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A Gentle Man

Mary Anne Mohanraj

“Let no one cherish anything, inasmuch as the loss of what is beloved is hard. There are no fetters for him who knows neither pleasure nor pain. From affection arises sorrow; from affection arises fear. To him who is free from affection there is no sorrow. Whence fear?” – Gautama Buddha

Suneel wakes up hours before his family. This is normal, although today is not normal, today is a special day. Most days he makes tea, reads the paper, eats some toast without butter before going to work at his store. Sushila, his wife, never wakes until after nine. She likes to stay up late, talking on the phone with her friends. When the children were younger, he was the one who woke them, who ironed their Catholic school uniforms and put out milk and cereal. But now the children are able to wake themselves, and only Riddhi, his youngest, still sleeps at home.

It is Riddhi's birthday today. Tonight all of their friends will gather to celebrate his youngest daughter's seventeenth birthday. She has just finished high school, and plans to start at the local community college in the fall. Not as smart as her older sister, no. His sweet Riddhi will never join Raji at Harvard. Just as well, considering what Raji is doing there, running around in public with white boys. It turns his stomach.

He drinks his tea, savoring the taste of cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, with shreds of ginger so fierce and strong. He's tasted the tea in American stores—weak, sugary brews. Diluted, adulterated. Pathetic. His wife claims she likes it that way, but she still makes his strong, the way they drink it back home. She knows that his standards haven't changed, that he still believes in doing things right. When she is with him, she drinks tea the way he does. But when she's on her own—who knows?

Sushila is still asleep; she has stayed up late, cooking for the party, making curries that will taste better the second day. She has made beef curries and pork and chicken for their friends, who are all Catholic like her; vegetables for him, the lone Buddhist. He has sometimes been tempted by the smell of her meat curries, but the thought of actually eating meat turns his stomach. He has not had meat since he was twenty, back in 1946. Two years before they married; thirty-four years ago. He has held firm to his convictions. If he ate meat now, it would make him ill.

He can taste already her brinjal curry, savor the spicy coconut sambol and the pungent pickled limes. His mouth is almost burning, though the fire is wholly imagined, and he takes a long drink of tea to soothe it. He chokes on a piece of ginger, and coughs for a few moments, his whole body shaking. Then it's gone, swallowed down, and he is at rest again.

His wife is an excellent cook; none can deny that, at least, though he can guess what else they say about her. She won't be awake until eleven at least. But there is a lot to do between now and then. He washes the cup, dries it, puts it away.

He calls the store; no problems. His assistant is a solid man, his cousin's friend, and reasonably trustworthy, although he wouldn't give the man access to the store's bank account. He knows that you can't really trust anyone here, in America, not the way you could back home, in Ceylon. It's just not the same; family and friendship don't mean the same things here that they did back there. He has learned that the hard way. Still, the man works hard, and the store takes a lot of hard work.

The store has fed and clothed him and his family; in it he sells saris, lengths of shining fabric in silk and chiffon with bright gold threads. Suneel started the shop with money saved up from work in Colombo, the capital, back when they were newlyweds. He had saved enough to bring his wife and young

children to America, enough to buy a partnership in a new sari store, one of the first in the country, and then worked hard enough to buy the store outright a few years later. He's proud of the store, and it's doing well, but who knows for how long? When they first arrived, it seemed that their white neighbors shared their values; knew the value of hard work, the importance of family, of decency. He'd thought it a good place to raise children, a place of opportunities. But in recent years, America has changed, changed completely. Nothing here is as it was, nothing lasts. In this country, everything looks bright and beautiful and substantial, but it is so often a sham, with nothing real supporting it. Not like back home.

Time to start cleaning. Sushila does the light cleaning—she looks lovely wandering around the house in a simple green sari, feather duster in her hand. But ask her to scrub the bathroom tiles, or even move the furniture to vacuum behind it...But he brought her here, after all; against everyone's advice. The first man in his village to go so far from home. It was his vision—America, land of opportunity, a shining bright future for his family. How could he have known that in America, you had to be fabulously rich to afford even a single servant? They are not fabulously rich, and his wife prefers not to think about the dirt that gathers in the corners, under the carpet.

He does not force it on her, though sometimes he is exhausted, coming home from the store only to find the house is so filthy that he cannot stand it. Sometimes he stays up late for nights on end, sweeping and scrubbing and mopping, while she talks on the telephone to her friends. She has so many friends, and they have so much to talk about. Sometimes he wants to take her face and push it down in the bucket of scummy water, just for a moment, just so she knows what she is forcing him to do—but he would never do that. He doesn't even raise his voice when he asks her what she has been doing all day long; he is not that sort of man. The Buddha counsels calm in the face of the vexatious; restraint when in the presence of troublesome souls. He tries to follow the teaching.



An hour later, Suneel is still cleaning, but Riddhi has woken up. She comes down the stairs in her purple pajamas with sleep still crusted in her eyes, hair falling tangled down her back. How many times her mother has told her to brush it with oil and braid it before sleep? She always forgets, like a child. His little one, his delicate angel. She looks just like her mother did when he married her; much the same age as well. So lovely. They sent her to a Catholic girls' high school; both of them had agreed that it was best, after what had happened with Raji. But soon the boys will be swarming around her; even tonight, at the party, the sons of their friends will be drawn to her. His sweet innocent; if he could only keep her a child, safe, forever.

She wraps her arms around his neck as he bends over the bathroom sink, scrubbing at a stubborn stain. "Good morning, Appa." Oh, good morning, my daughter. Happy birthday. I hope you have a very happy birthday today...

Then she's off to eat cereal before starting to help with the cleaning. Dutiful child, not like her sister who had always found some excuse to be out of the house when there was work to be done. Even today—where is she? Has Raji come home to help? No. She'll take the late train from Boston, waltz in the door at four o'clock when the guests have arrived and the work is done. And he'll have to count himself lucky if she comes alone.

So far, Raji has at least kept her shameful behavior with her at college, not brought it home to their house. He's not sure how much it matters, since she isn't discreet enough to keep it a secret. Running around in broad daylight; holding hands and kissing. All of their friends know what she does at night, when her mother calls at eleven o'clock and she isn't in her dorm room. One friend called them from *Australia* to tell them what she had heard—oh, how troubled she was, how concerned about their Raji. Sushila has pleaded with him to do something about it, has raged at him. But what can a father do? Raji has made

her own choices. He will educate her, that is his duty; then she will be on her own.

The heavy cleaning is done. Now there is just a little straightening left. Though soon Sushila will be up with an endless list of errands for him to run. He turns the sofa cushions in the family room, his fingers digging deep into the fabric, threatening to tear. She always has lists for him, and never mind what else he has planned; she never asks—that's yet another of his jobs, after all. To run around after his wife. He deliberately relaxes his hands, breathes deeply, releases the cushions.

He pulls open the curtains to let sunlight into the fading room. Suneel straightens the photos on top of the TV; so many of them. His beautiful wife, laughing at party after party. She likes parties, where she is always surrounded by her female friends. He can imagine the others not in the picture, the ghosts surrounding her. He is standing behind her, there to hold her up, catch her if she falls—the good husband.

There is Raji, so tall and straight and serious. His studious one, always busy alone in her room with her books and paper and paint. He had such hopes for her...all gone, now. And Riddhi, his angel girl, like a flower. Riddhi dancing, like her mother, a twirling burst of colored flame. After her Arangetrum, her graduation dance performance, she stood up on the stage so seriously, and thanked her teachers, her sister, her amma and appa most of all. You could see in her face her sweetness, her love for her family; it was clear from the light shining out of it. You can see it still.

There is a face missing from the photos as well, his son's, Raksha's—but the boy abandoned his family, and all the photos which contained him were thrown out long ago.

It's almost ten—time to wrap Riddhi's presents. Sushila has chosen most of them. Pretty dresses, and one of them not

to be wrapped, since Riddhi will wear it today. A white hand-bag. A dark green sari.

Sushila wore green, the day after they were married. Sitting at the table with him, his mother, his sisters—he remembers how beautiful she looked in that green, how she smiled and blushed when one of his sisters teased her about the night before. His young bride.

He had been so nervous the night before. His friends had been full of coarse advice; he was the first of them to marry; they knew nothing. One of his aunties had pulled him aside—he can't remember now which one it was. She whispered to him: "The girl's more scared than you are." Then she stuck a chicken roll in his hand and went away. The older relatives never remembered that he had given up eating the flesh of animals the year before, when he became a Buddhist. But it was good advice. It had calmed him down, and let him be very patient and gentle with Sushila that night. She had been so vulnerable, so sweet and still as he unwrapped her crimson sari. Afterwards, he had fallen asleep with her small hand held tightly in his own. When he woke, it was still there. Suneel aches even now, at the memory of it.

His fingers continue wrapping, creasing the delicate paper, tearing it, folding it over each gift. Lipstick. Blush. Eyeliner. Small gold earrings. He does not approve of the make-up. His daughter does not need to paint her face to be beautiful. But it's not worth arguing with his wife. He learned that long ago.

The earrings are good; a girl should have some nice jewelry, for beauty and security. He has been saving money; a little here and there put into a special bank account. He started when Raji was born—money for his daughters' dowry, for their jewelry. Now who knows whom Raji will marry, if she ever does. Running around with American boys. Taking them back to her dorm room for anyone to see—and they run and tell her shamed parents, of course, and all their friends. Sushila screams at the girl, hits her, but it does no good. Violence never does. Raji will find her own path, away from her family, and the jewelry

will go to Riddhi instead. It is just as well. A girl cannot have too much security.

One present left, but he will wrap it later.

At eleven, Sushila wakes. He brings her tea, and sits by the side of the bed while she drinks it. She has a list of instructions for him: buy chicken for the rolls, wine and beer, some large prawns; she's decided to make another curry. It will be expensive, more than they'd planned to spend, but he can work late tomorrow and make up the difference. She does not ask what he thinks.

She finishes her list, and gets out of bed. Sushila wears a thin white cotton nightgown. Her heavy breasts show through the sheer fabric, her waist and swell of hips, the darkness at the juncture of her thighs. Her long hair falls thickly down her back. He stirs at the sight of her; he often does.

Riddhi is working in the front yard, trimming the roses, mowing the lawn. He can hear the roar of the mower through the open window, and knows that if he were to close the bedroom door and pull his wife back to the bed, Riddhi would not hear them. He considers it—if he did draw her to the bed, Sushila would not protest. She never protests; she is always willing, always available, the accommodating wife. But she will lie still beneath him, with her head turned away and her eyes closed. She will be still like a statue. It is the only time she is awake and not in motion—when he is moving in her, above her.

On that first night, their wedding night, Suneel had been so gentle with her, but had not managed to coax a response from her. He had told himself that it would get better with time, that she hardly knew him, that he was a stranger to her. But it had not gotten better, and so only rarely had he let himself sink inside her. Once was a night when Sushila had gone shopping with her friends, and had come back late—so late! Nine-thirty at night, and while it was true that the mall

was open until nine, he had not been able to believe that she had only been shopping.

His anger had risen up in him then, and he had almost dragged her to their bed. He had wanted to hit her, wanted to hurt her, and he had come so close...Yet he had remembered the words of the Buddha, and had restrained himself. He had taken her fiercely, but without causing her pain. He had stayed true to himself, to his beliefs, and she had never known how angry he had been. Sometimes he wondered if that anger had infected Raji, conceived on that night.

Sushila raises her arms, stretches, displaying the dark thatch of hair under her arms, and he bites his lip, drawing blood. He wants her. She is his wife, and he has every right to take her. But he knows that if he takes her back to bed now, she will not want him. She will not want him. He lets her go to her shower, undisturbed.

He drives too fast on the highway. His family depends on him, he has a duty to them, and so he wears his seat belt—but he still drives too fast. A car speeds up, cuts in front of him, and he resists the urge to shove his foot down on the gas, rush forward and crash...that would be an extremely violent act.

Suneel forswore violence thirty-four years ago, and since that day he has not eaten fish or meat, not killed a spider or crushed an ant. He has never raised his hand to his wife or children, even though there was a time when Sushila begged him to discipline their son.

At sixteen, Raksha had fallen in with a bad crowd, taken to disappearing at night, climbing out windows and down trees, meeting with his friends. Eventually they'd heard about it, learned that the boy was spending his time smoking marijuana in a dark room with other teens, having sex with one girl or another, listening to music that preached revolution, revolution and sex, sex that they called "love." Those children had no idea what love was, but they were everywhere that summer, smoking

and drinking and running around late at night, singing. America had never seemed as alien as it did that year. Then came the rumors that Raksha had gotten a white girl pregnant, that she'd had an abortion or a baby, that she had disappeared or died—but maybe they were just rumors. No one seemed sure.

They had confined Raksha to his room, they had argued with him, his mother had screamed and wept—but for nothing. Raksha had grown sullen and silent. Finally he'd left, just disappeared into the night like a thief, without even a note. Sushila has never forgiven her husband for not being harsher with their son. She hasn't hesitated to discipline Raji, bringing the slim bamboo cane down on the girl's back, but it has done little good.

He has never hit anyone. He avoids harsh speech, and animosity of thought. All the Buddhism he knows he learned from a friend in school so long ago, and from what he can teach himself by studying books. He has learned at least a little after years of study, and knows that refraining from violent thought or action is essential if one wishes to reach the calm of enlightenment.

He removes his foot from the gas pedal. He strives for a peaceful state of mind, though he knows it will not come.

When he comes home, she screams at him. Sushila is a woman given to screeching, though he could never have guessed that when they married. He knew she had life and passion in her, but it seemed so joyous. She was sparkling then, like sunlight on river water. Laughter bubbled out of her. She even got his littlest sister to laugh once or twice, ugly Medha who had never managed to find a husband. Medha, who has ended up alone, living in a sad little house on the beach, battered by salty ocean winds, with only a maid for company. Without children.

Perhaps Raji will suffer the same fate, since she has apparently turned away from their society. Perhaps she too will end up ugly and alone. Once the thought of his daughter in

such straits might have tormented him, but he has been hurt too many times, betrayed over and over. His heart is closed to her; he cannot bring himself to care.

The first step to enlightenment, perhaps, to serenity. *When touched by happiness or sorrow, the wise show no elation or dejection; the wise become serene like unto a deep, calm and crystal-clear lake.* He suspects that he will never find it, but he longs for that serenity.

Serenity is difficult to find when Sushila is shouting that he has brought the wrong kind of chicken. Does he do this to her deliberately? Is he trying to torment her? His neck is taut with tension, his shoulders tight, but she cannot see that—he is much taller than she is. He bows his head until she is finished. Then he goes out again, to get the right kind of chicken.

When he comes back a half hour later, with the chicken, she does not thank him. She is busy cooking again, and two of his sisters have arrived as well to help. Their husbands are working, and will arrive later. The women are laughing in the kitchen, gossiping and trading bits of cooking wisdom. They ignore him, but he is used to that. The house is clean; the food will be ready on time; she needs nothing more of him. He goes to wrap his daughter's final present.

He takes the photo from a manila envelope he's kept hidden in a drawer. He arranged for it months ago; his wife has no idea. It's a good photo. There is a frame for it as well, heavy silver. He slips the photo into the frame, attaches the back, tightens the screws. It will not slip away. For a moment, he hesitates. This is home that he is holding in his hands—but he has not been back in so long, and sometimes he hears disturbing news of strange events. There had been the riots, in '58. And since then, scattered violence, here and there. Even some deaths. His gut twists for a moment, but then eases again. The violence is transient; it must be. It will pass. He knows what home really is, and what it isn't. Suneel wraps the photo with

steady hands in white tissue paper and places it in a box; wraps the box in shining red foil paper. It will glow from among the other presents in their decorous wrappings. Perhaps Riddhi will open it first—that would be a nice surprise.

Riddhi knocks on the bedroom door, calling to him—“Appa!” He is startled, and calls to her to wait. Just another minute securing it with scotch tape—there. It’s done. He puts it with the other presents and goes to open the door. His daughter grabs his hand, drags him to the dining room window. “Look, Appa—it’s raining!”

It’s true. The rain is slanting down over the lawn, spattering against the circles of metal folding chairs; it will be a large party, perhaps a hundred people. Too many to seat comfortably all in the house. He had spent at least an hour mowing the back lawn and setting up the chairs yesterday, and now his daughter is panicking because they are getting wet.

“It’s just a summer shower; it’ll pass. Don’t worry. Go get dressed; people will be here soon.”

Raji would have argued, would have wondered if they should make plans to bring the chairs inside somehow, would have at least pointed out that it was still two hours until anyone was due to arrive and that their friends were always an hour late in any case. Raji had never agreed with him; she had always argued. Once, he had thought that was good, a sign of a strong spirit. Now he knows better.

Riddhi smiles in response to his words and says, “Okay.” She goes upstairs to get ready; she trusts and obeys him. He would do almost anything to preserve that trust.

Suneel showers and gets dressed. He has trouble finding the tie he wants; Sushila has rearranged the closet again. He is looking for his favorite tie, the dark blue one with the thin white diagonal lines. It reminds him of river water, white foam on the darkness. He reaches back into the closet, and pulls out a handful of old ties, ties that he hasn’t seen in years. One of

them is bright red, shockingly bright, even after all this time.

His son was fifteen that day. Raksha had given him that tie on Father's day. Raji was only four then, and Riddhi was just two. Raksha had been born a scant nine months after their wedding; they had waited a long time for more children. Sometimes he wondered whether Sushila had actually wanted children, if she had been taking something to prevent them; motherhood had never really suited her. Maybe she had, and then had become careless as the long years stretched past, stopped worrying about it, and so he'd gotten his girls at last. She had her secrets, his wife. He'd never know the truth of it. Let it go.

Raksha had given him the tie on Father's Day. Such a bright boy he was, and yet already in trouble. Already running around with the wrong crowd, but they didn't know. His parents didn't know—how could they? Suneel was working seventy, eighty hours a week at the store in those days, and he was so tired at night. Sushila kept the family fed, and cleaned up a little, but she was busy herself with two young ones after so long without. She didn't spend much time on her son, who had already grown so tall. When Raksha had given him that tie, reached to hug him, had there been alcohol on his breath? Had there been marijuana smoke thick in his clothes? If so, neither of his parents had noticed.

When his grades started slipping, they had scolded Raksha, told him to try harder. Never doubted the boy when he said he was studying at the library late at night, trying to improve the grades. It had never occurred to the father to distrust his son. Adults could betray you, as he well knew, but children? Children were the light of life.

He should have paid more attention to the Buddha's example—the prince who walked away from his young wife and infant son to seek truth and an ending to false desire.

When Raksha ran off, they'd been frantic with worry, called the police, their friends across the country. The boy was found in Chicago, months later; he'd hitched his way across the country. Raksha lived with white friends for a while, then even-

tually found a job, but refused to come home or answer their letters. He never told them why he had run away. They had given him everything, and he had thrown it all back in their faces. Finally Sushila, enraged, had demanded that they cut him off entirely, weeping with her frustration. He had quietly agreed. They were only acknowledging a separation that was already final.

They still received reports from friends in Chicago. Raksha had settled down eventually, had even married a Tamil girl from a good family, a professional family. Married above him, actually; he had always been a handsome boy. There had been some trouble, but it was eventually sorted out. Suneel has picked up the phone to call him, a hundred times, but every time, he puts it down again.

Raksha has a daughter now, Chaya, a girl who will never know her father's parents. His son is lost to him. *For the sake of oneself, one should not long for a son, wealth or a kingdom.* He had never truly wanted wealth or a kingdom. He places the red tie back on the rack, finally finds the dark blue tie, soberly knots it around his neck.

Sushila has showered, is dressing now. He straightens the bedroom, pretending not to watch her, listening to her talking nonsense. She slips her arms into a dark purple blouse, and calls him to hook up the back. His fingers do not linger on the soft flesh exposed there; he is deft and quick, after so many years of practice. Thirty-two years of marriage. He married her when he was twenty-two and she was sixteen; he is fifty-four now, a good age for a man to ease back, to rest in the comfort of his family's love and affection.

She tucks one end of her dark green sari into her half-slip, and he takes the other end in his hands, holding it taut as she folds the fabric in front of her, making the pleats that will allow her to walk freely, to dance later. She will call him to dance, and he will gently refuse, as always. He does not dance.

She will dance with her friends, his sisters—not immodestly, of course. Only with women; never with men. But she will laugh freely, will be flushed with pleasure, will lean towards the women and whisper silly secrets in their ears, making them blush and giggle. Exuberant, yet unobjectionable, as always. But the public does not always reflect the private, and he has always known what really goes on.

Suneel is not sure when he first realized that his wife, his beautiful, innocent-seeming Sushila, was betraying him. The first clue was undoubtedly in bed, but he was so ignorant then; how long was it going on before he noticed? Before he realized that while she was willing, she was never eager for him? Before he realized that there was more than maidenly shyness in her lack of response to him?

In another kind of woman, perhaps that would have been normal, but not his Sushila, who laughed with her whole heart, who sometimes had taken the children out to dance in the rain, and who bit her lip and crossed her thighs as they watched the romantic scenes in American movies, the woman in soft focus, lips parted, clasped tight in strong arms. Somewhere in Sushila was a response, but not to him. Never to him.

He had never caught her at it. Never caught her sneaking out, or inviting someone in. He hadn't tried, hadn't wanted to. If he had caught her, he would have been tempted from the path. If he had caught her, he might have swung a heavy fist at her lying face, might have beaten her lover into a bloody pulp. And so he always called first if he were coming home unexpectedly early, or in the middle of the day. He had trouble sleeping at night, and so took pills so that he would not know if she ever slipped out of their bed. Suneel had done his best to never know the truth. He had no real evidence; he had tried not to know—yet he was sure. He knew.

He would have done better not to love her at all, not to desire her. *Let no one cherish anything, inasmuch as the loss of what is beloved is hard.* But after thirty-two years, he has not managed it. Sushila is still his wife, and beautiful to him, and

every night he fights his desire to reach for the woman who was the first to betray him.

She pulls the fabric from his hands; she is done pleating it. Sushila wraps it once around her body, and then crosses it up over her full breasts, over a shoulder to drape across her back and bare waist. He pins the heavy fabric in place at her shoulder, and she walks out of the room, still chattering about something, words which he can make no sense of.

The rain stops, and he goes out with a dishcloth to wipe the chairs dry. No one has arrived yet—they will start arriving at 4:30, 4:45. They will eat the appetizers, they will drink the wine, they will have a roaring good time. Eventually, they will go away, leaving a scattering of presents behind, and then the family will sit down with Riddhi to open them. It will be late—maybe eleven, or twelve or even later. Riddhi will be tired; they will all be. Their reactions will be muted, which is really a shame. He wants to see the looks on their faces as she opens his present. He wants it badly. He does not want to wait.

Maybe he won't.

By five, the party is going strong—all of their close friends have arrived, and only a few more people are straggling in. Riddhi is lovely in a pale cream summer dress, with slim straps baring too much of her skin. The boys cluster around her, and she tilts back her head and laughs, delightedly, at what they say to her. What are they saying to her?

Suneel cannot wait any longer.

"Everyone—everyone, can I have your attention, please?"

His voice is not loud—it never is. But the word is passed along, and slowly the crowd turns to face him, gathering across the lawn, brown faces cheerful in the sunlight.

"I have an announcement—but first, I have a special present for my daughter." They gather closer, drawn by the word, "present," wondering what it could be. Everyone loves getting presents. Riddhi comes to stand next to him, and Raji

and Sushila are near as well. Sushila looks puzzled, but not worried. Why should she be? He has never given her reason to worry.

He pulls the red foil wrapped present out from behind his back, hands it to his daughter. The crowd murmurs. Riddhi smiles and takes it. She starts peeling off the tape carefully, slowly, and Raji shouts, "Just tear it!" Riddhi continues slowly, though, slipping the foil off and then letting it fall to the fresh-mown grass. She opens the box, slides the frame out of it, unwraps the tissue paper. Riddhi looks at the picture of the handsome young man, bewildered.

Her father raises his voice now, louder than any there have ever heard it before. He wants to be sure everyone hears this.

"You've come to celebrate my daughter's birthday, and I thank you! Now, please, join me in celebrating her engagement as well!"

The murmurs have grown louder, and Raji is looking furious. She knows that Riddhi has known nothing of this, but the crowd is not so certain. Surely they would have heard something of this before? Some rumor? But he is a very private man, after all, and the family has had such trouble in the past...maybe he wanted to keep it secret until it was all settled. But how nice to have the girl settled so young; how lovely! The whispers fly through the crowd; he keeps talking.

"She will not be going to school in the fall; instead, Riddhi will be traveling this summer to Ceylon, where she will marry Ashok, the son of one of my good friends, a cloth merchant in Colombo. Ashok is twenty-two, just the age I was when I married my own wife. I know he and Riddhi will be very happy—so please, join me in wishing them every joy and happiness!"

The crowd is caught up in his fervor, his excitement, and they begin to cheer, to press forward and congratulate Riddhi, shaking her hand, exclaiming over the handsomeness of the photo. The noise grows louder and louder, and he slips

away in the confusion.

He sits alone on his marriage bed, drinking a glass of whiskey. It is the first taste of alcohol he has had in thirty-two years. He doesn't like it, but he drinks it down. His hands are shaking.

Later he will have to face Sushila, but he will convince her easily. Ashok's family is quite wealthy, and the boy is a very good catch. Riddhi would never have made a good student, and Sushila will be happy enough to be finally done with raising children, once she gets past the shock. Besides, all the agreements are made; the family is preparing in Colombo for the wedding. All that remains is to ready the bride and buy their plane tickets for the wedding. Sushila won't back out now.

Raji will rage, but she no longer has any power in this family. She gave that up herself. If Riddhi supported her, then perhaps, but otherwise...

The door slams open. Raji storms in, as expected.

"What do you think you're doing?" She is almost screaming, almost wailing. It is strangely satisfying to see so much emotion in her; to know that he has caused it. When Raji was younger, she was always bursting into the store, full of some scheme or another, but she has been distant for so long now, wrapped up in her life away from them. This is the passionate daughter he remembers.

"I'm doing what's best for Riddhi." He could chide her for her tone of voice, but chooses not to. Why bother? It has been a long time since she has shown any respect for her father.

"What's best for Riddhi? What's best for her is to go to school, to learn to support herself, to stop being dependent on you! Not to be packed off to Ceylon and married to a total stranger—she doesn't even speak Tamil!" Raji's hands are balled fists on her hips, and she leans forward, as if she

longs to hit him.

He weighs twice what she does; he could flatten her with one slap across her insolent face. He sits still on the bed, and keeps his voice calm. "She'll learn, and they speak English. She'll be well taken care of there." It's a good family; of course they'll take care of Riddhi.

Raji looks furious, as if she is about to explode. "She doesn't need to be taken care of, Appa—she needs to learn to take care of herself."

For a moment, he wonders if this is true, if he is making a mistake. Could Riddhi be happier with an education, with the ability to take care of herself? A few more years as a child... And yet, hasn't he seen what that leads to? If he doesn't take care of her now, won't she simply ruin herself, and break his heart in the process? For a moment, he isn't sure—and now Riddhi is quietly entering the room. She stops by the door, looking so pale, almost white. He could have been wrong.

But Raji keeps shouting, "You're just tired of taking care of her—you just want to get rid of her. You got rid of Raksha, and you're happy to be rid of me. All you want is your precious serenity—all you want is to be left alone!"

What nonsense. Doesn't she know that he has always loved them more than he has loved serenity and wisdom? Wasn't that his first mistake, and his last? "Be quiet, Raji. You don't know what you're talking about." Suddenly Suneel is weary; tired of dealing with this child, this stranger. What has happened to his fiery daughter, the girl who used to stretch her arms wide and say that she loved him *this* much? This girl in front of him—she understands nothing. "If Riddhi tells me she doesn't want to go, of course she doesn't have to." He gestures, and Raji turns to see her sister in the doorway.

"Riddhi, you can't let him do this to you!" She is shouting at her sister now.

Riddhi sighs. "Raji...go talk to Amma, okay?"

"But..."

"Please?"

Raji looks like she wants to stay, but what can she do? She casts one more angry glance at him, and then storms out of the room. Riddhi stands still, framed in the doorway.

"Appa?" There is a question in her voice, but he doesn't know what she wants to say.

"Yes, Riddhi?"

She doesn't say anything. After a short silence, he beckons her to him. She comes to sit at his feet, leaning her head against his knee. He strokes her hair, brushed smooth and oiled so that it flows like dark river water down her back.

"Do you trust me, Riddhi?"

She does not pause. "Yes, Appa." The others would have paused, at least.

"Will you trust me when I tell you this is for your own good, that I would never do anything to hurt you?"

"Of course, Appa. But..." She trails off.

"But what?"

"It's so far away..."

"Well. That's true. But we'll visit, and once Ashok gets established, you'll be able to visit us here. You've always enjoyed our summer trips to Ceylon. Do you remember—that summer when you were twelve, you said that you never wanted to leave. You'll see—you'll be happy there."

"Yes, Appa." She is a good girl. He had known that she would not fight him on this. They sit together, and he continues stroking her hair; after a little while, she presses his hand, gets up, and goes back out to the party.

She really will be happy there; he knows it. He would never hurt her, his sweet one, his darling daughter. He loves her more than is wise; he has never mastered the release of affection, of caring, that leads to true peace. He has to send her away, as far away as possible, perhaps to a place where she will not learn betrayal, if there is such a place left in this world.