The Wedding

Professor Govindaraja had proudly announced that it would be the wedding of the season and the wedding of the region, and so it proved. His extended wealthy family, of which he was openly proud, converged on his mansion from every corner of the British Commonwealth; in fact the extent and power of the Indian diaspora was exemplified by his own family. If anyone ever made disparaging remarks about Non-Resident Indians who had gone abroad to make money, the professor was always quick to respond that at least in his family, it was knowledge that was respected, and yes, though some had gained wealth, it was through research at the frontiers of science in famous, far-flung laboratories. None, so far, had been awarded the Nobel Prize, but as true Brahmins, it was Knowledge they valued in his house, not mere recognition.

He was particularly proud that two distant clans were to be united in his house. A scion of a cadet branch, which had settled in New Zealand to improve the quality of sheep, had chosen as his bride the orphaned daughter of cousins, who had already marketed her doctoral research into coir production. Her success was doubly gratifying to the professor, who had financed her studies from an early age; so naturally he had determined that the wedding would be in his house, at his expense, and that every one of his distant relatives should attend. Since the wedding was to be in May, when academics the world over were free of their duties, most had agreed to come, to meet each other under the hospitable roof of their cousin Dwarkinath, who was renowned for enjoying the role of a lavish host.

Two weeks of merriment were to precede the three days of the wedding. For four months, the professor had held daily briefing meetings, enthusiastically chaired by his precious little daughter, Shanta, when all the arrangements were gone over meticulously; the different styles of live music to be arranged for different days, both from classical and folk traditions; the fusion of all the cuisines for which southern India was justly famous, which required the careful purchase not only of spices, but even of different varieties of grains and pulses. The professor, through his contacts, in government and in the market, was able to get quintal sacks of exotic fragrant varieties of rice, which would grace every table. He had looked forward to giving impromptu learned lectures to his guests, who now knew only of basmati, about the ecological niches, and agricultural practices which produced each local variety. He had wanted to show a slide program at dinners, but had been vetoed by his wife. He was a world authority on tropical fruits, and though normally he forbade anyone from thoughtlessly eating away his collections, for the sake of the wedding he graciously bent his rule that year and permitted his wife to offer to his guests the very best of mangoes from his own gardens. Picnic baskets were prepared to sustain them while on short side trips in the neighbourhood, to visit historic forts and temples, or lively handicraft centers famous for bidri, bell-metalware chased with silver, or nirmal lacquer-painted furniture, or specialized sari weaving centers, with ancient pochampalli, gadwal or narayanpet designs.

Though he was a strict vegetarian, Professor Govindaraja was also a classic liberal, and made special arrangements for his distant cousins, who he guessed were looking forward to dining on Hyderabadi biryanis, phattar-ka-gosht, mutton shikampur, and the varied kebabs of the region. The old disused outhouse was renovated as a non-vegetarian kitchen, and Iqbal and his cooks specially requested to be in attendance for the two weeks of the guests' residence.

After they had arrived, and after they had recovered from their jet-lags, acquired while flying over the Atlantic, the Pacific, and Indian oceans, the cousins were offered a wide variety of entertainment, but seemed to prefer most their own company, rather than the thoughtful and educative visits to places of interest that the professor had laid on. Spontaneously, the clan formed fresh attachments. Everyone smilingly rejoiced that their chance coming together had instantly sparked ardent attraction between the Hong Kong fashion designer girl and the promising reader of culture studies in Trinidad. In the hope of creating more chances for future marriages, Madame Meira, the wife of the Mauritius finance minister, and the grande dame of the clan, took over the leadership for organizing outings from the hands of the professor's placid wife, who was clearly not up to the task. Madame Meira was a large woman, superbly at ease with her size, swathed in many coloured swirling dresses of her own design, always heavily made up, and sporting everyday a new electric shade of lipstick and nail-polish to match the rim of the sun-glasses she chose for the day. She was graciously and uniformly kind to everyone, and decided early on that picnic by the Osman Sagar lake should be a daily feature of entertainment. The older cousins sat under the shade of trees or spread garden umbrellas, and while carefully over-stepping any dietary restrictions imposed by their doctors exchanged exciting stories of desperate early-life struggles in distant lands, which had all happily resolved into flood tides of wealth and power. Amidst mutually exchanged congratulations, they languidly watched over the frolics of the younger set, playing transparently innocent games of hide and seek among the trees and bushes, accented with much squealing by the young women, who regularly scolded their male cousins for being 'naughty.' One or two mothers might get anxious and walk up to speak a word of warning or rebuke to their daughters eager to have fun, but such moments were rare since all of them had come to accept Western values which forbade nothing except open scandal. The Canadian twins once tartly asked their mother why the outrageous behaviour of an older married 'Irish' niece was never questioned, but the matron placidly replied that that girl was married, and if her husband chose to stay away at an academic workshop at Cork only he was to be blamed.

Professor Govindaraja neither approved nor disapproved of all the flirtation the young set indulged in, for he as he said himself was a liberal, but he did note with concern the deep distress such behaviour was causing his elder bachelor cousin, the famous Vidyasagar, whose SoftImaging had started the Indian millionaires roll-out in Silicon Valley, and who was also known as the strict conservative trustee of the Hindu Temple of San Jose. So, the kindly professor attached himself to the great man, took him on special visits to all the great temples of the neighbourhood, and had special pujas performed in his honour. A large, beautifully carved sandalwood idol of the god Rama, whose vocal devotee Vidyasagar was, was installed in an eastern corner, under the large window of the guest's room, so that he might make his prayers immediately after an early morning bath, and in complete sanctity, before having to meet any of the younger secular persons.

“I have nothing against secularism,” Vidyasagar had emphasized. “I am a devout Hindu secularist myself, who wishes to reach the benefits of our great religion to all the others, if only they have the mind to be open, mind you, but for a true religious life personal rectitude is key, as Lord Rama exemplified in his Life, and that is why I am quite pained by our own Hindu children acting in this lose way of Western Christians, or all those other people, whose names I don’t even want to bring to my lips!”

There was little that Professor Govindaraja could do to mollify his traditional cousin, but he did his best to distract him by attempting a religious discourse, and getting hopelessly lost on the way with his mild liberal concepts, retreated after thanking the censorious older man politely for opening his eyes to many things he had not thought of before. But he dug in his heels when Vidyasagar voiced displeasure at Ramulamma, a ‘pariah,’ being present in the house, and helping with all the arrangements. Professor Govindaraja said loudly and firmly that he did not believe in any caste whatsoever, he would never discriminate on the basis of caste, that Ramulamma, an efficient dai, had happened to officiate at the unexpected delivery of his daughter Shanta, while they were away in his country farm, and that he had grown to respect her professional skills, and Ramulamma was a ‘family member,’ as far as he was concerned, and that Mrs. Govindaraja had entrusted most of the household arrangements to Ramulamma. Vidyasagar had backed off in front of such unexpected vehemence from his kindly host, and made no further mention of his disapproval of Ramulamma, except to mutter mantras in Sanskrit whenever he passed by her, pointedly circling round to keep her at the greatest distance. Ramulamma’s only response on such occasions would be to smile teasingly and finger a large star-shaped silver nose-pin on her right nostril, presented to her by Shanta as a wedding gift.

In all Indian marriages, it’s the women who are central to all functions, and it is they in their heavily-laden jewellery, and brocaded finery, who crowd out the men, however large the room. Vidyasagar seemed overcome by the presence of so many women, and would retreat with thinly masked disgust from any room charged with their presence, and their rippling laughter, and the heady cocktail of perfumes, from deeply musky to flowery gentle, which floated around everywhere mixed with sandalwood fragrance, wood smoke, and armpit pheromones. The women were conscious of his alarm at their overwhelming presence, and many harmless jokes were cracked about the old fogey of a bachelor, who was too uptight to have the time of his life.

The wedding ceremony itself was as spectacular as any Bollywood mogul could have wished, with Sanskrit chants, Persian ghazals, and Chinese lanterns lighting the way to gardens, where lavish dinners were served among circles of rose bushes, and waiters circulated carrying trays of scotch, wines, and sherbet with bhang. The guests formed the expected brilliant gathering, and enjoyed it all, filling the gardens and mansion with silk saris, glittering diamonds, and brocaded sherwanis. Professor Govindaraja was a proud and happy host, as he stood on the terrace of his lawn and surveyed the scene. The bride, as if rising to the grandeur of the occasion, looked the most beautiful of all women. Normally, in her working jeans and lab coat, she had been almost unnoticeable, looking plain and dark, with hair straggling round a rather everyday face, and an undistinguished, in fact, slightly plump figure. Her relatives were quite astonished at the good match she had made, but put it down to Professor Govindaraja’s persuasive connections. After all, a good match was what a guardian was expected to make for his ward. But at the wedding, she turned out to be a vision,

from the tips of her mehndi-painted hands to the crest of her curly locks, glittering with diamonds and rubies. The dusk of her cheeks looked ravishing against the red silk and gold of her sari, diamonds dripped from her ears, and a large diamond nose-pin dazzled her guests as she flared her nostrils and laughed, tilting back her head. Everyone wanted to take her picture, and flashbulbs popped all over the place. The best happened to be a Polaroid close-up, with her full red lips parted in laughter, her head tilted back in a characteristic pose, the dazzle of her diamond highlighting the flared wing of her nostril. The picture was passed from hand to hand in admiration, and then claimed by the groom as his own, in the midst of loud protests, people remonstrating that he had no right to the photo since he had the girl herself all to himself.

"This picture will be in my wallet, next to my heart, all my life," he said with a smile, they all applauded, and then the whole group danced away towards refreshments.

No one wanted that night to end, and everyone tried to stretch out the fun, knowing that several would be departing the next day for foreign parts. Even little Shanta was allowed to stay up, and when she got very tired, Ramulamma carried her on her back, so that she wouldn't miss any of the excitement. After all the cars had driven away with guests from the city, the extended family gathered in the large living room, with tired people squished against each other very comfortably, on divans, sofas, floor cushions, or even stretched out on grass mats. They had all changed out of their heavy formal clothes, the women into plain cotton saris or kameez over skirts, the men into loose kurtas and pyjamas. Shanta sat in a deep chair of her own, and Ramulamma organized the house servants to bring in light refreshments. There was a general sense of contentment, a shared sigh of happiness, and most of the guests were already beginning to store up priceless memories of the event and the past two weeks. And yet, no one was prepared to get up and go to bed. Inevitably, someone suggested that they should sing, and a few of the older women readily broke into song.

Everyone was persuaded to join in, even Professor Govindaraja, whose game, flat voice was indulgently applauded by the guests, an inebriated enthusiast loudly regretting he did not have his tape-recorder with him, and would anyone please find him one? Suddenly it was noticed that old Vidyasagar had sneaked off to bed, and it was loudly demanded that he be dragged back and made to sing then and there. The cry was enthusiastically taken up by the tired crowd, and some women keeping little Shanta at the front for safety, barged into his room, pleading: "Mr. Vidyasagar, Sir, you have to come out and sing. No, no, no! We will not take no for an answer. Tonight you must sing. Please, Sir, Mr. Vidyasagar, Please, Please, Please! Come with us, Come!" Vidyasagar was most startled to say the least, and was quite annoyed, they could see that. He was in his simple vest and dhoti, preparing for bed, in front of the god's idol by the window, but after some nervous fluster, allowed the women to lead him meekly back to the living room.

"My good friends, family, I should say, you all know I cannot sing," he said placidly after he had been seated, and offered some orange juice. " However, Vedic chanting is very melodious, and apt for such a joyous holy occasion." Closing his eyes for concentration, he began a sonorous chant that forced everyone to listen with growing respect, creeping sleep, and evaporating spirits. There was polite applause when he finished, and then everyone slowly stretched, wished each other good-night

and went off to bed. Cradling her arms, Ramulamma carried the sleeping Shanta to the nursery, a thoughtful look in her eyes.

Neither Mrs. Govindaraja nor Ramulamma had any sleep that night, but quietly went about setting the house to order, and supervising the cooking of early breakfasts for those who would be leaving before dawn. Soon after the first batch left for the airport, servants turned up to sweep out the garden, take down the Chinese lanterns, and bundle up the buntings and balloons that were still not totally destroyed. The subdued noise of the morning's work soothed Mrs. Govindaraja's nerves, and bringing two hot cups of coffee from the kitchen, she gave one to Ramulamma, and then both of them sat on the front steps of the house, between the flowerpots, and quietly went over the events. Even before they had drained their cups, a few of the guests had come into the living-room and switched on the music system. But there was no question of starting any celebrations that morning; all activity was preparatory for departure. Into this quiet order a bombshell was thrown by the bridegroom himself, when he came down, still in his pajamas and still unshaven.

For the first few minutes no one knew what he was saying, he was so apologetic. "I guess I am just uncoordinated, soon I wouldn't be able to find my way out of a telephone booth! I've tried looking, but I guess the tension – I should say the excitement – of it all just got me fuddled so I can't see what's in front of my nose, I guess. But I did look everywhere. I guess I am just hopeless!" With these solemn words he slumped dramatically into the corner of the large sofa, and looked round with a mock pathetic smile. He had tended to mutter these vague inanities through the last few days, so at first everyone had just smiled and nodded without needing to take it all in. But Mrs. Govindaraja sensed that something was seriously wrong, and sat down beside him to wrest the secret from that deprecatory bosom.

"Well, it's my wallet, you see," said the bridegroom when coherence was at last restored. " I think I distinctly remember taking it out of my wedding sherwani and putting it on top of all the presents in the men's anteroom, when we were all changing into our house clothes after the show – I mean, the celebrations, I mean the dinner. I came down with all the others, and then when we went up to bed, I think I forgot about it and just left it there. Can't find it anywhere now."

This was terrible. Mrs. Govindaraja and Ramulamma had organized two anterooms upstairs, one for the women and another for men, for changing in and out of innumerable saris and sherwanis, for heaping presents, and storing incense sticks, attardans, sandalwood paste, garlands, boxes of halwa, and all the other odds and ends of a marriage house. These rooms opened on to the corridors where the bedrooms where located, and as is the custom during such large weddings of feudal households, no one ever dreamt there would be a need to lock up anything. And now the worst had happened to the most important person of the wedding – the bridegroom's wallet was missing, and that too hours before his departure for New Zealand. Mrs. Govindaraja rose without hesitation, disregarding his plaintive mumble that it was 'only the cards, the passport, y'see….' With Ramulamma, she carried out a quick, masterful search of the room and corridor. The wallet was gone, most probably stolen. With this dreadful thought, and tears smarting in her eyes, she rushed in agitation to her husband. He listened to her seriously, ordered another thorough search, and then told her and the embarrassed remonstrating bridegroom, he had to call in the police.

The next few hours were spent in turmoil. The Superintendent of Police who had left the party only a few short hours ago returned bleary-eyed with a contingent, who quickly went about interrogating the servants, and searching their quarters and belongings. While the servants withstood the onslaught with dignified composure, Mrs. Govindaraja retired to her room in tears. Two women constables had also been brought in to do body searches of the female servants, but Ramulamma was spared as the professor said with unexpected sternness that she was a family member. A thought was voiced that the wallet might just possibly have been caught up in the clothes of one the guests in the changing room, so everyone enthusiastically turned all their own suitcases upside down, but somehow knowing that the wallet would not be found. What if it was already in a suitcase winging its way towards the Atlantic?

The bride herself was by then out of her rooms, washed clean off all makeup and finery, and dressed in a tight white shirt and jeans, her hair pulled back severely into a ponytail.

“You are such an idiot, Raj, really, I don’t know how you survive,” she said sternly to her new husband. “To lose your passport like that! You could at least have told me to mind it, if you couldn’t. Now you will just have to call up your office, the airlines, the credit card companies. This is a fine mess of a honeymoon!” Her dark, angry face would accept no apology, and she refused to smile when he lamely suggested that maybe they could continue partying for the next couple of weeks.

Lunch as such did not happen, with guests helping themselves to sandwiches or leftovers from the kitchen. People sat around talking about nothing else but the missing wallet. The older women shook their heads and said it was not a good omen. Never mind omens said the men, the poor guy would be stranded for weeks without his passport or papers. By mid-afternoon, even Professor Govindaraja was beginning to think it would be prudent to advise the credit card companies, since it seemed to be a matter of theft. Even as the bridegroom was dejectedly reaching for a telephone and its directories, loud shouting came from the garden outside, and the thin wail of a woman. A few of the guests stepped out of the french windows to see what was happening, but before they could report back, Mr. Prakash Rao, the dark, thickset, Circle Inspector, who sported a huge black handlebar moustache, stepped smartly into the room, and gave the professor a professional salute, clicking his heels.

“The purse has been found and the thief,” said the officer with satisfaction. “We still do not know, Sir, what she has stolen, but the Passport, and credit cards are intact.” He carefully laid the brown leather wallet on the centre coffee table, stepped back and saluted again.

Professor Govindaraja walked up quickly and shook hands with the officer, who was smiling broadly under his moustache. “I can’t tell you how grateful I am, we all are, Circle Sahib,” he said, with relief written all over every powerful handshake. “ What a thing to happen in my house! And our bridegroom was almost canceling his flight this evening!” Everyone was standing up, relieved, laughing, a few even trying to extemporize a joke or two.

By then half-a-dozen policemen had dragged a thin, stooped weeping woman to the large open windows, while they tried to compete with each other in hitting her with their batons. Large black weals were rising across her arms, collarbone and back. Even

as the guests crowded round the window, the head-constable caught her by the hair, pulled her down to the ground and smacked her face hard with his huge hands.

"This thief is refusing to tell anything, Sir," he shouted back to his Circle Inspector. "She appears to be a hardened criminal and I suspect working with a Gang. Tell the truth to Sir! Tell the truth to Sir, you thieving whore!" He rained several blows on the collapsed woman while a few constables not to be outdone kicked her in the ribs with their boots.

"Find out the truth by all means, Circle Sahib," requested Professor Govindaraja urgently, "but I don't want anyone beaten in my house. Please charge her and take her to the station. I don't want to interfere, but I request humane treatment of the accused."

The bridegroom was appalled. "I have my papers back, I don't want to press charges!" he wailed. "Or maybe I can engage a lawyer for her?" No one paid him the least attention in the excitement of seeing the violence wreaked on the weeping servant woman. It seemed she had been caught red-handed as she was lifting the wallet out of a dustbin. But all she would say was she knew nothing, she was sweeping out the garden with all the other outer servants, and she found the wallet as she emptied the dustbin. The policemen smiled knowingly at such a barefaced lie.

"Kamala is a sweeper woman. She can never enter the house, she has not entered the house last night," said Ramulamma quietly. "She could not have stolen the purse."

"Perhaps, an accomplice – yes, an accomplice, threw it to her," suggested the head-constable, looking straight at her.

"There are no accomplices in my household," said the professor coldly.

"It must have fallen out of the window," said the bridegroom rapidly. "Yes, I think that's what must have happened. I was standing by the window and jerking off the sherwani – you can't imagine how difficult it is getting out of these things – it must have fallen out. That's what happened!"

His wife looked into his face with her brilliant black eyes. "Idiot!" she whispered loudly, but she gave him a fond, possessive smile that cleared his brow.

Everyone was only too anxious to accept the bridegroom's explanation and they all trooped out to the "scene of the crime," as the head-constable gamely tried to call it. Sure enough, the dustbin the sweeper woman had been caught at stood under a large upstairs window. That settled it. Everyone laughed and returned to complete their packing. Everyone was now anxious to leave as soon as possible.

Professor Govindaraja hung back in muttered consultation with the Circle Inspector. "Yes, I agree it doesn't quite gel," he said at last. "But this is a happy occasion and let it end on a happy note. Let her go, she is a poor woman after all, and these people get tempted… you're right, very right. Of course, she can't work here any more after this, let that be enough punishment."

The policemen retreated reluctantly, as did the sweeper woman, her wailing fading in the distance. The bridegroom had surreptitiously thrust a couple of hundred-rupee notes into her hands, but he still felt queasy at the lost look she had given him as she tied the notes into a knot at the end of her sari pallu.

Guests started to stream away to catch several trains and planes, the women completely ignoring the incident in their parting salutations, a few young men pointedly making a few suggestive jokes about their worries for the 'innocent' bridegroom. Old Vidyasagar had retreated to his bedroom to lie down and recover from fibrillations the excitement had brought on. He had just woken up from a comfortable nap, and was planning to get up and pack his simple suitcase, when Ramulamma calmly came into the room and sat down on the floor by the door.

"Oh, Pedda Saru, you are the most respected head of this family, and I have worked hard for this marriage, so I have come for my inam," she said smiling, and twirled the large star-shaped silver nose-pin on her right nostril.

Vidyasagar looked at her with disdain, trying to suppress the surge of anger he felt. He liked Govindaraja, but he did not approve of his abandoning all caste values. This woman should not even be in the house let alone being so much at home in his own room. He looked at her expensive Gadwal sari, at her silver jewellery, at her red paan-filled mouth, and said shortly: " You are very well rewarded by your master, it seems, better than any servant of my time. So I will give you nothing. I am not a weak man like that – that bridegroom!"

But Ramulamma was unabashed. She continued to sit on the floor and smile, her finger twirling her nose-pin. "He is not weak, Pedda Saru, he is only kind. He could not bear to see that innocent woman hurt by those devils," she said a little loudly, as if explaining to a child. "He knew he didn't drop it out of the window. That dustbin, Saru, is not under the anteroom where he was changing. It is under this window." She gestured towards the window with the idol of Rama, and even as he was preparing to tell her sternly not to touch the Lord, she went up to the window and flung it open. "Yes, Saru, there is that dustbin, and the wallet was thrown out of this window." Then very calmly she opened the top drawer of the chest under the window, and brought out a photograph.

"Yes, this is that beautiful photo of the bride that he always wanted to keep in his purse, Saru," she said meditatively, without looking at him. "Yes, she is very, very beautiful in this picture. It is the nose-pin that makes her so beautiful, that's why we women wear them to hold our men. But those white mems in Amreeka, Saru, they wear nothing on their noses – how can they be beautiful?" She turned and smiled at Vidyasagar, who lay frozen on his bed. "I am only an old Harijan, far beneath a big, Brahmin Saru like yourself, but I know you look at my nose-pin," she added twirling it affectionately, "so of course like everyone else you look at her nose-pin, and want to look at it again, again, again! I saw your eyes on her face, and she saw it too!"

"What – she saw, what?" His voice could hardly croak out the words.

"Yes, Saru, she saw, did you not see that sly smile of hers and how she would tilt her head when you looked? Men always think we don't know but we do know when they look at us in that special way. No woman minds if it is within limits."

Vidyasagar cleared his throat and tried to summon authority back to his voice, and tell the woman to get out, but his fibrillations had started again, and he just stared at her, his mouth flaccid and empty of words.

Ramulamma hunkered down by the window and clasped her hands above her head. “Ayyo Saru! God is not kind! He has not been kind to you, though you worship so much,” she said all compassion, turning to point to the idol of Rama. “Your Gods are like that, they give you a body and then forget about it? Yellamma is not like that, she cares for us, she knows what we women want in our wombs. Your Rama gave you money, fame, but what use is all that if you are alone, without a woman to comfort you? What can white mems know, they don’t even wear jewellery, they are like men. I am so sad thinking of you, Saru, God has been cruel to you, he sent you far away when you were young, and never gave you a desi woman.”

Ramulamma wiped the corner of her eye with the edge of her sari, and suddenly Vidyasagar felt his fibrillations ease, and he relaxed back on the pillows.

“Father Emmanuel is also a good man, but his Yesu is also cruel,” continued Ramulamma conversationally. “Such a good person you know Saru, whenever a Harijan is in trouble he is the first person we turn to. He will be with us in a police station – I have escaped many a beating because he was there – and he gave money out of his own pocket for little Sundaramma’s operation! Such a good person, Saru, but he cannot marry! How can Gods be so cruel? And the girls are cruel too, I know. They wear low-cut cholis and go and kneel in front of him in church, showing all. Is that not taunting a good man? Manemma who washes his clothes showed me his underwear one day, what else can a man do? We may be Harijans but our Yellamma looks after our souls and our bodies, she knows when it is time for us to marry. The Sircar is like Yesu and the Brahmin Gods, the Sircar says we cannot marry till we are old! But what do we do when we are young here?” she asked patting her lower belly.

Vidyasagar was silent for several minutes. Then he turned to look at her directly, and asked simply: “How did you know?”

“Oh, Saru, it was not difficult. I was behind the girls last night when they rushed into your room to ask you to sing. If they had not done so, there would have been no harm done. You turned startled, and I saw you brushed something out of the window. Later, when I thought about that moment, I understood. You see, Saru, who would steal that purse? No one, you are all rich, and I know the house servants are loyal to their salt. And what was in that purse anyway? Only cards which only that lucky bridegroom can use, may he live a thousand years, and be rich and happy and have many, many children! So it had nothing anyone would want. When the police found the purse everyone was happy the passport was there with all the cards, but even he didn’t notice that the photo wasn’t there. Then I knew you must have taken it for a moment only – which man would not Saru? – just to look at that photo, with that beautiful laughing face with that beautiful nose-pin sparkling on her nose – when we burst into your room. So you quickly threw it out and slipped the photo into this drawer before coming out with us. Ah, Saru, you need a woman – not a photo with a nose-pin!”

Ramulamma beat her head with her hands in sorrow.

Vidyasagar got slowly out of the bed. “You came for your wedding inam,” he said thickly. “I will give you a thousand rupees. And put that photo back among their things,” he added with self-disgust.

Ramulamma was also on her feet. “Saru, I did not come for money. I came for justice, from a great man like you. That poor sweeper woman has lost her job, never mind her beatings, we low people are accustomed to beating, I can show a hundred marks on my body. Saru, somehow that woman educated her son, he has learnt computers, Saru, we Harijans don’t even get to clean computers, but he knows how to work them. You give hundreds of people computer jobs, even white sahibs and mems. Give him one job, Saru, let him take care of his mother in her old age, now that she has lost her job. Here is his bio.” She thrust a single sheet of typed paper into his hand. Glancing down he saw it was some kind of C.V. quite artlessly written, and nodded abstractly. When he looked up, Ramulamma had quietly glided out.

Vidyasagar looked at himself in the mirror for a long moment. That woman had character; that incident was as good as locked away in his consciousness and suppressed. He would keep his end of the bargain and take that boy on trial. He would come cheap anyway, not like these upper-caste programmers who were disloyal and always planning to go to a competitor. Yes, at the very next conference in Silicon Valley he would proudly announce that the happiest part of his visit to India was giving a job – no, creating an opportunity – for a Dalit, yes a Dalit. He savoured the word, his confidence returning, and started to pack with a smile, thinking of the keynote address to come. He would see they got Bill Clinton to the high table.