage to a paedophile and mercenary, who would only bring her misery and despair, as a satisfactory solution to Lydia's breach of propriety. As far as Kantha was concerned, marrying Lydia off to Wickham showed a real lack of compassion.

Being a man, Wickham's inhumanity is overlooked and even rewarded. Kantha saw Darcy, who becomes a hero for uniting this young girl with a man of whose evil qualities he is fully aware, and all those so desperate to marry Lydia off to such a man for her breach of convention, she saw them all, including Elizabeth Bennet, as puppets of convention. To save face, they had insisted on a marriage that would condemn Lydia to a life of misery with a villain.

Kantha understood that the novel exemplified nineteenth century values, but heroes, in her mind, were not conformists. Through all time they defy convention when it becomes cruel and oppressive; they are able to see what others do not. Her sister, Jaya, had loved Darcy; Kantha could not. In Calcutta, she had

experienced at first hand the cruelty of convention in its demand for absolute conformity.

At the university, Kantha was among people who loved exploring ideas and they found her original and stimulating. And though she was much older than her fellow students, they loved talking with her and challenging her views. And she was truly happy. She wrote to Jaya to share with her the joy of being able to study again. When Jaya wrote back and confessed that Kantha was opening her eyes to new realities and understandings, she was elated.

And she would not miss her lectures for anything in the world. No matter what the weather, she insisted on being driven to class. One snowy winter's day, Ashok advised her to skip lectures as the weather prediction was for fourteen inches of snow, but she was adamant. She did not want to miss the first lecture on John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath.* She had read the novel and needed to understand the background; she could not miss it. Grumbling under his breath, he drove out with her into steadily falling snow.

By the time lectures were over, the roads had disappeared under a thick, white duvet, and she was stuck on campus. She had telephoned but Ashok was afraid to venture out. She didn't know what to do. Peter, a student in the same class, saw her looking forlornly at the entrance. He offered her a lift home. She was hesitant but he assured her he was used to such weather and she accepted gratefully. Though his car was equipped with snow tyres, he still had to drive quite carefully through the heavy covering of snow. When he dropped her off at home, she thanked him profusely, almost tearfully. She always became quite emotional at any show of kindness.

Amrita and Kumar missed their mother dreadfully when she went off in the evenings. Their father tried to teach them Bengali songs but they weren't interested and made feeble attempts to learn. He got them to play notes on the harmonium. That amused them greatly and they hit notes at random just for the magic of producing sounds, but they took no interest in learning to play. Ashok soon gave up, left them to the babysitter and watched TV until it was time to fetch Kantha from varsity.

As his wife's studies kept her quite busy, Ashok had to find ways to amuse himself. He took up tennis and spent Saturday afternoons at the courts. On Sundays, he went to his music group in University City.

14

When Amrita turned five, she began school. Being a little foreigner in appearance, she was exposed to unpleasantness from other children. Kantha was concerned. In South Africa, with its policy of separate development, pupils of different races attended separate schools. She had always been in an Indian school and had not had to put up with cruelty and unkindness on account of her race. But her poor little girl was being taught that she was different, that she was of inferior status. And even though she was a very beautiful little girl, she was learning that skin colour makes a difference and that would haunt her all her days. Her mother spent time comforting her when she returned from school, but there was nothing much she could do.

But it soon became apparent that Amrita was very bright and being at the top of her class, the other children could no longer despise her. That spurred her on to excel in everything she did at school. Her defence against prejudice was her brilliance. Kumar would begin school in the year after his mother had completed her degree and he too would have to deal with prejudice.

Kantha was thinking of post-graduate studies but knew Ashok would object; he had been grumbling about the additional expense of her studies. But she was quite determined. If she were earning, she would not be dependent on him to finance her education. So once she graduated, she would find employment and pay her own way.

At the end of the following academic year, Kantha graduated *cum laude* and was inducted into an honour society. But she knew she would not be able to participate in honour society activities as

she was looking for a part-time job so she could earn and save for post-graduate work.

Then she discovered she was pregnant … again … and would have to postpone her studies … again.

When Kantha enrolled Kumar in school, she warned him about nasty children who would pick on him. She assured him that if he ignored them, they would leave him alone. She was going by what Amrita had experienced and had no idea that it would be much worse for Kumar, because he was a boy.

For the first few years, there was some minor provocation but it got worse as he made his way up into the higher grades. Because he was different, he attracted a gang of bullies who made fun of him, called him names and pushed him around. Kumar was not a big, tough kid; he was slightly built and no match for a gang of rough boys. And when it was discovered that he was an outstanding pupil, and at the top of his class, that did not protect him as it had protected his sister. It aggravated his situation and increased the animosity of the gang. *Who the hell did he think he was!* They became quite aggressive and began roughing him up. He was afraid to use the toilet at school as that was a favourite place for bullies to victimize boys like him. His only recourse was to hide from the gang during recess and even when travelling on the school bus.

Kantha could see that he was suffering but she did not know how to protect him. She wanted to go to the school to report the matter to the Principal but that terrified Kumar; it would make the ruffians even more vicious.

Kantha had encountered such hatred in South Africa – hatred that arose simply out of human difference. Why did people feel so threatened by difference? Such fear was primitive; feral – yet it permeated even the most advanced societies. Those who preach the brotherhood of man limit it to their own kind. Brotherhood has no universality; it is a parochial concept. It really means "you have to be like me, if I am to respect you." It was one of the reasons that her sister, Jaya, eschewed religion and its dependence on conversion.

And Kantha began to realise that as prejudice emanates from

fear of the loss of power, the most powerful are the most prejudiced. It is evident in the class systems into which all societies are divided. South Africa is singled out because it made prejudice official, but prejudice pervades all cultures. Kantha felt that as we can never overcome fear, we can never be truly humane. Paradoxically, that same primitive fear forms the pragmatic basis for civilization. All our organisations are our ways of rationalising this fear. We have even made a business of it – the whole insurance industry.

But realising all of this did not help solve her son's problem.

Ashok thought Kumar needed toughening up. He could take up karate and learn to defend himself. Kumar wasn't happy; he was not keen on aggressive behaviour – of any kind. Still, his Dad took him to the local dojo where he would be trained in self-defence. He gave it a go but knew he would not use it – it still meant fighting. He would continue to hide to avoid the bullies.

Though Kumar was born and brought up in the US, the gang at school treated him as alien, so he was being made aware that human beings operate within systems and adapt to the dictates of systems. As he was not regarded as being of their system, he was forced to conclude that there were other systems and that there were systems within systems and that human existence was a highly complex intricate maze. At first it filled him with despair, because he did not know where he belonged.

Later he would realize that it offered him choice.

As she put her new baby into her little bathtub, Kantha looked at this sweet innocent and sighed. She had brought another little one into this cruel world. But baby Vanitha, splashing away, was happy to be alive and making discoveries.

15

In high school, Amrita continued to excel. In addition to her academic achievements, she was also a tennis champion, was

in the swimming team, the debating team, and was writing for the school magazine. Though she now had many friends, she continued to strive for excellence; it was a striving to become the quintessential American. She was discovering and adopting new ways, customs and traditions not practiced in her home. Though she had found a great degree of acceptance, she still could not relax. The striving to wipe out all cultural differences between herself and her classmates was a never-ending endeavour.

While Amrita had adopted assimilation as her weapon against racial intolerance, Kumar was still dealing with its hostility. And then he discovered *Dungeons and Dragons,* (D&D), the role playing game in which each player creates his own character and embarks on adventures to free people from the threat of demons and other evil creatures. Kantha bought Kumar a D&D book that contained modules with scenarios for adventures and he played with the few good friends that he had made. It was a wonderfully liberating game; it allowed a player to determine the kind of hero he wanted to be and the strategies he would use to overcome enemies. It provided the settings for the players and presented them with a particular objective.

Kumar's favourite game consisted of three modules: G1: *The Steading of the Hill Giant;* G2: *Glacial Rift of the Frost Giant Jarl;* G3: *Hall of the Fire Giant King*. The object of the game was to discover the source of the giants' power and to destroy it. Kumar always chose to be a wise tactician who found ways through difficult terrain, anticipated the actions of the giants and devised strategies to outwit them. And he was the one who led the others to the *Drow* – the trolls who instigate the wars between giants and humans.

D&D opened Kumar's eyes to his own human potential. Just as he cast himself as a kind of seer– one who invented and planned his own way through the game, he was beginning to see that he could apply that kind of creativity in reality. He had also learned a little about mystical beliefs and began to burn a black candle in his room. He understood it to offer protection from the evil and negative energy of those who wished to harm him.

When his father became aware of the candle, he ordered his son to get rid of it. Ashok had been told that it was a way to invoke

the devil. He believed the critics of D&D who connected the game with Satanism as it included demons and other evil characters. He berated Kantha for buying Kumar the book and decried her explanation that it was only a game. He insisted that Kumar get rid of the book and the black candle. Kumar did not; he simply hid them. They had awakened him to an understanding that there was more to life than its observable reality and that he was in charge of his destiny.

While Amrita and Kumar were making their way through the undercurrents of school life, their little sister Vanitha was sailing along over a calm surface. This was the 1980s; perhaps times were changing and the efforts of people of the 1960s – activists like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, poets like Sonya Sanchez and Amiri Baraka, Sydney Poitier in the films *Guess who's coming to Dinner* and *A Raisin in the Sun* – were at last beginning to take effect and people were changing their attitudes about racial differences. At any rate, Vani's experience of school was pleasant, productive and – harmonious. Her favourite subject was music. She was learning to play the recorder and piano and was taking singing lessons. And she loved reading. At home, she was often curled up on a couch with a book.

Kantha was now a little more independent than she had been. A few years earlier, when Ashok had been about to buy a new car, she had asked him not to trade in the old one but to let her have it. And she had learned to drive, got her licence, had become a substitute teacher and was earning. She did not re-enroll at university; she was nearing fifty and felt she had left it too late. Instead she enrolled in a night-time writing course, pulled out the stories that she had written in Calcutta and worked on them in class.

Ashok, a well-respected, highly productive member of his engineering firm was happy at work. He was earning very well and decided to buy a house in a more upmarket area. He went house-hunting and eventually found a three-bedroom house with a large basement that accommodated a little bedroom as well as a laundry and storage area. Ashok was elated; he had long wanted to move to better accommodation and a better neighbourhood.

He was of the Brahmin caste and wanted to maintain his position in the upper classes. But in America, he could not rise above a moderate middle class.

He had tried to initiate Kumar into the Brahmin tradition of the sacred thread. It required sanctifying and wearing a special cord just below the waist. It so upset and horrified his son that he gave up.

Ashok was beginning to feel an outsider in his home. He was Indian, born and brought up in Calcutta and his mother tongue and culture were Bengali. There had been the colonial influence in terms of his education and he had learned to read, write and speak in English. But it was only in his middle twenties, when he went to study in London that he had been in a setting of western culture. That is where he had met Kantha; she was like the Bengali women of the rich upper classes in Calcutta who had adopted Western ways. When he married her, he had thought she would enhance his status back home – but that did not happen.

In marrying her and then coming to live in America, it had not occurred to him that he would be giving up his customary way of life; that he would have to adapt to new norms and values. For his wife it was a minor adjustment and his children were growing up in this culture; only he felt uprooted. He had lost the comfort of the familiar, had not expected it to be painful and made a brave show of being at home in his new surroundings. It was not the material aspects of living in the States that presented a challenge; it was the unfamiliarity of such a high degree of individual freedom to which he had to adapt. He had been brought up in a culture in which there were set ways for everything and the father's authority was absolute.

As he himself was going through a process of adapting to new ways, he could not fully appreciate what his children were going through at school; in particular Kumar. He simply saw his son as one who reflected badly on himself. He held the conventional view that to thwart bullies you had to become a bully yourself. But that kind of thinking was exactly what Kumar was questioning.

Ashok still belonged to the music group; it was his only real pleasure until he discovered the Fairmont Race Course and began to spend his Saturdays there. It soon became an addiction and, as

there was little pleasure for him at home, he went more frequently, in the evenings after work. Totally devoted to her children, Kantha had little time for him; Calcutta had changed their relationship. He was beginning to feel a strange empathy with Mohan, the lover in South Africa from whom she had fled.

He had been very proud of his brilliant daughter, Amrita, but when she converted to Christianity, it unsettled him. He could share his misgivings only with Jay, his friend in the music group. His wife, who believed that every individual has the right to choose her own way, had simply accepted her daughter's decision. She had pointed out that her daughter was growing up in a basically Christian community. At home, there had been no induction into religious practices and the children, having no idea of the Hindu religion, were adapting to the predominant culture in which they lived. He knew she was right; nevertheless, he felt betrayed.

Amrita had made friends with Marian, a devout Christian, had met her parents and her brother, David, and had visited with them. When they invited her to attend church, it had confused her but she went with them. She was warmly welcomed by the minister and other members of the congregation; they made her feel part of their Christian community. And she began to attend every Sunday. She was learning about God and Jesus Christ, and it filled the emptiness inside her that she had striven to fill with all her achievements at school. She was given a bible and when Ashok saw her studying it, he gave her a copy of the *Bhagavadgita*. She took it, but never opened it.

Her mother picked it up and began reading it. Kantha was not religious; not an atheist like her sister, Jaya, but possibly agnostic. She had never given it serious thought. She found the *Bhagavadgita* very interesting. It is a section from the *Mahabharata,* in which Arjuna and Krishna explore the meaning of duty. Arjuna, the hero of the *Mahabharata,* is unwilling to enter into war with his first cousins, the Kauravas. He declares that he cannot kill members of his own family; it would be a form of fratricide. It would invoke *karma* and lead to punishment in the form of reincarnation, the endless cycle of deaths and rebirths. But Lord Krishna, who has taken human form, argues that it is his duty to destroy what is evil. To perform one's duty is not sinful; duty is beyond good and

evil as it does not involve self-gain of any kind and, therefore, will not lead to *karma.* When Krishna reveals himself as God, Arjuna accepts his word.

Kantha smiled; she knew Jaya would say that was pure rationalization; Krishna was endorsing a form of capital punishment and justifying war. Jaya was strongly anti-war and anti-capital punishment. But Kantha, fascinated by the idea that one's actions could be beyond good and evil; that even killing could be beyond evil, was keen to explore it. She would look for further explanations of what it meant to be "beyond good and evil".

Meanwhile Amrita, studying the Bible in preparation for her baptism, was dealing with the meaning of sin. It meant breaking God's law as contained in the Ten Commandments. She could understand that. "Thou shalt not kill" is not at all ambiguous. So while her mother was struggling, like Arjuna, to understand the justification for taking a human life, she knew it was plainly wrong.

When Amrita was baptized, Kantha, Kumar and Vani were there in church to support her. Ashok had struggled with his conscience; to attend would mean repudiation of who he was – a member of the priestly Brahmin caste, the upholders of Hindu beliefs. He could not attend.

Then Amrita and David began dating. It was exciting; he was a very handsome young man, kind, considerate and very impressive in his military uniform. He had enlisted after high school and would soon be stationed in Germany, where US troops were deployed to help end the war between Bosnia and Herzegovina. David's interest in Amrita was explicit affirmation of her as a member of the community. She would no longer be an alien. It inspired her to learn and become involved in all the teachings and practices of the church. And she was learning how to bring comfort to the suffering and needy through various forms of prayer.

David, however, was not a regular churchgoer. He loved Amrita not only because she was beautiful, intelligent and very capable but also because she was different. She represented escape from a mundane way of life. He had enlisted simply as a temporary measure to give him time to discover the means to a genuine

existence. Like Kumar, he had become aware of the system and the control it exerted on him and he was searching for a way to give real meaning to his life. And when he met Kumar, they hit it off immediately.

They could understand each other's quest for authenticity, but they were heading in different directions. David was searching for a new system while Kumar was trying to find an existing humane and just system that did not simply require mechanical acceptance of societal norms. Kumar had begun to attend church with Amrita and they took Vani with them as well. He was hoping that like his sister, he would find answers there.

David was surprised to find that it was Kantha who understood him best. She had fallen foul of systems in South Africa and even more so in Calcutta. She had been an outcast as she had not conformed. Even so, she was surprised to find that David felt trapped. Wasn't this America, the land of individual freedom? And she began to see that great personal freedom did not mean total non-conformity. There are rules that govern existence in community; without them there would be no community. Even with his message of love and compassion, Jesus had advocated the Ten Commandments. They were *commandments*, not requests, not suggestions – commandments!

But David had found that they led to a tendency to fall into accepted routines. And he was finding accepted ways rigid and stultifying. His hope lay in Amrita. When she graduated from high school, he gave up the army, they married and went off together to continue their education at university.

In his senior year at high school, Kumar, an honours student and good-looking, became a greater threat to the bullies at school when girls began to take notice of him and he began dating. When he was going steady, it troubled him that he could be exposing his girlfriend, Laura, to harassment and bullying. But strong minded, independent Laura was not intimidated by the taunts and slurs hurled at her. It amazed Kumar to find that she actually felt sorry for the ruffians. She saw them as sad individuals with no confidence in themselves, needing the herd to give them a sense of worth. Laura was an inspiration; she filled Kumar with great admiration and hope.

When Kumar graduated from high school, he knew exactly what he wanted to do: he would study philosophy at UMSL.

But after meeting David, and seeing him in his uniform, his father had other plans for him. Ashok had become aware that there were many advantages to enlisting; not only did it toughen one up but it offered all kinds of educational and skills training opportunities. Ashok was adamant; Kumar had to enlist.

Kumar could not hide this time and he poured his anguish into a poem:

MY OWN SELF BETRAYED

Pain, joy;
Life, death;
Love.
Reality (or is it illusion…?...) bombards
My fragile world,
Invading what is mine … what is me.
Truths and concepts are hurled at me
As flaming black daggers that pierce
The heart and wound the soul
These intruders surpass any feeble defence
My piteous, pathetic corpse could provide.
They ridicule and snicker at my nakedness as
They scourge me with their savageness.
The fiends tear flesh from my body while
Angels whisper bittersweet songs of
Melancholy.
The conquerors feast on my essence, my
Being, devouring and destroying 'till only
A void remains
Unrighteous depravity rapes my emptiness,
Refusing me any sanctuary.

In the beginning, my liberty was stripped
From me and traded for this terrestrial
Prison – God's gift to man.
They used me and made me one of THEM!

They told me the same lies
A thousand times a day.
I saw through their disguises, though,
And heard what they were really
Trying to say.
This existence is a lie,
Never knowing – seeking:
A painful deception for the tortured soul.
My evil is born of him,
He who devours the souls of all men.
It is found in friendship, found in trust,
Found in man.
The truth
– my vision is getting cloudy –
is found
– mind is spinning, vision fading –
at last
– alone and afraid, without sight –
…Death.
St. John 11:35 –
"Jesus wept." [5]

Kumar enrolled in the Coast Guard Academy, the lesser of two evils. He spent eight weeks at boot-camp where his individuality and that of all recruits was marginalized. They wore uniforms for exercise and all their functions. And, as the word uniform suggests, they were expected to respond identically in every aspect of their training. And though the physical training was demanding and painful, it did make him stronger and more able to endure stress and strain.

After boot-camp, he was assigned to a cutter, went sailing along the coast and only came home on leave. He wore a cadet's uniform and looked very impressive, but he felt that he had been reduced

[5] poem written by PK Ray 5/15/1990

to a cipher, a cog in a machine. Though it was neutralization, not negation as it had been at school, it was more rigid in terms of its demand for conformity. Protocols determined all speech and action. He felt himself disappearing as an individual. He would get out at the end of his term of service.

16

Kantha came home from shopping in great excitement. She had found videos of old movies that she had loved as a child in Pretoria; movies starring Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald: *Naughty Marietta* and *Rosemarie.* She immediately switched on the VCR and sat down to watch.

When Vani came home from school, she found her mother in front of the TV. "Hi Mom, what are you watching?"

Kantha looked up at this young girl. "Hello, who are you?"

Vani laughed. "Why, Cinderella of course."

Kantha was puzzled, "Cinderella? Are you really called Cinderella?" Vani giggled. But Kantha was still frowning, "Where's Jaya?"

Now Vani was puzzled, "Who?"

"Jaya – you know – my sister? She will be surprised to see what I have." She held up the video boxes. "I wonder what's showing next at the Empire bioscope. I hope it will be a Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland picture. We'll find out when we go on Saturday."

"Mother, what game is this?"

Kantha looked around, "Where's your mother?"

"Okay Mom, that's enough. It's not funny anymore."

Suddenly Kantha locked her hand to the side of her head and squeezed her eyes shut. She sat there like that for a few minutes. When she opened her eyes, she looked surprised, "Vani?"

"Mom, are you okay? You look like you're in such pain."

"Just a headache. I've had a few severe ones lately."

"You frightened me, Mom ... the things you were saying."

"I'm sorry, my darling. Come on, let's get you some tea." She was up and off to the kitchen. "I got fresh-cream scones from the bakery."

Vani was mystified.

A letter arrived from Kumar, with a photograph of the cutter to which he had been assigned. Kantha felt guilty; she had simply allowed him to be sent off to the Coast Guard when she knew he wanted to enroll at varsity. But his letter was cheerful. He had discovered that there were advantages to this way of life. He was earning, was provided with accommodation and best of all, he could study – through correspondence courses; so he would not miss out on an education.

And his friend Andrew, whom he had met at boot camp, had been assigned to the same cutter. They were quite enjoying sailing around to different ports.

Andrew and Kumar had important things in common. Both had been forced into military service. Both had been treated as aberrant at school: Kumar because he was Indian; Andrew because he was gay. When he first learned of Andrew's sexual orientation, Kumar had felt uneasy and had wanted to end the friendship. Then he realized that he was reacting out of fear and prejudice – exactly like the bullies he had encountered at school. Homosexuality, like skin colour, was not contagious or a challenge to another's identity. And he of all people knew what it meant to be ostracized.

Ashamed of his initial reaction, he put aside shame and prejudice and working with Andrew, discovered a very good friend indeed; one who shared the same need to find a liberal community in which to live and work. And to their amazement, they found what they were looking for through the Coast Guard – they found the Universal Church, a church that accepted all people without any form of prejudice; it welcomed everyone!

This church based its functioning on principles of creativity rather than control – principles that recognized the inherent worth and dignity of every person; fostered equity and compassion in human relations; promoted the free and responsible search for

truth and meaning; supported the right of all to peace, liberty, and justice; and respected the interdependence of all existence of which humans are a part.

As long as it was based on these principles, the individual had the freedom to create his own way of life. There was no emphasis on ritual and the usual forms of worship. The emphasis was on active service in the community. The church and congregation were largely for those rituals that were absolutely necessary – marriage, birth and death ceremonies. And even these did not have to follow a set pattern; participants could add their own ways of marking these events.

It was mind-blowing. It was D&D, without the dungeons and the dragons; just the never ending opportunity to create one's existence, serve one's fellow beings and protect and nurture one's environment.

Kumar and Andrew applied to become members of the church and were accepted. And once they understood that worship meant service in the community not in a building; they saw that they were to minister to people in their own environments. And with the relevant college education, they could become chaplains in the Coast Guard. So they signed up with a university for distant studies in philosophy and theology; and when they were off-duty, it was study time.

After Kumar obtained the bachelor's degree, he enrolled for a Masters in Comparative Religion. In his studies he explored the variety of cultural attitudes that constitute the human understanding of God; and underneath cultural differences, he found universal reverence for divine goodness, mercy and compassion. And that reconciled him to the anomaly of being the offspring of Hindu parents and growing up in a Christian culture.

After his university studies, he completed the requirements for becoming a chaplain and began to minister to those on board ship. In this work, he found his true calling and was happy.

He wrote the following article to help those who had queries about belief.

Chaplain, Combat Service Support Group-1

ONE CORPS, MANY RELIGIONS

The Marine Corps' population is becoming increasingly diverse regarding ethnicity, gender, and religion. As Marines and Sailors from various backgrounds encounter this diversity, I am often asked, "Why are there so many religions?" and "What do Christians believe about people of other faiths?" Sometimes people will tell me, "I used to believe in God, but I just can't believe that a good God would send most people to hell." While space does not permit a complete response to these questions, I address the latter two in part by presenting three different viewpoints around which modern religious thinkers gather: the exclusive, inclusive, and pluralistic positions.

The exclusive perspective is the one with which people are probably most familiar. Exclusivists believe that their particular religion is the only true religion and that participation in their religion is the only possible manner by which one can attain salvation (have a relationship with God; go to heaven when he or she dies, etc…). Exclusivists also believe that since their religion is the only vehicle for salvation, those who are outside of their religion will be damned (separated from God, condemned to hell, etc…). Exclusivist Christians might therefore believe that only those who believe in Christ's atoning death or only those who were baptized into the church can have access to salvation.

Inclusivists share the exclusivist viewpoint that theirs is the only true religion, but extend the possibility of salvation to others beyond those who explicitly belong to their particular religion. Christian theologian Sir Norman Anderson has suggested the possibility that some, who have never heard of Christianity might, by their circumstances of life, call upon God whom they dimly perceive and that God saves them based on the atoning work of Christ even though they have not heard of him. Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner has argued that God wants all people to be saved. Therefore, those who have no knowledge of the Christian message and are not baptized members of the church can still open their hearts to experience the reality of God's grace. For Rahner, this is an implicit act of accepting God's giving of God's self to humanity in Christ. Those who do such should then be considered anonymous Christians – for they have accepted Christ without explicit knowledge of Christ.

Theologian John Hick has advanced the pluralist view. He has observed that each of the major world religions has its own history of producing devout, spiritual, ethical, and saintly people. Each also has had its share of sinners and dark episodes such as the crusades and inquisitions in Christianity. He has also observed that there seems to be a similar model of salvation being advanced in the great world religions: they identify the miserable condition of ordinary human life and offer the possibility of a better and more meaningful life by inviting followers to transition from a self-centered existence to one centered in God or transcendence. This meaningful existence culminates in an ultimate fulfillment (e.g., Heaven or Nirvana). These observations have led him to reject the notion that only one particular religion is true. Instead, each offers a context within which one may cultivate a relationship with God.

An objection to Hick's position is that the different religions assert contradictory claims about the nature of reality; therefore at least some must be in error. Hick has responded by asserting that all religions are culturally conditioned responses to a transcendent reality that each partially perceives. One faith may claim that God is personal and another may claim that the ultimate is non-personal. Each claiming something from his own experience is not exhausting the mystery of what God is in God's self.

A second objection to the pluralistic view is that if salvation is accessible to those within several of the religious traditions, then an exclusive understanding within these traditions must not be true in a literal or factual sense. For Christians, this means abandoning the understanding that salvation comes only from an explicit belief in Christ's atoning death. A Christian pluralist believes instead that salvation happens through one's relationship with God. As a Christian, a pluralist experiences this relationship within the Eucharistic community that gathers together to worship God, celebrate the sacraments, and proclaim God's love revealed in the life of ministry, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. As a pluralist, he or she acknowledges that his or her experience does not preclude the possibility of God's saving activity with others. Devout followers of other faiths may also experience God within their sacred space and in the context of their sacred stories.

I present these three positions not to persuade anyone to adopt a particular one, but merely to raise the awareness that not all thoughtful

religious persons have the same view of those who fall outside of their particular religion. As a Chaplain, I enjoy the diversity of perspectives within the Corps. My own faith has been enriched through my encounter with faithful people from different religious back grounds. I invite all of us to respect our differences and genuinely try to understand the beliefs and practices of others before passing judgment.[6]

Kantha sent this article to her sister in Botswana and when Jaya received it, she was very proud to be the aunt of such an intelligent and articulate person. Being South African, she immediately saw his paper as an account of religious racism: exclusivists being rabid racists and inclusivists, paternalistic. Only pluralists had an understanding of democracy. She knew her nephew had to be a pluralist. As she saw it, she was fighting social and political apartheid here and he was fighting religious apartheid there. It was the legacy of being discriminated against.

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Whenever Vani came home from school these days, she found her mother watching videos of old movies of the 1940s and 1950s that she picked up on her shopping trips. And again there were times when she did not recognize Vani or Ashok.

On one occasion, when Ashok came into the kitchen, she stared at him and began crying. "Oh Mohan, you've come back. You are going to be with me after all."

As she came towards him, she began to wobble but he caught her before she fell. She was not too steady on her legs these days. He put her into a chair, and she apologized, "My leg suddenly went numb." She was going through the menopause and, at first, Ashok thought these could be side effects.

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[6] Author: LT Pratik K. Ray, Chaplain, Combat Service Support Group-1

But her lapses of memory, feelings of numbness and unsteadiness persisted even afterwards. It was clear she had to see a doctor. After the medical examination, the doctor sent her for X-rays and it was discovered that she had developed a brain tumour: it was cancerous. That meant surgery.

So Kantha was hospitalized, put through all kinds of pre-operation procedures and had to down all kinds of dreadful medicinal draughts. On the day before the operation, Amrita came back from Indiana, where she and David were studying, to sit with her mother, pray for her and comfort Vani, who was very brave, but most thankful for her sister's support.

After the surgery, Kantha went into intensive care, and after several days was removed to a ward. When Amrita saw that her mother was growing stronger, she went back to Indiana. She was in her final year and when she graduated, she and Dave would be back and she would apply for a teaching post in St Louis.

Kantha remained in hospital for almost a month undergoing post-op examinations and tests. When she came home she was no longer the same woman. Now an invalid, she could no longer walk and had to have a wheel chair. And what was most painful, especially for her husband, she no longer had control over her bodily functions. Like a baby, she was dependent on others to clean and change her. Ashok could not control his disgust. He often yelled at Kantha and scolded her.

She said nothing and submitted to his assistance like a child. It was difficult to know what she was feeling or thinking; she did not seem present. Ashok brought in a hospital bed, settled his wife in a separate room and hired a nurse to take care of her during the day. He had to cope at night and it was not pleasant. It was humiliating. In Calcutta, this would not have been his responsibility.

And his discomfort was intensified by the cost of it all– doctors' bills, hospital bills, medication costs and now having to pay a nurse. He was constantly on the phone arguing with the insurance company about payments, about restrictions placed on what they would cover and the percentage of costs for which they were responsible. It was driving him crazy.

Deborah, the registered nurse who took care of Kantha during the day, was an energetic and kindly person. She would bundle up

her charge, buckle her up in the front seat of her car, put her wheel chair in the boot, and drive off with her to a shopping centre, a park or the zoo. Then she would wheel her around and chatter away. Kantha was very comfortable with Deborah who did her best to shelter her from all unpleasantness.

Kantha's daughter, Vani, was also a great comfort. Vani had graduated from high school and was now enrolled in the music department at university. When she came home from college, and Deborah had gone for the day, she sat with her mother and read to her. And she watched her favourite movies with her. As these were musicals of the 1940s, Vani quite enjoyed them too. She thought Nelson Eddy very handsome; he and Jeanette MacDonald always ended up happily ever after. Vani found herself humming the songs of Victor Herbert, Sigmund Romberg and Oscar Hammerstein – *Ah, Sweet mystery of Life … Wanting you … The Indian Love Call ...*

Vani also wrote to her mother's sister, Jaya, who had returned to South Africa from Botswana after Nelson Mandela's release from Pollsmoor Prison.

Official apartheid was coming to an end and a new constitution was being drawn up in South Africa. Looking forward to life in a democracy, Jaya, was now teaching at a school in Gazankulu, one of the former "Homelands" – "self-governing" territories that were set aside under apartheid separate development for various African ethnic groups. Jaya wanted desperately to go to her sister and was saving up so she could make the trip. Vani had written that Kantha was much changed; her illness had robbed her of her independence – she was in and out of hospital, a ghost of herself. Jaya was reminded of her mother.

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Jaya arrived in St Louis in July 1993, at the beginning of the three week school recess in South Africa. She would have to be back on duty in the last week of the month. When she arrived, Kumar was

waiting for her at the airport. His mother had had a relapse and he was back in St Louis. Kumar drove his aunt to his parents' home and after Jaya was shown her room and had refreshed herself, he drove her and his sisters to the hospital.

Kantha was greatly changed and Amrita, Kumar and Vani were grateful that Jaya did not react to their mother's gaunt look and shaved head. She just seemed so very glad to see her sister; she kissed her and sat down next to her bed. They didn't talk; Kantha was weak and couldn't really concentrate on what was being said. But she kept her eyes on her sister and it was clear she was comforted by her presence. The nurse advised them not to stay long and after a little while was back to usher them out. Jaya asked the nurse if she could come back the next day to sit with Kantha.

Kumar explained that this was his aunt who had come all the way from South Africa to see her sister. Jaya said she wanted to be with her sister; that was all, nothing more. She would not try to engage her in conversation. She just wanted to be with her. The nurse said it would be fine as long as Jaya did not try to talk and tire her.

Kumar drove them home where he introduced Jaya to his father who had come home from work while they were at the hospital. Amrita and Kumar reported to him on their mother's condition and then left; Kumar was staying with Amrita and David while in St Louis.

Then Jaya sat down to dinner with Ashok and Vani. Ashok had ordered in a pizza. He spoke about Kantha's illness and helplessness and complained about his struggle with the insurance company and cover that did not include every aspect of treatment. The extremely high costs of hospitalization and medical care were a great burden on him.

After dinner, Jaya excused herself and went to the room that had been prepared for her. She was quite tired after her long flight.

The next morning, Vani drove her aunt to the hospital and went up to the ward with her. Kantha was asleep. Vani kissed her and then left for the university. Jaya settled in a chair next to the bed and pulled out her book. She had become a Salman Rushdie fan

and was now reading *The Satanic Verses*. The furore that the book had caused and the threat of death had sent the author into hiding. Nothing like that had happened to the Monty Python group for the *Life of Brian.*

Jaya saw the persecution of Rushdie as clear indication that fanaticism arises out of the lack of self-assurance and confidence in one's own beliefs. So anything perceived to be disrespectful leads to violent assertion of authority. As far as she was concerned, violence does not restore belief or respect – it only affirms the power to destroy and is simply confirmation of insecurity. Jaya loved Monty Python and Salman Rushdie and enjoyed the way in which they turned everything on its head and challenged conventional beliefs – challenged blind adherence to faith.

Kantha had woken up and lain there silently watching her sister smiling and laughing as she read. This was like old times at home in Durban; Jaya with her head stuck in a book quite oblivious of the real world and her sister's involvement in it. Jaya looked up, caught her sister's eye, came over and kissed her. There was no need to talk; they remained in a companionable silence just glad of each other's presence. Jaya stayed with her sister the whole day, helping her with her little needs, watching while she was awake and reading when she slept.

In her waking moments, looking at her sister, Kantha could see that Jaya had not changed. She lived in the world of ideas and had no personal understanding of human relationships. She was awkward, had no real friends and traversed life as an observer. Kantha wondered what she would make of Ashok – probably treat him as she had Mohan – an intruder into their lives. Kantha felt sorry for her sister; she had to be lonely.

And as Jaya looked at Kantha, it pained her to see her suffering and to think of all she had been through and she prized the independence of her life as a loner.

After a few days, Kantha was allowed to go home and her nurse, Deborah, was back to look after her during the day. Deborah's matter of fact way of handling Kantha's personal needs indicated great compassion for her patient. Her gentle, kindly care was

more than just professionalism and efficiency; it was genuine dedication. Jaya was impressed and very grateful. Now Deborah took both sisters with her on little outings. When she went off at the end of the day, she left her patient in the care of her husband and daughter.

And what a difference! Jaya was horrified to hear Ashok shouting at his wife for her incontinence and for having to minister to her. She would go to her sister afterwards to comfort her and would find Vani already there and Kantha calmly reassuring her daughter. It surprised Jaya; either Kantha was used to the abuse or she felt guilty about putting her husband through this unpleasantness.

When they were not on their little jaunts with Deborah, Jaya sat with her sister and watched old movies. One day she asked Deborah to drop them off at a cinema and she took her sister in to watch *Jurassic Park,* recently out on the circuit. Afterwards she was shocked that she had taken someone so ill to see such a film. She realized that Kantha had probably accepted it simply because her sister was enthusiastic about it. Jaya was ashamed of her thoughtlessness and could not forgive herself. She was no better than Ashok.

She tried to make up for it by watching with her sister, all her Nelson Eddy-Jeanette MacDonald films. That took them back to pleasant memories of their childhood in Pretoria. But Jaya remained penitent.

The day before Jaya's return flight to South Africa, Kantha suffered another relapse and was rushed to hospital. When Jaya went to wish her goodbye the next day, she promised to return in December when schools were in recess again.

Looking at her sister, Kantha could only see her disconnection with reality. It was the same as when they were teenagers and their mother was dying.

Jaya went to visit their mother in the hospital – dressed in her tennis togs! Her mother was lying there almost comatose, unable to speak, but Jaya could not or would not see that she was dying. Their mother's sister was sitting outside, and as Jaya came out of the ward, her aunt looked up at her and shook her head sadly. But

Jaya, annoyed that her aunt was sitting there in mourning, simply went off to her tennis. Not long after, she was called out of the courts by Uncle MJ, who had just come from the hospital. It came as a great shock to her to learn from him that her mother had died. She went back to the hospital with him and it was only when she looked at her mother's lifeless face that she understood that her mother was dead. And she broke down.

Now here she was talking about returning in December; she could not see that her sister was dying.

A week after she arrived back in Gazankulu, Jaya received a phone call; Kantha had died that morning. In her last moments, Amrita had asked her mother to accept Christ as her saviour and had baptized her.

Through her tears, Jaya had to admire her sister.

Kantha was mother supreme; her last act in life was her affirmation of her children.

In Memoriam

you
live
on
in memory
as long as
a living mind
remembers
a loving heart
reveres
you
live
on

BY MUTHAL NAIDOO:

Biography

*Stories from the Asiatic Bazaar (*2007)
The Keshwars from Dundee (2011)
A Life in Fact and Fiction (2016, Autobiography)
Ramy Pillay:Yuga Purushar (2016)
Sooboo (2017)

Children's Stories

Emerging Heroes (2012, Children's Stories)
Rhulani's Dilemma (2013, A Novella for Teenagers)

Essays

Metaphoric Being (2014,)
Mirroring Nature (2015,)
The Paradox of Being (2015,)
A Medley: Women, Writing, Freedom (2017,)
My Search for Meaning (2017,)

Miscellaneous

A Little Book of Tamil Religious Rituals (2004)

Poems and Plays

WIP Theatre Plays (2008)
Kaliyuga (2014, Prose-poems)
Pocket Poems (2016)

Stories and Novellas

Jail Birds and Others	(2004, Short Stories)
Gansie in Kammaland	(2011, linked stories)
New Old Ways	(2017, short stories by Sharmini Brooks, Mala Gounden, Muthal Naidoo, Sudhira Sham, Tom Swart)
Finding Hassan	(2017, novel)

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heroes

not anti-heroes

romance

not reality

nobility

to dazzle the eyes

and consistency,

consistency,

consistency,

cause and effect

we need the lies

Dr Jekyll

not Mr Hyde

the art of fiction

the fiction of art