



Onto the Stage

'Slighted Souls' and other stage and radio plays

- *BS MURTHY*

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BS Murthy

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Cover with Mohan’s watercolor painting

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Stage Plays

Slighted Souls

Men at *work* on Women at work

Castle of Despair

Radio Play

A Love on Hold

With boundless gratitude to the peerless
Chatla Sreeramulu,
the director–actor of Telugu theatre,
who had opened the wide windows to the grand stage
the sneaking view of which enabled me to shape these plays

Slighted Souls

A political stage play by BS Murthy

Dramatis Personae

On one side

Muthyal Rao, *Dora* of Rampur.

Papa Rao, Police *Patel*.

Rami Reddy, *Patwari*.

Papi Reddy, landlord.

Shaukar Suryam, moneylender.

Veeraiah, Head Constable.

Venkataswamy, MLA.

Mallesam Goud, ex-MLA.

Narsi Reddy, son of Rami Reddy.

Henchmen, Police Constables,

Capt. Kapoor, Home Guards/Greyhounds

Of the other side on this side

Anasuya, Yadagiri's wife.

Saailu, Anasuya's brother.

On the other

Yellaiah, a peasant.

Mallamma, Yellaiah's wife.

Narsimma, Yellaiah's son.

Sarakka, Yellaiah's daughter.

Maisamma, Mallamma's mother.

Yadagiri, Maisamma's son.

Renuka, Yadagiri's daughter

Maisaiah, a peasant.

Lachamma, Maisaiah's wife

Madanna, head of a *naxal dalam*

Mallanna, Madanna's confidant.

Srisailam, Narsimma's friend

Nirmala, victim of Narsi Reddy.

Annalu, and onlookers.

And on neither side is Raja, the six-year old grandson of the I.G of A. P. Police.

Scene – 1

Voice Over: Under the British Raj in India, the self-indulging Nizams of Hyderabad abdicated the administration of their vast principality to *doralu*, the village heads, letting them turn the areas under their domain into their personal fiefdoms. While the successive Nizams were obsessed with building palaces and acquiring jewelry, the village heads succeeded in ushering in an oppressive era of tyrannical order. Acting as loose cannon from their palatial houses called *gadis*, the *doralu* succeeded in foisting an inimical feudal order upon the downtrodden *dalits*. Besides making these *dalits* toil for them as cheap labor without impunity, the *doralu* had no qualms in making vassals out of the hapless women folk. What with the police *patels* and the revenue *patwaris* in nexus with the landed gentry and the moneyed *shaukars* making a common cause with the *doralu* in their unabated exploitation, their sub-human condition ensured that the *dalits* were distressed economically, degraded socially and debased morally. Ironically, lending the privileged few the muscle power to perpetrate the inimical social order were their henchmen from the other backward classes. Moreover, given the British political pragmatism of an indifference to the Indian caste conundrum the downtrodden *dalits* had nowhere to run for cover.

Though the merger of their province with the Union of India brought the curtains down on the Nizams' two-hundred year misrule, the exploitation of the rural *dalits* by the *dora-patel-patwari* nexus continued unabated. And that led to the formation of 'communes' as part of a peasant movement in July 1948 under the Telangana Struggle that didn't take off any way. On the other hand as the seeds of egalitarianism began to take roots in the urban Indian soil, in time, these "slighted souls" too began to envision the dawn of an equitable era for them. However, the nascent upward mobility of the downtrodden was at odds with the vested interests of the feudal order, and to nip the *dalit* moral assertiveness in the bud, the 'axis of evil' saw to it that such were brutalized to make an example of them.

"Slighted Souls" scripts the life of the downtrodden of Rampur nearly a decade after the famous but failed peasant struggle of Telangana. Making cohorts with Muthyal Rao the *dora* in oppressing its *dalits* are Papa Rao the Police *Patel*, Rami Reddy the *Patwari*, Papi Reddy the landlord and Shaukar Suryam the moneylender. Beginning with the life and times of Yellaiah and his wife Mallamma this play unfolds the urge of the deprived to unyoke themselves, and the desperation of the privileged to rein in them.

[Curtains up: Mallamma sits in front of her thatched hut in the *dalit mohalla* weaving a bamboo basket. Enter: Yellaiah, and seeing him, she goes into the hut to fetch some water for him, and he takes over the work.]

Mallamma [Back with a glass of water]: Why make a mess of it *maava*.

Yellaiab [Taking over the glass]: Take it I'm giving them their due.

Mallamma: I wonder how they're harming you.

Yellaiab [Having emptied the glass]: Aren't they harsh on my darling's delicate hands?

Mallamma [Taking back the glass]: I'm glad you're still fond of your old woman.

Yellaiab: Who said you're old dear. I'm ever scared that some *dora* or a *patel* might grab my Malli.

Mallamma [Taking the bamboo work]: You know it would never be the case.

Yellaiab: Well but still.

Mallamma: Leave alone the *patels* and the *patwaris*, would the *dora* ever forget that incident in a hurry? Besides, I'm behind the bamboo curtain, am I not?

Yellaiab: Well who can forget that potential tragedy turned farce? [He laughs heartily]. But still it hurts to let you toil day and night.

Mallamma: So be it, till our Narsimma becomes a big officer. Till then, the fact that you care keeps it going.

Yellaiab: Where is Sarakka?

Mallamma: Wonder why she hasn't turned up yet.

Yellaiab [Making a move to get up]: Why not I better check up at her school.

Mallamma [Holding him back]: Isn't it enough that you've been toiling like a mule all day long.

Yellaiab: Why their lot is any day better dear. They are well-fed by *peddollaru* and attended by doctors. See, they've doctors to look after them but we've to put with the quacks. I hear even their lives are insured these days.

Mallamma: Well, mules have a price tag on them, but what about us. Don't *dalits* come cheaper by the dozen?

[Enter: Maisaiah on his way in a hurry.]

Yellaiab: O Maisaiah, where are you running to now?

Maisaiah: Running around on Shaukar's errands, oh, how I've forgot about *mamsaab*. She said she has some work for me before he returned from Warangal.

[Exit: Maisaiah.]

Yellaiab: Why, their women too boss over our men, don't they? How I wish our Narsimma won't have to put up with all that.

Mallamma: Why should he as *Pantulayya* says he's bright. He feels the same way about our Sarakka, and Renuka. But I think Renuka is better than both.

Yellaiab: Don't I know you're always partial towards your brother's daughter.

Mallamma: It's as if I'm a stepmother to your kids.

Yellaiab: Why get hurt dear, I was just joking. But still our kids are hot heads while she carries a clear head? If not for you, wouldn't they have become rebels by now?

Mallamma: Whatever, once he sets his mind; Narsimma is not the one to waver. And Sarakka too is developing the same traits, isn't she?

Yellaiab: Well, how you've been drumming him not to get distracted from his studies.

Mallamma: Why not? You know how we're undone by being *unpad*. I want all three of them to be well educated. I've been hoping that an educated Renuka makes an ideal wife for our Narsimma. But sadly *vadina* seems to have developed second thoughts about giving her to him.

Yellaiah: Don't I see Anasuya is rooting for Saailu, her good for nothing brother. Well, we can only hope that your brother Yadagiri puts his foot down for once.

Mallamma: But can he do that? Any way, there is still a long way to go. Let's see what the future has in store for them.

Yellaiah: What a wretched life ours is Malli? We don't even have a say in our own affairs. It's Papi Reddy *Patel* who's behind all this. And don't I see his game plan?

Mallamma: Don't they say woman is woman's enemy. Let's hope Renuka's fate prevails over *vadina's* whims.

Yellaiah: How I wish that happens.

Mallamma: I'm quite hopeful, more so as times are changing.

Yellaiah: Wish I've your strength of belief Malli.

Mallamma: *Maava*, if you want change, you've got to dream about it.

Yellaiah: How're we to dream Malli, when life itself is a nightmare? Oh, how the *peddollu* have reduced us.

[Enter Sarakka with a slate and a few school books, and collapses in front of them.]

Yellaiah: Malli quick, fetch some water for Sarakka.

[Even as Mallamma brings in some water, Yellaiah takes Sarakka in his lap. After the mother sprinkles some water on her, the girl gets up and greedily drinks from the tumbler.]

Mallamma: What happened to you my child?

Sarakka: I felt thirsty on the way *amma*. But they didn't allow me to drink from their well.

Yellaiah: They refuse water to a thirsty child! Oh, how lowly are these *peddollu*.

Mallamma: Well, their well is full of frogs, yet they think it gets polluted if we drink from it. What an irony?

Yellaiab: Why, being a frog in the well is better than the bane of being a *dalit*.

Mallamma: Oh, why did God make it so inhuman for us?

Yellaiab: And see their gall; they say its God's own will. Isn't it like rubbing salt on our wounds?

Mallamma: He must be a cruel God to say that. But did He say that?

Sarakka: We're dearer to God, that's why Gandhiji said we're *harijan*. We've that lesson in our class.

Yellaiab: If only Gandhiji lived long enough to make it true for us.

Sarakka: *Maastaru* says God helps only those who help themselves.

Mallamma: Who knows another *mahatma* might be waiting in the wings to pick up the threads?

Yellaiab: Having made us *anguthachaps* all along, mercifully, they're letting our children study these days.

Mallamma: Well, grudgingly. Whatever, it's going to be the turning point for us.

[Enter a tired Narsimma with his schoolbag]

Yellaiab: How our poor Narsimma has to walk all those miles. If only we've a high school here.

Mallamma: Why're you so dull my boy?

Narsimma: I couldn't go to school *amma*.

Yellaiab: Why what's the matter?

Narsimma: I was crossing the *gadi* and the *dorasani* held me. As their *Maali* fell ill, she made me work all day in the garden.

Mallamma: Why, when it's *julum* on us, the *dorasanlu* score no less.

Narsimma: And all the while she was yelling, Narsiga, Narsiga, Narsiga. It's as if she can't get my name right.

Yellaiah: Well, they think we're not entitled to our name even.

Mallamma to Narsimma: Bear all that for now my boy. Once you're a B.A., all will call you Narsimma.

Yellaiah to Mallamma: I'll sell my shirt to make him a B.A., and it's my word to you.

[There is a commotion outside, and Sarakka exits.]

Sarakka [Reenters]: Maisaiah *mama* is being carried on a cart. Shaukar *Saab* is also there.

Yellaiah: Let me find out what's the matter.

Mallamma: I'll also come. Lachamma might need me.

[Exit: Yellaiah and Mallamma leaving Narsimma and Sarakka. Curtains down.]

Scene – 2

[Curtains up: Maisaiah's body 'in drawer' laid in front of his hut in the *dalit mohalla*. Lachamma, his wife wails over it. Shaukar Suryam and two of his henchmen with sticks stand aside. Enter Yellaiah and Mallamma anxiously.]

Yellaiah: *Dandaalu* Shaukar *Saab*.

[Yellaiah goes over to Maisaiah and sees he's dead.]

Yellaiah: Shaukar *Saab*, how's that Maisaiah died in his drawer?

Shaukar Suryam: *Yera* Yelliga, are you questioning me?

Yellaiah: Is it possible Shaukar *Saab*. But what it means to die in one's drawer?

Shaukar Suryam: *Yedava Naayala* stole my money. It's only to make him open his mouth, he was stripped and beaten. But sadly for me, he died before coughing up.

Mallamma: *Shaukar Saab*, we're poor but we're no thieves.

Shaukar Suryam: That will be known now. [He turns to his henchmen.] Go in and see.

[The two go into the hut as directed.]

Mallamma: *Shaukar Saab*, there aren't any attics in our huts to hide booty.

Shaukar Suryam: O, *Mallamma*, mind your own business or else.

Yellaiah: Don't mind her words *Shaukar Saab*.

[Thrown out of the hut by the search party, some dented and unkempt aluminum vessels fall all over the place. In the end, as his henchmen appear with a cloth bundle, *Shaukar Suryam* is delighted, and the gathering is stunned. He eagerly unfolds the bundle and finds a plastic kiddy bank that he expectantly opens. But disappointed at finding only some small change, he throws the plastic on the floor, however, after pocketing the money. *Lachamma* takes the empty box, and wails inconsolably.]

Mallamma: Now what do you say *Shaukar Saab*? Why didn't you make sure he really stole? Oh, how you've killed an innocent man.

Shaukar Suryam: I suspect he was at it all along. *Naayala* might've hidden it somewhere.

Lachamma: Oh, he was saving for his child in my womb but couldn't save his own life. As I'm penniless, his child would be posthumous.

Shaukar Suryam: Don't worry *Lachhi*. Aren't you good enough to find a mate in double quick time? Do you think I'll let you down in the meantime?

[Enter *Papa Rao Patel* in *mufti* and Head Constable *Veeraiah* in *vardi*.]

Shaukar Suryam: *Randi Veeraiah garu*, but sorry for the bother.

Veeraiah: Isn't it my duty *Shaukar Saab*.

Papa Rao to Veeraiah: *Mori Saab*, don't think *Shaukar Saab* won't how know risky it is for you?

Shaukar Suryam: Don't I know *Papa Rao Patel* that I've to provide an 'all risks cover' for *Veeraiah garu*.

Veeraiah: [Goes near *Maisaiah's* body.] What happened to this fellow?

Papa Rao: Poor fellow died of snake bite *Mori Saab*.

Shaukar Suryam: If *Veeraiah garu* clears the air, they can cremate the body.

Lachamma: *Mori Saab*, please listen to me.

Papa Rao: Didn't you hear what *Shaukar Saab* has said? What is left for you to add?

Mallamma: *Mori Saab*, she's his wife after all, and you've got to take her statement, won't you?

Veeraiah: Keep your mouth shut or else I'll drag you to the Police *Naaka*, and book you under the Brothel Act. You dirty bitch, what do you think of yourself?

Shaukar Suryam: Pardon her *Veeraiah garu*. After all, it hurts to lose one of their own. Now let's go about the *panchanama*.

[Exit: *Shaukar Suryam* with his henchmen and *Veeraiah*.]

[Enter: *Yadagiri*, *Mallamma's* brother. After condoling *Lachamma*, he whispers into *Mallamma's* ear. In turn *Mallamma* whispers into *Yellaiah's* ear.]

[Exit: All three of them. Curtains down.]

Scene - 3

[Curtains up: Maisamma on a stool besides two wooden chairs and Renuka on a mat in the hall of a *kacha* building in the *dalit mohalla*.]

Renuka: Why all this fuss *naanamma*?

Maisamma: Because our Renu has matured.

Renuka: So what.

Maisamma: Well, it's the day that begins your nights.

Renuka: What do you mean by that?

[*Maisamma* whispers into *Renuka*'s ears.]

Renuka: But isn't *amma* against *baava*.

Maisamma: Sadly she's rooting for Saailu. Say you don't want to wed any till you pass Matric, and we'll see later.

Renuka: But why is *naayana* afraid of *amma*?

Maisamma: Well, how long can it be hidden from you. Your mother is hand in glove with that cruel Papi Reddy, and so my poor Yadagiri is scared of him.

Renuka: I hear *naayana* call *amma* a loose woman. Who's a loose woman *naanamma*?

Maisamma: Someone close to more than one man, but as things stand, it's rare for a *dalit* woman not to be loose, especially in youth. These *peddollu* force upon us and there is no way we can resist them.

Renuka: But don't they say we're untouchables?

Maisamma: That's the irony of sex Renu. How I wish you remain untouchable for them.

Renuka: What about you?

Maisamma: One day Shankar Rao *Patel* caught my hand in the fields, and I slapped him with all my strength. Imagine what he did. He took my hand, rolled it over his face, and said that he loved it far better that way. After that, I couldn't resist him for long. Well, we had a steady affair till he died, sadly at fifty. But unlike the *peddollu* you've come to see, he was a kind man.

Renuka: What about *aththa*?

Maisamma: My *Mallamma* is made of a different mettle. When this *dora* tried to molest her, she said she would rather die than yield to him. But as he tried to grab her still, she ran like hell and jumped into their well. Luckily, she was saved in the nick of time.

Renuka: Oh, really!

Maisamma: That's not all. What a predicament it was for the *peddollu* that an untouchable jumped into their well. As nobody was prepared to drink from it, they had to purify it with *gangajal*, that too after pumping out all the water from it. In the meantime, oh how long it took them, they had to fetch water from other villages. Well, what news it made then, and they got the message that *Mallamma* won't bend any way. Maybe, it could be the fear of her jumping into the well again that keeps the *patels* and the *patwaris* too at bay.

Renuka: Why not all of us do that *naanamma*?

Maisamma: It's because of our love to live that we put up with the indignities of life. Being branded loose women is just one such.

Renuka: What about the *mamsaabs*?

Maisamma: Why aren't they women like us.

Renuka: But do they get close to our *dalit* men?

Maisamma: In hush-hush ways that is. But if the cat is out of the bag, often it gets killed. Of course, the dark one, but the fate of the fair thing depends on other things. But, mostly the affair is pushed under the carpet.

[Enter: Yadagiri with Yellaiah and Mallamma.]

Yadagiri: *Amma*, Maisaiah is dead.

Maisamma: Oh how come?

Yellaiah: I doubt that Shaukar got him killed.

Maisamma: But why should he get his own *naukar* killed?

Yellaiah: Shaukar says Maisaiah has stolen his money but I suspect there's something fishy about it. [Then he turns to Mallamma.] Malli, didn't Maisaiah tell us that he was going to *memsaab* as she had some work for him before Shaukar returned from Warangal. Can't we now put two and two together?

Mallamma: Why all that now before Renuka. [To Renuka.] So, you've left Sarakka behind.

Renuka: *Po aththa*.

Mallamma: You better preserve your shyness for your *baava*. Well, where is *vadina*?

Maisamma: Don't you know she's always with that Papi Reddy *Pate*?

Yellaiah: It's high time we had put some sense into her head.

Yadagiri: Whenever I'm hard on her, she goads him to get tough with me. Why blame him when she herself is so mean.

Mallamma: Why not I give her a bit of my mind.

Yadagiri: Don't ever do that *akka*; you know what a foul mouth she has.

Mallamma: So be it. It won't do any good to Renuka if she won't mend her ways now.

Yadagiri: Let's get Renu married to Narsimma, and that solves all the problems.

Mallamma: How I wish we could do that. But I want Narsimma to be a B.A. at any cost and you know marriage means its curtains down. Moreover, aren't they too young to wed?

Yadagiri: Oh, how my poor girl is caught between two stools. If we don't move fast Anasuya would make her wed that good for nothing Saailu, her pimp of a brother.

Maisamma: Be a man at last, and let not things come to that pass.

[Enter: Anasuya.]

Anasuya: Whom is the old hag instigating?

Yadagiri: Learn to respect my mother at least.

Anasuya: Respect her, my foot.

Yadagiri: Any way, what does a loose woman know about respect?

Anasuya: Oh, don't tell me your mother kept her thighs ever closed.

Mallamma: It's sickening really; at least consider her age *vadina*.

Anasuya: True, an old whore is chaste no less. Oh the poor thing.

Mallamma: Forget about her past; now think about Renuka's future.

Anasuya: Don't I know what this *panchayat* is all about.

Yadagiri: Why what's the secret about it? Who would want Renu wed a pimp.

Anasuya: Oh, *penimiti*, better mind your tongue.

Yadagiri: Don't forget Renu has a mind of her own. Don't you know she's fond of Narsimma.

Anasuya: Once she weds Saailu, she would be no less fond of him.

Mallamma: *Vadina*, why hurry things, let her first complete her Matric.

Anasuya: Why, to let your B.A son elope with her then?

Yellaiah: Well, all along you've been teasing them as a couple in the making, didn't you?

Anasuya: Maybe, but I've changed my mind.

Mallamma: But then, they're in love with each other.

Anasuya: Don't worry; it won't take long for them to fall out of it.

Mallamma: But *vadina*, why are you bent upon breaking the alliance?

Anasuya: *Yeendee lolli*. Am I obliged to tell to you?

Yellaiah: I'll see how you can back out now. Don't I drag you to the *panchayat*?

Anasuya: Listen Yellaiah, Renu can wed your son over my dead body, but before that take care you don't die of some snake bite like that poor Maisaiah.

Yadagiri: What to do when the fence itself is bent on eating up the crop. [Turns to Yellaiah.] Why should you suffer more of her foul mouth?

[Yadagiri leads away Yellaiah, and Mallamma follows them.]

Anasuya: Good riddance bad rubbish.

[Anasuya goes inside.]

Renuka: Who's a whore *naanamma*?

Maisamma: An abusive word for a loose woman that loosens her lovers' purse strings.

And the irony of abuse is that in abusing man, it's the woman that is abused. Won't the list of abusive words reveal that?

Renuka: And what about a pimp?

Maisamma: Why do you want to know all about sex the day you've matured? [She laughs heartily.]

Well, God forbid you won't have to deal with any.

[Curtains down.]

Scene – 4

[Curtains up: The sun is still some way to set on Rampur's horizon, and seated on the square cement dais around a mango tree at the temple are Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao *Patel*, Rami Reddy *Patwari*, Papi Reddy *Patel* and Shaukar Suryam. A couple of Muthyal Rao's henchmen stand guard as well. Papa Rao *Patel* opens the day's daily, and is about to read out the earmarked news to them.]

Muthyal Rao: Papa Rao *Patel*, for once why not give precedence to the local news. Let's hear the update on Maisaiah' widow from the horse's mouth.

Rami Reddy: *Dora*, why embarrass Shaukar *Saab*?

Muthyal Rao: Why *Patwari*, what's new in it? Won't he take women on lien in lieu of interest?

Rami Reddy: Why don't you realize *dora* that he has to pay for her upkeep in this case? Isn't it like parting with the principal? What an unwelcome development for any moneylender.

Papi Reddy: Why isn't she well-endowed to make value addition.

Rami Reddy: By the way, Shaukar *Saab*, have you any clue who stole the money?

Muthyal Rao: God knows that but don't we know the widow's stole is in Shaukar's hands?

[Laughs.]

Shaukar Suryam: And the money under my wife's pillow. She was to send it to her brother but forgot to tell me about it. It's as well she didn't part with it for that gambler would've squandered at the races.

Papa Rao: Now that Shaukar *Saab* had galloped with the widow, what if his brother-in-law got stranded in his tracks.

Papi Reddy: If not for the brother's turn to the tale, surely it's tabloid stuff. And that would've made Shaukar Suryam a household name.

Muthyal Rao: That is if our Shaukar is prepared to spend some time behind the bars. Well, don't ever spread it, it won't help any. Now let's turn to the press Papa Rao *Patel*.

Papa Rao: There's disturbing news from West Bengal *dora*.

Shaukar Suryam: Isn't West Bengal too far away to disturb us any way.

Papa Rao: Don't they say what Bengal thinks today the rest of India thinks tomorrow, and that's my worry.

Rami Reddy: What's it any way?

Papa Rao: Well, it took place only the other day and God forbid 25 May 1967 won't be a red-letter day.

Muthyal Rao: What for is all this buildup, Papa Rao *Patel*? Why don't you tell us in a nutshell?

Papa Rao: You know, well who would've ever known, Naxalbari is a small village in West Bengal. As it happens all the time, there was a dispute over an assigned land between a landlord and a peasant. And again, as is the case all over, the landlord got the peasant thrashed by his goons. That was on 2nd March, but on 25th May the story took a different turn with an unpalatable twist to it. Led by the ultra leftists, Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal, the peasants of Naxalbari revolted against the landlords and usurped their lands. What's worse, vowing to take this revolutionary opposition to every nook and corner, the Maoist duo gave a call to the downtrodden to join the movement in numbers.

Muthyal Rao: Even then, I'm not the one to lose sleep over a storm in the Naxalbari teacup. After all, haven't we seen the so-called Telangana Struggle fizzle out before? Why not move on to something more relevant.

Papa Rao: Maybe you're right after all? Well, our *sarkar* says it's going to distribute *banjar* among the peasants.

Rami Reddy: Won't it make some welcome news?

Shaukar Suryam: Our *Patwari* must be out of his wits to say that *dora*.

Rami Reddy: What would moneylenders know about land grabbing? How long would it take us to relieve them of their *pattas*?

Muthyal Rao: That's true. We can look for better times then. But how are we to believe the politicians?

Papa Rao: They also plan to propagate family planning among them.

Papi Reddy: Why isn't it a sensible measure? Won't that cap the scum?

Shaukar Suryam: Papi Reddy *Patel* seems to miss the point here. What if that picks up amongst them? Won't we be short of women pandering to us?

Papa Rao: That's true; Shaukar *Saab* has some foresight after all.

Muthyal Rao: Why, won't that shrink his customer base as well? What a double jeopardy it could be to our Shaukar. But then, there is no need to worry as things won't change in a hurry, if at all they change.

[Enter: Anasuya.]

Anasuya: *Dandaal dora.*

Muthyal Rao: Why, any problem?

Anasuya: I seek protection for my daughter *dora*.

Papi Reddy: Well, what's the matter?

Anasuya: *Dora*, my sister-in-law and her husband are forcing my daughter to wed their son.

Papa Rao: What's the objection? After all, isn't it the custom?

Anasuya: But the custom in my family is to get her married to her *maama* that is my brother Saailu.

Muthyal Rao to his henchman: Bring Yellaiah and Mallamma to the *panchayat*.

[Exit: Henchman.]

Rami Reddy: How old is your daughter?

Anasuya: *Patwari-ji*, she has just now matured.

Shaukar Suryam: Won't it be in the know of Papi Reddy *Patel* as well?

Papi Reddy: Why poke your nose into my affairs. Did I ever enquire about her EDD, you know who.

Muthyal Rao: Oh, stop it. [Turns to *Anasuya*.] What's your man's take on this?

Anasuya: He's coerced by them into agreeing *dora*.

[Enter: Henchman with Mallamma.]

Mallamma: *Dandaal dora*.

Muthyal Rao: What about Yelligadu?

Mallamma: He's gone to town *dora*.

Muthyal Rao: *Yeme* Mallamma, *Anasuya* complains that you're fiddling in her family matters.

Mallamma: *Dora*, my son was betrothed to *Renuka* at her birth itself. Now it's my *vadina* who backtracks.

Muthyal Rao: *Yemey* Anasuya, is it true?

Papi Reddy: Whatever, we may restrain the Yellaiahs to keep away from the girl.

Mallamma: *Dora*, how can Papi Reddy *Patel* decide for the *panchayat* even before Anasuya replies?

Papi Reddy: *Yeme* Mallamma, aren't you talking like a *panch*. Don't you know it's the parents who decide whom the children have to marry? Now the *panchayat* decides that none from Yellaiah's family should take things into their hands.

Mallamma: How come *dora* fails to stop Papi Reddy *Patel* from hijacking the *panchayat*.

Papi Reddy: Oh how dare you? Don't we see you're thrashed and then thrown out of Rampur?

Mallamma [in all fury]: *Dora*, they say *panch* is *parameshwar* but here I see the Satan in collusion.

Papi Reddy: You dirty bitch. [He spats on her.]

Mallamma: *Orey* Papi Reddy. [She leaps up to Papi Reddy but drops down holding her chest in pain.]

Papi Reddy: Won't it serve you right, you upstart. It does no good for the *dalits* to be angry. Realize that.

Mallamma: *Orey luchchaa*. [Getting up with some effort, she pounces upon Papi Reddy.]

[As Mallamma tries to throttle Papi Reddy, Anasuya tries to restrain her. In the end, Mallamma collapses as Papi Reddy *Patel* pushes her away.]

Rami Reddy: Looks like she's dead, maybe, it's a massive stroke followed by a mild one.

Papa Rao: Thank God, she didn't have a sickle in her hand. Now I can imagine the peasant fury at Naxalbari.

Muthyal Rao: Papa Rao *Patel*, forget about Naxalbari, surely it's one headache less in Rampur.

Shaukar Suryam: More so for Papi Reddy Patel. Oh, the way he's rooting for Anasuya! *Dora*, don't you see some *daal me kaala* in this?

Papi Reddy [Recovers his composure]: Why not you go and please yourself with that just widowed.

Muthyal Rao (Gets up): Let's go.

Rami Reddy: Where, to Maisaiah's widow.

[All laugh as they exit and Mallamma lay on the floor.]

[Enter Yellaiah with a bag in hand, and seeing Mallamma, he rushes to her.]

Yellaiah: Oh Malli, why did you desert me? Now how am I to live without you? [Lying over her body Yellaiah wails inconsolably.]

[Enter: Narsimma, Sarakka, Yadagiri, Maisamma and other villagers as the curtains are slowly down.]

Scene - 5

[Curtains up: Standing near the well of the downtrodden, Narsimma peeps into it.]

[Enter: Renuka on tiptoe, and blindfolds him.]

Narsimma: Don't I smell my Renu from a mile. [He clasps her hand that blindfolds him.]

Renuka [Pushes a sweetmeat into his mouth]: See how my success in Matric tastes.

Narsimma: [Taking her into his arms.] But I'm for sweeter things from a sweet sixteen.

Renuka [Coyly]: *Po baava*. [Coquettishly] As if I'm holding you at the threshold. You can smell me from a mile but won't move an inch into my life. What a *buddhu* you are *baava*.

Narsimma: *Buddhu* or *badiya* you would only know after we wed. But don't you feel the pull of my love from the pulse of my heart?

Renuka: [Puts her ear to his chest.] Well, now if you don't pull me into your life, my mother would push me out of it, and *baava* that would be the end of me. [She sits morosely on the wall and looks into the well.]

Narsimma: Don't you know Renu that lovers never die. Ask Romeo - Juliet, Salim - Anarkali, Heer - Ranjha etc.

Renuka: Do you want us to go their way or what, to live 'happily ever after' only in the hereafter.

Narsimma: Don't lose heart Renu; we'll make it a unique *baava-maradalu* saga in Rampur itself.

Renuka: With Saailu as villain, don't you know my mother has her own script. Oh, the very thought of wedding him is so scary. [She looks into the well.] Well, if ever the push comes to the shove, like *aththa*, I too would jump into their well.

Narsimma [Holding her]: Why don't you have a thought for me Renu? Don't you know I live with the hope of living with you? If you die, it would be the end of me as well. [He peeps into the well.]

Renuka: Oh, *baava*, how you keep me in the *trisankehu swargam*.

Narsimma: Bear with me, I'll find a way out.

Renuka: I don't see any way out but to elope, and now is the time. If not. [She mocks to slip into the well]

Narsimma [Catching her by the waist.]: Do you think I didn't think about it?

Renuka: *Baava*, I suspect my mother has a secret agenda. We've no time to lose now.

Narsimma: Oh, if only Sarakka were married and I've my degree on hand. Then I would've left this god-damn place with you and my father. But if we run away now, my father and sister would be hauled over the coals by your mother. Leave aside Papi Reddy *Patel*, she would have the full *panchayat* to back her on that score.

Renuka: Don't I foresee that? But I don't want to lose you at any cost, and that's my dilemma. Oh, God, I'm going mad.

Narsimma: Even if our fears are liars, still our move puts a full stop to my studies. How my mother lived and died dreaming about my being a B.A.

Renuka: Don't I value your feelings for her and cherish her memory myself. In a way, didn't she die trying to avert my fate? Now it's up to you *baava* to see that she didn't die in vain. Let not your misplaced sentiment make me a living dead.

Narsimma: More than my sentiment Renu, it's my conviction that's inhibiting me.

Renuka: What is it *baava* that overrides the fate of your beloved?

Narsimma: Don't you know how I swear by *dalit* education. What's the use of preaching without practicing?

Renuka: Oh! Life is not for tagging to theories *baava*; it's about grabbing its moments.

Narsimma: Maybe, I'm too young to be realistic about life.

Renuka: It's nothing but escapism *baava*, and that's going to ruin my life. [She looks into the well over her shoulder]

Narsimma: Don't you see that I'm powerless now to protect you? Let's see how your life itself protects you.

Renuka: You don't need any crystal ball to see what my future portends, do you? [She looks into the well.]

Narsimma: Don't I know what my future would be like without you.

Renuka: Why, I've an idea. [She jumps down to the ground] Let's elope with *mavayya* and Sarakka in tow. We three will toil to keep you going.

Narsimma [Excitedly.]: Why couldn't I think of it myself Renu? Is it that I love you any less?

Renuka: I know you love me more than you realize. Well, your wooly ideologies seem to be the bane of my life.

Narsimma: Maybe, it's possible. But Renu, if there's a way of not losing you, do you think I'll ever lose you?

Renuka: But *baava*, God forbid what if it's a foiled bid.

Narsimma: Why do you think so? As you've buoyed my love, I'll fly you to the moon itself. All said and done, it's better to try and fail than never to have tried at all.

Renuka: Just in case, don't forget that I live in the hope of being your wife before I die.

Narsimma: If ever I lose your love, I know it would be the end of my life. Well let's plan for our life together.

[Narsimma and Renuka talk in undertones. Curtains down]

Scene – 6

[Curtains up: Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao, Rami Reddy, Papi Reddy and Shaukar Suryam sit on the dais of scene - 4 with a couple of henchmen standing guard. While Yellaiah, Narsimma, Renuka

and Sarakka stand accused, sitting on the floor are Maisamma, Yadagiri, Anasuya and other villagers.]

Muthyal Rao: Papa Rao *Patel*, let the *panchayat* begin.

Papa Rao: *Hahn dora*. Abetted by Yelligadu and Sarakka, Narsigadu tried to elope with Renuka. All were caught red-handed while leaving the village at the dead of the night, last night.

Renuka: *Dora*, as my mother fixed my marriage against my wishes, it's I who goaded them to take me away.

Muthyal Rao: Keep quiet, no one called for your *sanjaayishi*.

Narsimma: *Dora*, Renu is my betrothed, and my *aththa* is the spoilsport.

Muthyal Rao: Narsiga, why didn't you approach the *panchayat* then?

Narsimma: *Dora*, you know how Papi Reddy *Patel* takes sides.

Papi Reddy: Narsiga, how dare you accuse a *panch*?

Yellaiah: *Dora*, please pardon me and bless the children.

Reddy: Wah Yelliga wah. Blessing the runaways, what a precedent it sets.

Yellaiah: [Bows his head in silence]

Muthyal Rao: *Yera* Yelliga, why abet your son, don't you know elopement is a crime in Rampur?

Yellaiah: *Hahn dora*, but Anasuya is the cause of it.

Yadagiri: *Hahn dora*.

Maisamma: *Dora*, bless the children and may God bless you.

Muthyal Rao: Maisamma, sadly it's all too late now. Had any of you brought the issue before the *panchayat*, we would've addressed it suitably.

Narsimma: Is it so *dora*?

Muthyal Rao: Well, now that the crime is committed, it's the punishment time. What the *panch* have to say?

Papa Rao: What's there to disagree *dora*.

Papi Reddy: *Dora*, we might note that Yellaiah's family members are habitual offenders.

Shankar Suryam: Well, didn't Mallamma attack Papi Reddy *Patel* in the *panchayat* itself. If not for that stroke of luck and for lack of a sickle, God knows where he would've been now.

Muthyal Rao: It's five lashes each to Narsigadu and Yelligadu, and two to Sarakka.

Renuka: Why leave me out *dora*. Let me also share their fate.

Muthyal Rao: What makes you think you're let off scot-free; your turn would come any way.

[Taking cue from Muthyal Rao, his henchman was about to lash at Narasimma. Even before Narasimma could take the blow, Renuka rushes to him and takes it herself. While other henchman holds Renuka, Narsimma, Yellaiah and Sarakka are whipped as directed.]

Muthyal Rao: As Renuka tried to elope with Narsigadu, the *panchayat* prohibits her from marrying him.

Papi Reddy: And for having shamed Saailu, she should be his slavish wife.

Renuka: *Dora*, is not history repeating itself. Don't you see Papi Reddy *Patel* hijacking the *panchayat* all again.

[Instinctively Papi Reddy gets into a protective posture.]

Narsimma: And yet *dora* says we should've approached the *panchayat*.

Anasuya: See his audacity *dora*. I'm afraid he may frisk her away before the wedding.

Muthyal Rao: When is that?

Anasuya: It's day after tomorrow *dora*.

Muthyal Rao: Then, till Renuka's marriage is performed, Yelligadu and his children may be confined in the *banduldoddi*.

Rami Reddy: *Dora*, with strayed cattle for company?

Muthyal Rao: So be it *Patwari*. Won't that serve as a lesson for the others?

[Exit: Yellaiah, Narsimma and Sarakka led away by the henchmen.]

Maisamma: [As she exits.] Oh, if only Mallamma were alive.

Shaukar Suryam: We would've kept round the clock vigil at our well. What do you say *dora*?

Muthyal Rao [Frowns]: Go jump yourself.

Papi Reddy: Why so *dora*, hasn't he got better things on his hands?

Rami Reddy: Better we focus on Narsimma for hurt cuts both ways.

[Curtains down.]

Scene - 7

[Curtains up: Narsimma is at the reading table in his room in the Scheduled Castes -Scheduled Tribes Hostel. Enter: Srisailam, his friend and fellow inmate.]

Srisailam: Hi, how're you still here?

Narsimma: [Doesn't respond.]

Srisailam: Don't you know Madanna is expected?

Narsimma: Is it in tow with Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal or what?

Srisailam: It's no joking matter you know, the People's War Group.

Narsimma: What else is it? Don't they think bashing up the *peddollar* is going to solve our problems? And they call it revolutionary opposition, my foot. Let them go to hell with their *naxalism*, and better we mind our studies.

Srisailam: All said and done, is he not your *langotiyaar*?

Narsimma: If not why did I put up with that Majumdar's 'Historic Eight Documents' for so long?

Srisailam: I don't know why you're so cut up with him.

Narsimma: Why should I not be? You know he is of IAS stuff. Oh, how I did my best to convince him that as a District Collector he could have made a difference to the downtrodden. Besides, won't a bright *dalit* boost the morale of our folks? If only you knew how I begged him not to put all that on the *naxal* line. But he spoiled it all for him and for us as well. Hasn't he become a fugitive already?

Srisailam: So be it. He's already the darling of the downtrodden and a high-up in the PWG .

Narsimma: Why forget even a *dalam* bears his name? And he wants me as his deputy. It's as if he's making me the Vice-President of the nation.

Srisailam: I'm sure you've declined to pursue your god-damn studies.

Narsimma: You leave me to my studious fate and tell me why you're eager to join the gang.

Srisailam: Why, do you feel we're not oppressed enough to be aggressive?

Narsimma: If a few of us bash up a few of them, do you believe that would end our ordeals?

Srisailam: It may not be the end but surely it would be the beginning of the end.

Narsimma: Why, your revolutionary opposition is sure to invite their retaliatory repression. Won't the cycle of violence stymie our struggle?

Srisailam: So what's your prescription to our ailment? Bear it all through life waiting for death to end it.

Narsimma: Why, didn't Baba *Sabeb* pave the path for *dalit* progress through education? Maybe, the journey is long, arduous even, but it surely gets us there. But these Charus and Kanus are leading us astray. I'm convinced about it.

Srisailam: No denying Ambedkar Marg leads us to the *dalit* country. But we need Majumdar's musketeers and Sanyal's *sepoys* to guard our convoys, don't we?

Narsimma: Maybe, but what about the oppressors from our own ranks?

Srisailam: What a weird thought it is, oppressors among the oppressed.

[Enter: Madanna on the run.]

Narsimma to Madanna: You know I'm not a game for it.

Madanna: Oh, you shut up, and find a way out for me. I'm on the run now.

[Exit: Narsimma even as Madanna gets under the cot.]

Srisailam: I too want to serve the cause *anna*.

Madanna: Well, Narsimma would lead you to my hideout. Let's meet tomorrow if I'm not nabbed now.

[Enter: Narsimma, and lets Madanna slip away from the window.]

Srisailam: After this can you miss the heroism in *naxalism*.

Narsimma: Oh, what a rendezvous it was with your idol.

Srisailam: And he showed me the green light.

Narsimma: He himself being on the run that is. Well, who am I to stop you, any way?

Srisailam: Show me the way then.

[Even as Narsimma whispers into Srisailam's ear, there is a knock on the door. And Narsimma opens it. Enter: Two Police Constables and they search the place]

Police Constable (1) to Narsimma: Where is Madanna?

Narsimma: Constable *Saab*, he left the hostel long ago.

Police Constable (1): Where is he is now?

Narsimma: *Saab*, I've lost touch with him

Police Constable (2) [Pushing Narsimma.]: *Chal beta*, once in the lockup, surely you would sing a different tune.

Police Constable (1) [Pushing Srisailam]: *Chal, tum bhi chal.*

[Exit: Police Constables with Narsimma and Srisailam. Curtains down.]

Scene – 8

[Curtains up: Badly bruised Narsimma and Srisailam lodged in the Police Lockup.]

Srisailam: Though I was sure you wouldn't, I was worried that I might spill the beans. Maybe, it's the confidence that you won't let out that let me hold out. Oh, how these bastards beat us to pulp.

Narsimma: Oppressors among the oppressed, is it still a weird thought?

Srisailam: Not any more, but do tell me whom you had in mind before my eyes were opened by these brutish cops.

Narsimma: I didn't tell you what my aunt did to her own daughter. Oh how she got her daughter married to a pimp of her brother. God knows how my poor Renu is putting up with that Saailu. Hope his last threads of decency hold him from pimping for his own wife.

Srisailam: Oh, how sad. Can't I understand your hurt at losing your sweetheart?

Narsimma: And to add insult to injury was that *banduldoddi*. I didn't tell you about it either. How our family was hauled up there for three days. Now this lockup has only opened my old wounds. Oh, how sickening it feels.

[Optional - Projecting a pre-shot movie clip showing Yellaiah, Narsimma and Sarakka in the *banduldoddi* with cattle for company.]

Srisailam: Agreed that your aunt is an oppressor herself though from the oppressed lot. But delve deeper and you see the source of her callousness is her closeness with her own oppressors. If we eradicate the poison that is feudalism, then that would defang our own snakes in the grass.

Narsimma: Maybe what you say could be true. But how would you explain the brutality of the men of our ilk simply because they don the police uniform?

Srisailam: Isn't it a good reason for you to strengthen Madanna's hands?

Narsimma: As I told you, I don't do anything that spoils my studies, more so as I've lost my Renu. But when they call me 'Narsiga', I feel like cutting their tongues for that.

Srisailam: You need a knife for that, don't you? Let not the silly degree hold you in bettering the *dalit* lot of as a whole. Seize the moment and be Madanna's deputy.

Narsimma: You may demean the *peddollu* with a gun but that won't make you dignified either. It's by being well educated that we force them to give us our due, though grudgingly in the beginning.

Srisailam: Sure you score. But the other side of the *dalit* coin bears Majumdar's facsimile.

Narsimma: Well can we call both heads and tails at the same time. Maybe, for the *dalit* good, we need some brainstorming and a little arm-twisting as well. But the question is one of division of roles. If not my temperament, surely my circumstance, rules out any revolutionary role for me.

Srisailam: Well said. Let some of us pick up guns while others stick to their studies. Seems we need them both to uplift our folks. Be glued to your books as I arm myself. Know this lockup has only steeled my resolve for revolutionary opposition.

Narsimma: Honestly, I'm no less bitter about the cops. Maybe, a little *maalish* at some joint might soothe our bodies if not our souls.

Srisailam: That is, if they don't have more of an interrogation. Well, won't that earn them more of our ill-will?

Narsimma: We'll know right now. Don't you see that cop coming to us?

[Enter: Police Constable (1) and opens the lockup.]

Police Constable (1): It's over for now, but mind you; we'll keep an eye on you.

[Narsimma and Srisailam come out of the lockup.]

Srisailam: Hope, a homely *dasara* would lighten this a little.

Narsimma: Having gone through hell, why not we've some fun at our place.

Srisailam: I would've loved to, but you know where my heart is pushing me to.

Narsimma: Well, let's see how long I can hold out at this rate.

[Exit: Narsimma and Srisailam. Curtains down.]

Scene – 9

[Curtains up: Papa Rao *Patel* with the day's daily on the dais of scenes – 4 & 6.]

[Enter: Shaukar Suryam.]

Papa Rao: Aayiye Shaukar Saab

Shaukar Suryam: Patel garu, I thought I was late.

Papa Rao: Well isn't that the privilege of our dora, not of the patels and the patwaris. Lo, here he comes.

[Enter: Muthyal Rao.]

Muthyal Rao: What's the news Papa Rao Patel?

Papa Rao: Dora, it's all about annalu and their atrocities.

Shaukar Suryam: Oh, how difficult they're making life for us these days. You know my brother-in-law in Burugupadu, they told him to move out or else. It seems they don't want moneylenders any more.

Muthyal Rao: What is their dora doing there, hatching eggs?

Shaukar Suryam: Whatever it is, he's shifting to Nizamabad.

Muthyal Rao: When lions are on the run, it's the rabbits that chase them, don't they?

Shaukar Suryam: When in dilemma one should go by our proverbs dora. Isn't it said that it's better to kick around than kicking the bucket.

Papa Rao: Thanks to dora, our ilaaka is out of their bounds, at least for now.

Muthyal Rao: Where have Rami Reddy Patwari and Papi Reddy Patel gone?

Papa Rao: They went to Warangal dora.

Muthyal Rao: Why, to spy on their keeps. [He laughs heartily.]

Papa Rao: That's the problem with keeping a woman *dora*, one has to keep an eye on her forever.

Shaukar Suryam: Our *dora* has to thank his forefathers for saving him the bother.

Muthyal Rao: What do you mean by that Shaukar?

Shaukar Suryam: Why, didn't they make it your privilege to have the lowly brides in their nuptials beds? With bride a night, where's the need for you to keep any, much less keep an eye?

Papa Rao [aside]: The women he takes to bed could be his half-sisters and most of the lowly youth must be his bastard sons. But here comes an exception.

[Enter: Narsimma bearing the bruises.]

Muthyal Rao: *Yera* Narsiga why those bruises, were you caught picking a pocket or what?

[Narsimma proceeds ignoring them.]

Muthyal Rao: *Lamdiki*, have you turned deaf?

Narsimma: *Dora*, I'm Narsimma, not Narsiga. And, I'm a college student, not a pickpocket.

Papa Rao: *Osos*, if Inter-pass Narsigadu is Narsimma, then what would be Narsigadu the graduate?

Shaukar Suryam: Well, Narsimma *Saab* of Rampur, won't he be?

Papa Rao: *Dora*, the way the *sarkar* is pampering these, one day we may have to call him Narsimma Sir.

Muthyal Rao: *Bhosdike*, if you're Narsimma, what to say of Yelligadu *thera baap*?

Papa Rao: *Dora*, it has to be Yellaiah *garu*, no less. Why doubt that?

Narsimma: Papa Rao *Patel*, be it a *patel* father or a *dalit* father, father is a father.

Papa Rao: Naayaala, don't forget your *aukaat*. If Yellaiahs and Pullaiahs are Yella Raos and Pulla Raos, what's the use of being a *dora*, leave alone a *patel* or a *patwar?*

Narsimma: B.A. is bound to change my *aukaat* but many *patels* may remain *anguthachaaps*.

Papa Rao: Banchut, what audacity, mind you, you would pay for it.

Shankar Suryam: Well, was it not Gandhi who brought things to this pass. How he turned these lowly against us saying they are *harijan*. It's as if we are devil's descendents.

Muthyal Rao: Why blame Gandhi who's dead and gone. Isn't it the *sarkar* that feeds their egos with free food and all, that too with the taxpayers' money? And the irony is they prefer to be referred as *dalits*, whatever it might mean.

Papa Rao: Dora, how are the *naxals* any better? Don't they extort money from us to turn these against us?

Muthyal Rao: Well said Papa Rao Patel, this *naxal* extortion is a damn good business without investment. What about joining their gang?

Shankar Suryam: Dora, if only we're young enough to take a little beating in the woods, then maybe, it's not a bad business line at all.

Papa Rao: Any way, Narsiga, better keep off from the *naxal hawa* or else you would come to grief in the end.

Muthyal Rao: Narsiga, fetch your *baap* here and now. I'll find out why he failed to teach you how to respect your *dora*.

Papa Rao: Why dora forgets about poor *patels*.

Shankar Suryam: Now why spoil our time with these men. Isn't it time to spend time with their women? Why not summon him to the *gadi* tomorrow.

Muthyal Rao: Oh, how I've got carried away. *Orey* Narsiga, haven't you heard what Shaukar *Saab* said? Tell your *abba* to be at the *gadi* at eleven in the morning. Sharp eleven. [Exit: Narsimma in all silence.]

Shaukar Suryam: *Dora*, didn't you see the defiant look in him. If this is going to be the trend with them, then what would the future portend us?

Papa Rao: My son pesters me to shift to Karimnagar but I thought there's no point in becoming a nonentity there. Now that these too don't *khatir* us any more, maybe it calls for a rethink on my part.

Shaukar Suryam: Don't lose heart Papa Rao *Patel*. Wait and watch as *dora* takes Yelligadu to task. Won't Narsigadu fall in line then?

Papa Rao: *Dora*, looks like it has turned out to be two swords in a sheath syndrome now. It's either they or us, and that's for sure.

Muthyal Rao: Papa Rao *Patel*, all I can say is, wait till the morrow.

Shaukar Suryam: *Dora*, do remember, the proof of pudding is in the eating.

Muthyal Rao: Let come the dinner time. [He gets up.]

[Exit: Others too get up. Curtains down.]

Scene - 10

[Curtains up: Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao and Shaukar Suryam in the courtyard of Muthyal Rao's *gadi*.]

Papa Rao: Why *dora*, Yelligadu hasn't turned up so far!

Shaukar Suryam: Well, won't he need time to pick up courage to come?

Muthyal Rao: And gather his wits as well.

[Enter: Head Constable Veeraiah amidst their laughter.]

Veeraiah: What makes the *dora* so mirthful, that too in these *naxal* times!

Muthyal Rao: Oh, leave it Veeraiah, what brings you here so often? Is it a second set-up or what?

Veeraiah: *Dora*, with *sarkari* salary where's the scope for a *bavaldar* having a *chinnillu*?

Shaukar Suryam: Maintain wife with salary, and sustain keep with *mamools*. Isn't it the norm with the *sarkari naukars*?

Veeraiah: Shaukar *Saab*, it was the case in the good old days. But now, it's the politicians that are lining their pockets, leaving us with soiled hands. By the way, is there any fish here that's not in your net already?

Muthyal Rao: With so many brothels in the town why cry foul Veeraiah. Raid a den and you're in. Isn't it as simple as that?

Veeraiah: *Dora*, we're more at raiding *naxal* hideouts these days. Now it's all about braving bullets and not pulling *pallus*. Oh, these *annalu* and their god-damn intent to kill cops.

Papa Rao: *Mori Saab*, do you smell a rat here or what?

Veeraiah: Well, we suspect that *Madanna Dalam* has a mole here.

Muthyal Rao: Who could that be?

Veeraiah: *Dora*, looks like its Yellaiah's son Narsimma. Once he was Madanna's roommate at the SC-ST Hostel.

Papa Rao: So, he's just a step away from joining his gang.

Veeraiah: Who knows by my next visit, he would've gone underground. Well we all have to keep an eye on him.

Muthyal Rao: Don't worry Veeraiah, leave that to me.

Veeraiah: It will surely make my job easy. *Yellostha dora*.

[Exit: Veeraiah.]

Shaukar Suryam: *Dora*, won't that explain Narsigadu's impudence?

Papa Rao: Now it's high time our *dora* gets tough with him.

Muthyal Rao: Let Yelligadu come and then see the *tamaasha*.

Shaukar Suryam: But why is there no sign of him yet?

Papa Rao: Who knows if Narsigadu cared to tell him at all?

Muthyal Rao: Maybe it's possible. It's as if the rascal is already putting on *naxal* airs.

Papa Rao: If we fail to act now, it might even send wrong signals to them.

Shaukar Suryam: Why, it will be surely taken as our weakness.

Muthyal Rao: Why not I send my men to drag them here together.

Papa Rao: Better we make an example of both of them in their own backyard *dora*. That would send the right signals to one and all.

Shaukar Suryam: What do you say about that *dora*?

Muthyal Rao [Gets up]: Come, let's nip it in the bud. [He gets up.]

[Exit: Others too get up. Curtains down.]

Scene – 11

[Curtains up: Yellaiah's hut of scene -1 in the *dalit mohalla*.]

[Enter: Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao and Sahukar Suryam with their walking sticks and their henchmen.]

Papa Rao: Orey Yelliga.

Yellaiah [From inside]: Dandaalu Patel garu.

[Enter: Yellaiah with folded hands.]

Yellaiah: Why take the trouble of coming here dora. You could've sent word to me.

Muthyal Rao: Yera, didn't Narsigadu tell you?

Yellaiah: He told me nothing dora.

Muthyal Rao: Where's that rascal?

Yellaiah: He left in the morning dora, I don't know where to.

Muthyal Rao [Raising the walking stick]: Jhootakor, don't tell lies, tell us where he is.

Yellaiah: Believe me dora, I really don't know where he has gone. Please tell me what's wrong with him, and I will set him right.

Sahukar Suryam: Dora, if only we set right the father, the son gets it right, won't he?

[Muthyal Rao strikes Yellaiah with his walking stick followed by Papa Rao and Sahukar Suryam: As Yellaiah falls on the ground, they beat him still, hurling abuses at him. All the while the terrified onlookers watch helplessly.]

Muthyal Rao: Yedava naayaala, if you want to stay here, send your son to the gadi.

[Enter: Sarakka from outside, and goes to Yellaiah.]

Muthyal Rao [Pulling Sarakka away from Yellaiah]: *Arre*, how I failed to notice this lass all these days?

Yellaiah: She's just a kid *dora*.

Muthyal Rao: *Bhosdike*, do you think your *dora* is blind or what?

Papa Rao: Don't worry Yelliga; we'll let her taste the sweetness of life before her brother tastes its bitterness.

Yellaiah: *Dora*, it won't go well with *ammoru*, Sarakka and Sammakka. Know she's born with their blessings.

Papa Rao (Beating Yellaiah with his stick): So you want to invoke their curse on us.

Muthyal Rao: Try sending your *ammoru* Sammakka to save your daughter Sarakka.

[Exit: Muthyal Rao dragging a wailing Sarakka, followed by Papa Rao, Shaukar Suryam and the henchmen.]

[The neighbours gather around Yellaiah. Someone fetches him some water that he drinks.

Yellaiah slowly goes into the hut as all leave.]

[Enter: Narsimma after a while and finds a distraught Yellaiah]

Narsimma: Why what happened?

Yellaiah: But why did you offend the *dora*?

Narsimma: Well, he called me Narsiga and I told him that I'm Narsimma. Has he taken it out on you or what?

Yellaiah: Don't you know these *peddollu* are quick to take offence. Didn't your mother bind you to bear till you're a B.A.? But still you turn a hotheaded at the least provocation.

Narsimma: Why, didn't I bear the *banduldoddi*? Or did I fail to keep my cool after the police lockup. Animals too retort but we, oh how we're conditioned not to protest even. Oh, what a life we lead, if it can be called life at all. But don't try to bind me with that sentiment any more. Enough is enough.

Yellaiah: Please yourself with your foolhardy as we pay the price for it.

Narsimma: Why where's Sarakka?

Yellaiah: What I can tell you? [He cries no end.]

Narsimma: Why don't you tell me what happened to her?

Yellaiah: Oh how your *amma* died protesting against the injustice to her brother's daughter. Failing to protect my own daughter why am I still alive? Oh what an accursed life.

[Enter Sarakka with tattered clothes and shattered look. As Yellaiah takes her into his arms, Narsimma picks up a sickle from the bamboo work.]

Narsimma: Who's that?

Sarakka: Not one, it's three of them.

Narsimma [Raising the sickle.]: Tell me who they are? I'll see their end.

Yellaiah: Why put your life at risk as if we're not harmed enough. Won't they see your end before you raise your hand?

[Narsimma throws the weapon in frustration, and folds about Sarakka in emotion]

Narsimma: Oh, if only I acted in time, I would've been Madanna's deputy by now. Who would've dared touch you then?

Yellaiah: It's as well you're not. Now don't get carried away in the heat of the moment and ruin your life. In time, all this will come to pass any way.

Narsimma: Now that they've tasted our blood, do you think they won't thirst for more of it. Can't I see this as their proxy war against Madanna?

Yellaiab: Whatever, lay low till you get your degree, and all will be fine thereafter.

Narsimma: Oh the god-damn degree. Of what avail is it when my sister's life is in tatters.

Sarakka: If anything, your Renu's life is worse for she has to endure more of it. Oh, how she longs for you.

Yellaiab: Sarakka don't be crazy and incite him further. Don't you know whoso revolted came to grief? Have you forgotten what happened to your mother? Don't they say devils tread where angels fear. Let him not spoil the show after all the preparation. Once he gets a job, we'll get rid of this hell and be done with them.

Narsimma: Patience beyond a point is cowardice *naayana*. Didn't *amma* prove that point in the *panchayat*? And even if we get away from here, our folks remain entrapped all the same. Its better I die fighting the *peddollaru* than live a slighted soul.

Yellaiab: But don't you see the police are shooting these *naxals* like stray dogs these days.

Narsimma: It's worth dying for the downtrodden than live as one. I've made up my mind now; I won't let you live as their vassals any longer.

Sarakka: *Anna*, now I've no reason to live than to be avenged. And if that helps our *dalit* cause as well, won't I have a purpose added to it. Oh, how I'm raring to go now.

Yellaiab: Why there's no thought for your old father? Don't you know I've vested all my interests in you? Do you want to throw me to the wolves?

Narsimma: No emotional blackmail would do now *naayana*. Why, with both of us in the *dalam*, who would dare come near you? If land lends them strength, gun gives us power, won't it?

Sarakka: If only *amma* had a sickle in her hand then, that bloody Papi Reddy wouldn't have been alive now? With a gun in hand, won't I show them the difference now?

Narsimma to Sarakka: Wait till I brief Madanna and send for you. Any way, it won't be long. Bye till then [Goes to Yellaiah and takes his hand.] Be assured no harm would ever come to you.

[Exit: Narsimma as Sarakka sees him off.]

Yellaiah [Falling on the floor]: Malli, don't you see how our hopes have collapsed like a pack of cards? Oh, God only knows what would happen now?

[Curtains down.]

Scene – 12

[Curtains up: Madanna, Mallanna, Srisailam and Narsimma in a jungle hideout.]

Madanna to Narsimma: So, the bird has come home to roost after all.

Narsimma: Driven out of its hearth so to say.

Mallanna: How *peddanna* has been waiting for this day.

Madanna: Well, who doesn't want to have a strategic brain like his?

Srisailam: Oh, how he used to turn the tables on your opponents at every turn.

Madanna: Wait and see what a difference he makes to the *dalit* cause. [Turns to Naesimma.] But how did you achieve your nirvana Narsimma?

Narsimma: Oh, how my sister was raped, and for what reason? It's just because I protested their calling me Narsiga.

Madanna: I hope it's not just your hurt that drove you here

Narsimma: Why, I've lost patience for a patient change.

Srisailam: *Peddanna*, to be fair to Narsimma, he too feels that it calls for a little arm-twisting besides some brainstorming. I know that temperamentally he's all for revolutionary opposition, but ironically it was his circumstances that kept him away from the People's War in the beginning and brought him into it in the end.

Narsimma: How well you've read me *anna*. Now, with the end of my dilemma, won't they begin to feel the heat of my hurt?

Madanna: Mark my words Mallanna, wounded that he is, he's going to revolutionize the revolutionary opposition itself.

Srisailam: Why its *Ugra* Narsimma the *peddollaru* have to contend with now.

Narsimma: Why have you forgiven the cops already?

Srisailam: How can I?

Narsimma to Madanna: *Peddanna*, my sister Sarakka too is itching to join us.

Mallanna: Why not, our *dalam* will have one more motivated member in it. (Turns to Madanna)

What do you say *peddanna*? Won't that herald women cadres?

Madanna: Why not take all the members into confidence. I don't want them to carry the impression that it's our joint enterprise. Moreover, as it involves women, you better ascertain their views.

[Exit: Mallanna.]

Srisailam: Don't we need to be cautious in our move? What if it turns out to be the ideological dilution in a romantic setting? Well, I'm not speaking for myself as I swore to be single.

Narsimma: What if they are ideologically compatible, won't they contribute in their own way. Instead of keeping them away altogether, why not we wed them to our struggle as our wives.

Madanna: Well, let's wait for the feedback.

[Enter: Mallanna.]

Mallanna: They're all for it *peddanna*.

Madanna: Now, three of you together put procedures in place. Let it also be known that it's innovation in planning and daring in operation that decides who climbs up the ladder, and nothing else, gender included. By now all know Madanna doesn't play favourites.

Narsimma: It's my word that I shall never try to allow my closeness to *peddanna* affect my attitude towards others. I shall strive to win the trust and affection of all in every possible way.

Madanna: Mallanna may fetch Narsimma's sister.

[Exit: Mallanna. Curtains down.]

Scene – 13

[Curtains up: Madanna, Srisailam and Narsimma in the jungle hideout of scene -12.]

[Enter: Sarakka ushered in by Mallanna. Narsimma goes up and takes her hand.]

Narsimma: How is *naayana*?

Sarakka: Don't worry; he's reconciling.

Narsimma to Madanna: She's Sarakka, my sister.

Madanna: Warm welcome Saroopaa. Don't you like your alias?

Sarakka: Thanks for the welcome and the alias as well.

Madanna: Maybe you're smart, but life here is tough, tougher than you could've imagined it to be.

Sarakka: Didn't I have a taste of it trekking all the way.

Madanna: Being a single female here, it could be odd even.

Sarakka: And so I've come with my companion.

Narsimma: Who's that?

Sarakka: Let the leader show the green light, and then you could see for yourself.

Madanna: Interesting and intriguing even, coming on recommendation yourself, you have another to commend to our *dalam*. Okay, go ahead.

[Exit: Sarakka leaving a perplexed Narsimma.]

[Enter: Renuka with Sarakka. Narsimma goes up to Renuka and takes her hand.]

Renuka: I'm Narsimma's Renuka. *Annalu* may excuse my trespass.

Madanna: Welcome Renakka. But what brings you here?

Renuka: To seek redress for myself and to serve our cause as well.

Madanna: What's your grievance like?

Renuka: I'm wronged by my mother and abused by my man.

Madanna: What's the evidence to prove your accusation?

Renuka: Your friend Narsimma can provide the evidence and my cousin Sarakka can bear witness to my travails.

[Narsimma and Renuka murmur into Madanna's ears in turns.]

Madanna: Now that their guilt is established beyond doubt, what about the punishment?

Renuka: Death to my mother, and I would like to put my man's fate in your hands.

Madanna: How do you justify the exemplary punishment to a woman, that too your mother?

Renuka: She knew that I don't share her idea of *dalit* life as pandering to the *peddollu*. Knowing that her brother makes his living by pimping for them, still she coerced me into marrying him knowing fully well that I'm in love with my *baava*. What's worse, it's she who turned her brother into a pimp to serve her ends. Isn't she an inimical woman, wife, mother and sister all rolled into one. I believe she deserves to die.

Madanna: What about your man who has harmed you no less?

Renuka: Well it's I who married him though against my will. Sure he bedded me with that Papi Reddy, and I failed to resist him on my own. Now I don't want to punish him with borrowed strength.

Madanna: I appreciate your sense of justice and invite you to be the conscience keeper of the *dalam*.

Renuka: *Peddanna*, I'm honoured indeed.

Madanna: Now, besides confirming the sentencing of Anasuya, I pronounce death to Saailu as well for his anti-*dalit* activities. But for our *dalam* it's an irony to punish the errant *dalits* ahead of the erring *dora*.

Narsimma: Coinciding with their execution, why not we have a *dalit adalat* at Rampur to try its *dora* and his cohorts.

Madanna: Well, it's tactically sound. All may assist Mallanna in planning things.

Srisailam to Mallanna: Didn't I tell you Narsimma makes a difference to the revolutionary opposition.

Mallanna: Don't I know that Madanna is spot on when it comes to judging people. Now that he has his alter ego in tow, won't it be a time of nightmares for them?

[Curtains down.]

Scene – 14

[Curtains up: Madanna, Srisailam, Narsimma, Sarakka and Renuka (all in the *dalam's* uniform) sit on the dais around the mango tree of the scenes – 4, 6 & 9 as armed *naxals* (also in the same uniform) stand besides them. A stream of villagers gathers there.]

[Enter: *Anna (1)* of the *dalam*.]

Anna (1): *Peddanna*, we've got them.

Madanna: Usher them in.

[Exit: *Anna (1)*]

[Enter: *Anna (1)* and *Anna (2)* with bleary eyed Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao, Shaugar Suryam, Papi Reddy, and Rami Reddy with his son Narsi Reddy. Srisailam motions to them to sit.]

Narsimma: With the *dalit adalat* trying the *gram panchayat*, well, what a day it is going to be for the revolutionary opposition. But why is Narsi Reddy brought here?

Anna (1): You may know Madiga Yellanna's daughter Nirmala. She has complained against Rami Reddy's son Narsi Reddy.

Narsimma: Well, but where is she?

Anna (2): *Anna*, she would be here any time now.

Narsimma: Okay, we'll take up the issue after she turns up. Meanwhile, let's deal with the *dora* and his cohorts.

[*Anna (2)* calls up Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao, Rami Reddy, Papi Reddy and Shaukar Suryam, and they all stand up]

Sarakeka: Chief, these are the sinful five.

Madanna: What are they accused of?

Sarakeka: To start with, they're all inimical towards the *dalits*.

Madanna: Are you guilty on that count or not?

[All five nod in agreement.]

Narsimma: Any submission to this *dalit adalat*?

Papa Rao: Forgive us Narsimma, pardon us *peddanna*, we'll behave ourselves.

Narsimma: Will you swear to respect *dalits*?

[All five nod in agreement.]

Madanna: It's the revolutionary decree of this *adalat* to tattoo 'I respect *dalits*' on both their forearms. And for better effect, let it be capital D.

[Exit: A stunned Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao, Rami Reddy, Papi Reddy and Shaukar Suryam are led away by *Anna(1)* and *Anna(2)* as the gathered applaud the judgment.]

[Enter: *Anna (3)* with Nirmala.]

Anna (3): *Anna*, this is Nirmala.

Srisailam: What's your grievance?

Nirmala: This Narsi Reddy has raped me.

Srisailam: *Yera* Narsi Reddy, are you guilty of the charge?

Narsi Reddy: *Anna* allow me to make amends by marrying her.

Srisailam to Nirmala: Does that redress your grievance?

Nirmala: It's not out of remorse that he proposes. He wants to save his skin, that's all. And the whole village knows he's a habitual violator.

Madanna: Let Narsi Reddy face the firing squad.

Narsi Reddy: *Peddanna*, please.

Narsimma: Not to take anything away from Nirmala's hurt; we may take Narsi Reddy's youth into account. It's true he's willing to atone for his sin only to save his skin but still.

Srisailam: *Anna*, it's not some juvenile delinquency calling for leniency. It's his *patwari* mind-set to debauch *dalit* women that we're dealing with.

Madanna: What is our conscience keeper's say on this?

Renuka: It's only fair that he serves a jail term as per law. But sadly our failed system lets him go scot-free. And that enables him to violate many more women, if not here, elsewhere. So to save the trauma of his likely victims, he should lose his life.

Madanna: Let the sentence be carried out.

[Exit: A stunned Narsi Reddy led away by *Anna* (3).]

[Enter: *Anna* (1) and *Anna* (2) with Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao, Rami Reddy, Papi Reddy and Shaukar Suryam, amidst a hail of bullets.]

Rami Reddy: Where is my son? What have you done to him?

Srisailam: Well, he has got his deserts.

Rami Reddy: *Peddanna* please let me see him.

Madanna: *Yeh, Patwari*, sit still till all get their due. [To *Sarakka*] Well, are there any more charges against these fellows?

Sarakka: I accuse Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao and Shaukar Suryam of having raped me.

Narsimma: Are you guilty of the charge?

[All the three nod in agreement]

Narsimma: Any submissions by you?

Shaukar Suryam: *Annalu*, we beg of you, pardon us and spare our lives.

Yellaiah (From the gathering): Maisaiah too would have pleaded for his life, wouldn't he have?

Narsimma: Well, what has the victim to say?

Sarakeka: They too must face the firing squad like Narsi Reddy, and for the same reason.

Yellaiah: Only after they undergo the pain of seeing the gang-bang of their daughters.

Gathering: Yah, Yah.

Madanna: What's Renakka's take on this?

Renuka: That would surely humiliate these thick-skinned but at the same time it amounts to punishing the innocent. Thus, violating their daughters is a crime against the girls and not a punishment for their lecherous fathers.

Sarakeka: Still they deserve to die, don't they?

Renuka: Won't death make it easy for them. Why can't we imagine their life reminiscing over their humiliation? So it serves them well if they're spared to suffer. Moreover, putting them to death means punishing their wives for no fault of theirs.

Madanna: But how's that?

Renuka: Why, didn't these rascals' roving eye deny them as wives? And don't we know what a shabby treatment awaits them as widows? If we kill their men, won't it be a double jeopardy for them?

Madanna: But if let loose, won't they stray again?

Renuka: Not so if bailed on fidelity bonds.

Madanna: What if they jump bail?

Renuka: After all this, they are no fools not to see the writing on the wall.

Srisailam: What have the guilty to say?

[All three in turns]: I swear that I'll not stray again.

Madanna: They may be let off but on parole.

[All three in one voice]: Thank you *peddanna*, Thank you all.

Narsimma: Not before spending a night or two in the *banduldoddi*. Let them have a taste of their own medicine.

Srisailam: Why should the cattle there endure these rotten souls? Surely it makes a case of cruelty to animals, won't it?

Madanna: True, but the cattle might have its own scores to settle with these fiends. Let the filthy five spend five days with them.

Sarakeka: Chief, but if ever it comes to light that these eyed a *dalit* woman, nay any woman, why not we cut off their staffs. Won't that take the stuffing out of these buggers, and justify their women sleeping with *dalit* men in full view of these eunuchs.

Madanna: Let that be the caveat of the *dalit adalat*. If they misuse the reprieve, then it's death for them without further trial.

[Even as their faces show relief all the guilty five bow their heads in shame.]

[Enter: Mallanna with Yadagiri and Maisamma, followed by two armed *annalu*.]

Madanna: *Anna*, are the guilty brought to book?

Mallanna: As ordained, Anasuya and Saailu are executed.

Madanna: This is for the information of all. It was decreed by the *dalam* that Anasuya and Saailu should face the firing squad for their anti-*dalit* activities, both being *dalits*. As all are aware of their nefarious activities, the charges against them need no repetition.

Yadagiri: Though it pains me, I welcome the punishment to my wife and her brother whom I never considered as my *daamaad*. I'm sure it warns our black sheep as well.

Madanna: Well, at *dalit adalats* it's all about fairness and firmness regardless of class. Let the world know that these are no kangaroo courts, and may history hail this as the Rampur Resolution.

Nirmala: Isn't it still an unresolved resolution?

Madanna: What makes you think so?

Nirmala: Where's the succor to the abused women.

Madanna: Well, before we come to grips with that let the condemned be led away to the *banduldoddi*.

[Exit: Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao, Rami Reddy, Papi Reddy and Shaukar Suryam led away by *Anna* (1) and *Anna* (2) as the onlookers hoot them.]

[Madanna confabulates with Mallanna, Srisailam and Narsimma in undertones.] *Madanna:* We reprehensive the taboo and like to lead by example. All those willing to take a revolutionary's hand can have their *swayamvaram* at our hideout. Let's see who leads whom to the altar. [Exit: Curtains down]

Scene - 15

[Curtains up: Madanna - Nirmala, Narsimma - Renuka and Mallanna - Sarakka (all in wedding attire) with Srisailam and members of the *dalam* in the jungle hideout of the scene -12 and 13. After mutual congratulations, Madanna and Nirmala exit with Srisailam and others.]

Sarakka: What a day it is for us Renu, sorry, *vadina*.

Renuka: Won't I prefer to tell your brother first.

Mallanna to Sarakka: Don't you take the cue from her?

Sarakka: Don't worry you didn't marry a dumb either.

[Exit: Mallanna led away by Sarakka.]

Narsimma: I thought I've lost you forever. [He takes Renuka into his arms.]

Renuka: Let bygones be bygones *baava*.

Narsimma: Oh, how your mother had played the spoilsport?

Renuka: I think I solved the puzzle in the end. Like all our women, she too had to pander to the *peddollu*, which she did but with a difference. Unlike the others, she learned to exploit her exploiters to improve her lot. But sensing that the fancies of the *patels* are but passing clouds, she manipulated Papi Reddy into taking her as his concubine. Yet to cater to his roving eye, and to make him ingratiate to herself, she set her brother to pimp for him.

Narsimma: Where did you pick up all the psychological threads from?

Renuka: Why, from the ruins of my life. And to continue, she was too shrewd not to foresee that as her own charms wane, her influence on Papi Reddy would wane. Well, she knew that would take her back to square one of the *dalit* life, or worse. And to avert that from ever happening, she

had this idea of making me his keep as Saailu's wife. In her scheme of things, the prospect of our marriage was but a red herring to her. Oh, how she spoiled her brother's and daughter's life to serve her own ends. That's why I felt she deserved to die, and not entitled to any mercy.

Narsimma: Now I see the canvas fate had chosen to paint the picture of our misery. But how do you explain her hatred to my mother?

Renuka: She came to hate *aththa* as she herself suffered in comparison. After all, *aththa* had a spotless image, and my mom knew how low her own moral stock was. In a way, she wanted to drag me into Papi Reddy's bed out of spite for your mother. She knew your mother loved me, and so she wanted to hurt her through my fall. And sadly she succeeded.

Narsimma: Oh, how miserable it was craving for you in the *bunduldoddi*. The very thought of your plight deepened my sense of humiliation even more. Oh, how I cursed my life for its powerlessness to protect you.

Renuka: When we were caught on the verge of freedom, I felt as if the ground beneath was giving way. But now, armed with your power, I feel secure in your arms. What is more, I feel fulfilled for I've left behind the pathos of my past.

Narsimma: Renu, I didn't dare dream of our union, and holding you, still I'm unable to believe it.

Renuka: Hi *baava*. [Pinches him] I always wanted to be your wife before I died. I don't know why but I had a premonition that we would come together, that is in spite of that fiasco of an escape. That's why, instead of dying, I married Saailu hoping to be your wife someday. But when he pushed me into that Papi Reddy's arms, I wanted to live for a different reason.

Narsimma: What's that Renu?

Renuka: Instead of dying a despaired *dalit*, I was obsessed with the idea of dying only at the threshold of *dalit* empowerment. In a way, that has become the fulcrum of my life and the purpose of my suffering. Now that I've a sense of power even, I shall use it against anyone who tends to spoil my vision.

Narsimma: But then, why didn't you complain to Madanna earlier?

Renuka: I knew he would rid me off Saailu but then what next. I didn't want to run from pillar to post as I've fixed my heart on you. But when Sarakka told me you joined his *dalam*, I didn't waste a moment, did I?

Narsimma: Didn't I tell you that our love would script a unique story.

Renuka: Oh, how the filthy five forbade us from marrying? But why didn't it occur to us to force them to witness our wedding? What a sorry figure they would've cut then?

Narsimma: It's as if they didn't eat crow at the *dalit adalat*.

Renuka: Well, but how could they be digesting that now?

[As Narsimma takes her into his arms, lights go off. Curtains down]

Scene – 16

[Curtains up: Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao, Rami Reddy, Papi Reddy and Shaukar Suryam sit morosely in to the courtyard of Muthyal Rao's *gadi* of scene -10.]

Shaukar Suryam: What a relief, if it can be called so, to come out of the *banduldoddi*. What a five-day ordeal it was. Oh, how they turned our plight into a *tamaasha* for all. Didn't it turn out to be a *tiranaala* of our *taluka*? Can we raise our heads in our lifetime again? (Stares at his forearm) What

a shame they added insult to injury. Our forefathers might be turning in their graves at our humiliation.

Rami Reddy: What to say Shaukar *Saab*, with the death of my son, my family is deprived of its lineage as well.

Papa Rao (Sniffs at his shoulders): What's left to bestow than the stink of the *banduldoddi*. Aren't you better off on that score?

Shaukar Suryam: Perhaps, death is much preferable than to be shamed like this.

Rami Reddy: But then, you were on your knees begging for life, didn't you?

Shaukar Suryam: Don't tell me you stood your ground, even after they had killed your son.

Rami Reddy: It's not as if they had let others go scot-free. Have you forgotten their staff and stuffing warning or what? Apart from handling the gun, these buggers are learning to handle the language as well, aren't they?

Papa Rao: Why blame any? What can anyone do when they hold the gun and the *sarkar* is on the run? For that matter haven't we come to fear their shadow even? Well, did they stand guard at the *banduldoddi*? Yet didn't we fail to rescue ourselves from it though the S.P offered us police protection for the rest of our lives?

Papi Reddy: Coming to Shaukar *Saab*, maybe, he wanted to save his skin to latch onto Lachhi who holds sway on him.

Sabukar Suryam: What about you Papi Reddy *Pate*? Haven't you lost your keep as well as your pimp, not to speak of the future upkeep?

Muthyal Rao: You stop taking snipes at each other, will you? Before he arrives, let's work out a strategy to confront our MLA Venkataswamy. I want to get tough with him to see that he exerts pressure on the C.M. Isn't he known to brag about his closeness to him.

Shankar Suryam: *Dora*, I'm really out of my wits to apply my mind now. Its better we lay low for the time being.

Papi Reddy: Wait and watch the next *naxal* order could be interest free loans, free of guarantees at that. Surely that makes you think, won't it?

Papa Rao: Isn't it like their running a parallel regime?

[Enter Mallesam Gowd, the ex-MLA of the constituency]

Muthyal Rao: *Randi*, Gowd *garu*.

Mallesam Gowd: I feel sad for all that has happened *dora*. But if only you people had seen the writing on the wall, it was all in the coming. You know while our party is committed to put an end to this *naxal* menace, all others pamper them for political gains. Don't you know why our party was humbled at the hustings, and how this party of opportunists came to rule? Was it not the fear of the *naxal* gun that turned away our voters from the polling booths? Now it's the payback time, and so the *sarkar* looks the other way even as the *naxals* are on the rampage. What else can you expect from a party that dabbles with the *annalu* to come to power and then goes soft on them to retain it? Well, it's the turn of the gentry to suffer now.

Muthyal Rao: Gowd *garu*, what you say maybe true. Now our worry is how to keep things going our way without hindrance from them.

Mallesam Gowd: Don't you see it's already turning out to be a war between the haves and the have-nots?

Papa Rao: Why doubt that?

Mallesam Gowd: Is it not said that everything is fair in love and war.

Shaukar Suryam: What is sad, we're made to lose in our love life also, what do you say Papi Reddy Patel?

Muthyal Rao: Oh, stop it Shaukar. It seems our Gowd *garu* has something up his sleeve.

Papa Rao: Well, not for nothing he is a politician after all. You know how well Gowd *garu* ingratiates himself with the party high command. Win or lose, the party ticket is his, isn't it?

Muthyal Rao: Let's come to the point Gowd *garu*.

Mallesam Gowd: As the *naxals* are helping the *dalits* to raise their heads, you can hurt them by hitting at their bellies, if not below their belts.

Muthyal Rao: But how can we do that when we're on parole. Oh damn the *dalit adalat* and its Rampur Resolution.

Mallesam Gowd: Don't worry about that for they can't get wind of it. What if you set your crops on fire, and then blame it upon the *naxals*. As there will be no grain left on your farms for the *dalits* to lay their claim on, won't the pangs of hunger knock at the bottom of the *naxal* base? And as for you, you've enough to last for years, don't you? Why not see this scorch earth strategy cutting both ways?

Muthyal Rao: What a brilliant idea Gowd *garu*? What do you say Rami Reddy?

Rami Reddy: Why, it's a case of hitting two birds at one shot. Besides, we can avenge ourselves at least to some extent.

[Enter: An apologetically looking Venkataswamy, the current MLA.]

Muthyal Rao: Swamy *Saab*, who is ruling the State, you people or the *annalu*?

Mallesam Gowd: Dora, didn't I tell you that it's the nexus of the *naxals* and the opportunists.

Venkataswamy: Gowd *garu*, why fish in the troubled waters.

Mallesam Gowd: Isn't it like pot calling the kettle black?

Muthyal Rao: Gowd *garu's* barbs apart, how do you explain the lawlessness, MLA *saab*?

Venkataswamy: Well, I've spoken to the C. M. In fact, it was the other way round. He rang me up to express his distress at the episode, and said an emergency cabinet meeting was held to root out the *naxal* menace once and for all. To tackle these guys, soon an elite force of Greyhounds would be grounded.

Mallesam Gowd: Heard *dora*, Greyhounds of these greenhorns. Won't it make a case of balsam on self-inflicted wounds? They lifted the ban we had imposed upon them and held the so-called peace talks, that too when they came with their guns. They made merry with the carrots, and these are left holding their broken sticks.

Shaukar Suryam: Sure it seems too little too late.

Papi Reddy: By now, all know that whatever the politicians say against each other is only for the public consumption. When it comes to protecting each others interests, they're ever hand in glove, aren't they?

Muthyal Rao: Whatever, Swamy *Saab*, now it's clear that your *sarkar* is running with the hares and hunting with the hounds. Well, it can't go on like this anymore. You've to take your pick, quickly at that. It's up to your party now.

Venkataswamy: Dora, don't we know which side of the public bread has political butter?

Mallesam Gowd: Dora, don't you know they're postmasters at licking off the butter and throwing the crumbs at the rich and poor alike.

Venkataswamy: Don't tell me you're any political novices.

Papa Rao: How can there be novices in the cesspool of leeches that is politics?

Mallesam Gowd: Sour grapes Papa Rao *Patel*.

Venkataswamy: Set aside party politics, we've to admit that our public stock is low.

Muthyal Rao: Why not you people do something about improving your worse than 'the last resort of the scoundrels' image?

Venkataswamy: You won't say that *dora*, if you're in politics even for a day. Where's the scope for that, and moreover why is it needed? Won't people have to choose between a rogue of a Gog and a moron of a Megog? Well, the blessing that is electoral politics hands them power on a platter, well in turns. And five years is not too long a period to make good the lost opportunities. Is it Gowd *garu*?

Papa Rao: He'll respond on the floor of the house or raise a hell of it in the well of it.

Venkataswamy: Well, that's not going to happen till either of us changes the constituency. What do you say Gowd *garu*?

Muthyal Rao: It's no joking matter Swamy *Saab*. If your Greyhounds don't hunt them in their hideouts, they're sure to hound us out of the villages. And that would be curtains down on your party propped up by the landlords.

Venkataswamy: Are we naïve not to understand that *dora*. Wait and watch, it will be thumbs up for us any way. But isn't it time we cheer up with cheers, why don't I see any preparations.

Muthyal Rao: Why not, some Scotch might drown our sorrows a little. What do you prefer, Johnnie Walker or Chivas Regal?

Mallesam Gowd: Maybe Johnnie Walker as any way they're on the way out.

Venkataswamy: Dora why not let poor Gowd *garu* dream over Chivas Regal.

Muthyal Rao: And to keep both of you in good humour, won't we have both.

Venkataswamy: Well, with three cheers to the Greyhounds on the hunt. [Curtains down]

Scene - 17

[Curtains up: Narsimma, Mallanna, Srisailam, Renuka, Sarakka, Nirmala and others in the jungle hideout of the scenes-12, 13 & 15. Sitting by a transistor as Nirmala is impatient for the news, Narsimma looks at his watch restlessly, and others wait in anxiety. As the beeps heralding the news are aired, all hold their breath.]

News Reader: This is All India Radio. The news read by Swathi Rangarajan. Here's a flash. Acting on intelligence, the A.P. Police have nabbed *Madanna*, a high ranking PWG leader from a hideout in Hyderabad. Even as he was frisked away to an undisclosed location, fearing retaliatory raids by the *Madanna Dalam*, the Government has placed the police on the alert. In the other headlines...

[Nirmala switches off the transistor, and looks at Narsimma anxiously.]

Sarakka: So, it takes them twenty-four hours to break the news.

Nirmala: I'm worried that he may be harmed *anna*.

Narsimma: It's my word Nirmalakka; I'll go to any lengths to see he is freed.

Nirmala: Don't I know that *anna*. But still, I'm afraid as he's high on their wanted list.

Narsimma: Renu, you better take her out and steady her nerves.

[Exit: Renuka with Nirmala.]

[Narsimma huddles himself with Mallanna, Srisailam and Sarakka.]

Mallanna: Who could've betrayed *peddanna*?

Narsimma: Can't the post-mortem wait Mallanna. Let's think of a tit-for-tat to free him.

Srisailam: But *anna*, now that they're on the alert, I don't see any soft targets to kidnap.

Narsimma: Who wants a soft target now? Well, we've to think it big. Won't a tough ask with sentimental value soften their stance.

Sarakka: Why not the I.G's kid if he has one.

Narsimma: Isn't the I.G old enough to be a grandfather. Well, that works out better as he will be under varied pressure. Find out and plan for that. If not, think about some other kid with value addition. But who shall be on the mission.

Sarakka: Being a woman, won't I be the best suited.

Narsimma: Well, you be at the forefront as we provide the back-up.

Mallanna: Why not you hold our fort as Srisailam and I will help her raid theirs.

Narsimma: Best of luck, but don't throw caution to the winds, the *dalam* can't afford to lose any of you.

[Exit: Mallanna, Srisailam and Sarakka.]

[Enter: Renuka and Nirmala.]

Nirmala: What happened to our couriers?

Narsimma: Well, for now, no news is good news. But Mallanna and others have left to create some very soon.

Renuka: Have you sent them on a rescue mission or what?

Narsimma: Well, we don't even know where he's kept.

Renuka: I think it's time we think of penetrating their ranks.

Narsimma: It's not a bad idea in the long run. Well, you look after the counter intelligence of the *dalam*. But for now, it's about kidnapping one kid or the other of the I.G's household.

Renuka: I love to build a network, won't I? But why involve kids in this war of nerves.

Narsimma: Well, don't we've to choose horses for the races?

Renuka: Women and children are always kept out, aren't they? Why break rules.

Narsimma: Why not think I'm rewriting them.

Nirmala: Why not, if it helps to secure his release without harming any.

Renuka: Why don't you both realize that it's a dangerous game to start?

Narsimma: So be it. But why place the cart before the horse. Let's wait for their return. Till then it's sojourn.

[Lights go on and off to indicate the passage of a few days.]

[Bright light and Narsimma, Renuka and Nirmala are in anxious wait near the transistor.]

News Reader: This is All India Radio. The news read by Rakesh Tiwari. Here's a flash. In a daring operation, *Madanna Dalam* of the People's War has kidnapped Raja, the I.G's six-year-old grandson from his school in Hyderabad. The two accompanying Home Guards were also taken hostage by the gang suspected to have been led by Sarakka. In a handwritten note left behind on the school premises, the *dalam* sought the release of their leader Madanna within twenty-four hours threatening to kill the hostages after the deadline. It may be recalled that Madanna was nabbed by the Police from his hideout in Hyderabad only recently.

Narsimma: Didn't they make us proud. Won't they deserve a hero's welcome?

Nirmala [In Excitement]: I'll go out and receive them at the frontier.

[Exits: Nirmala.]

Renuka: Your raising the stakes is really worrying me *baava*. I wish one won't lead to the other.

Narsimma: Why don't you see this as a breakthrough for the revolution Renu.

Renuka: Well, I'll wait and watch with my fingers crossed.

[Lights go on and off to indicate the passage of time.]

[Bright light and Narsimma with Renuka in wait.]

[Enter Nirmala, Mallanna, Srisailam and Sarakka with Raja, the six-year-old grandson of the I G. of Police and two sheepish looking Home Guards. Even as Renuka reaches out to a nonplussed Raja, Narsimma in excitement hugs Sarakka, Mallanna and Srisailam.]

Narsimma: Hail the heroes [Goes up to Raja.] Don't worry my boy; we'll send you home soon.

Raja [cries]: O Mummy ..., I want my mummy

Renuka: Don't cry my Raja, she's would come soon. Till then why don't you play with me?

[As Renuka folds round him, Raja stops crying.]

Nirmala: *Anna*, the deadline is up and yet there is no contact. Now I see all my worries returning.

Renuka: You know it's no easy decision, is it?

Narsimma: Won't a tough stance make it easy for them?

Renuka: What's that?

Narsimma: A Home Guard in a body-bag.

[Narsimma looks at Mallanna, and then he eyes one of the Home Guards. Exit: Mallanna and Srisailam with the Home Guards.]

Renuka: It's atrocious to kill an innocent, isn't it?

Narsimma: Sarakka why not see that Nirmalakka rests as I handle your restless *vadina*.

[Taking the cue, Sarakka tries to take Raja along he resists and cries. As Renuka holds Raja, Sarakka leads Nirmala away.]

Narsimma: Why don't you understand Renu? The crisis calls for hard decisions. Besides, isn't he guilty by association? After all, he sides with the system.

Renuka: But it's his occupation to make a living. And he's only doing his duty.

Narsimma: Sadly for him, his duty clashes with our cause.

Renuka: So be it, but they're poor like us, and our struggle is supposed to better their lot.

Narsimma: It's the price the poor have to pay in our struggle for them.

Renuka: What if they won't yield?

Narsimma: They would have two more body-bags to count.

Renuka [She hugs Raja tight]: Oh, he's just a kid as you and I were once.

Narsimma: But unlike us, he's a potential class enemy. As a grown-up, won't he serve the very system that oppresses us? But still we might spare him if that helps to secure our Madanna's release.

Renuka: Why not hold out and see.

Narsimma: Why not turn the heat on them by killing the other guard as well. It's then they would come around to save their privileged kid.

Renuka: Oh, what a change. Oh, how you had pleaded for Narsi Reddy's life in that *dalit adalat*. And this Raja is just a kid.

Narsimma: In a way I was more of my mother's boy than my own man then.

Renuka: Oh, how strange life could be. If you were not forthcoming then as your mother's boy, now you are distancing yourself from me as your own man. But you were your own self when you symbolized the ethos of the Rampur Resolution. Not before and certainly not now.

Narsimma: Maybe, but then they were the early days of the revolutionary opposition. As the course of the struggle made me its leader, am I not obliged to give it a new direction. As a lot of *naxal* blood had flowed down the ideological bridge, let revolutionary aggression be the new mantra of the movement.

Renuka: Oh, what a ruthless leader you're turning out to be?

Narsimma: Maybe, underneath I've always been ruthless Renu. Why, didn't I keep you away till you showed me the way to save my studies?

Renuka: I am afraid we're drifting away *baava*.

Narsimma: Don't worry Renu, our love is sure to bind us together, and that's forever.

Renuka: I feel as if your life has trapped our love in a *padmanyuham*. And my fear is that like Abhimanyu, you too don't know the way out to save it.

Narsimma: But unlike his wife Uttara, aren't you right in the middle to do that for me?

Renuka: It's my only hope, and God forbid a let down.

Narsimma: Now wish that God wills our Madanna's release.

Renuka: Won't I pray for that any way. More so as that saves the kid and the Home Guard.

Narsimma: Oh, how it feels when you can't pin hopes on prayers even. I experienced that when I was powerless to prevent your marriage. Well, it can never be described, and God forbid one can only experience it. And now, all my power seems inadequate to secure Madanna's release.

Renuka: Oh really, how helpless life makes us to save our beloveds. Given my newfound zeal to serve our folks, now I'm coming to fathom your the then obsession for graduation. If not for my urge to further my vision won't I wish to die if I were to fail you?

Narsimma: You failing me, forget about it. Can you do that even in your dreams Renu?

Renuka: But *baava*, its nightmares these days.

Narsimma: Why lose your nerve and tie my hands at this crucial moment? Are we not equally passionate about our mission?

Renuka: Why am I not here to strengthen your hands to fight for our folks? But are you not bloodying your hands more and more. Oh, don't I find them slippery to hold even, leave alone lending support to you. Why not we rescind from violence and put some substance into our struggle *baava*?

Narsimma: Why not, let's first secure Madanna's release, and then we'll have a full house to discuss. Didn't Madanna himself hold you as the conscience keeper to the *dalam*?

Renuka: I'm relieved *baava*. Now won't I pray for Madanna as much as for Raja and his escort?

Narsimma: Let's see what the *sarkar* has up its sleeve. Hope it's not a case of Renu proposing and the regime disposing.

[Curtains down.]

Scene – 18

Voice Over: In spite of its repeated threats to kill the kid, the *dalam* failed to secure Madanna's release, and a cornered Narsimma carried out the threat. In a swift move that followed while the

Greyhounds captured Sarakka, the police had eliminated her in a fake encounter thereafter. And this hardened Narsimma's attitude towards the men in uniform even more, and he began raiding the Police Stations and blasting their patrol jeeps at will. In time, when the police claimed to have killed a fleeing Madanna in an encounter, he in rage went on a rampage. And that made him the most wanted in the land with a reward of Rupees two million on his head. Outraged by his revolutionary aggression, Renuka was wont to advocate the course of political opposition to further the *dalit* cause but a cynical Narsimma wouldn't change tack. In the end, Renuka threatened to leave him, and the *dalam*, but to no avail.

[Curtains up: Narsimma and Renuka are in the hideout of scenes – 12, 13, 15 & 17.]

Renuka: *Baava*, do you realize what this day means to us?

Narsimma: Why aren't we still a year away from the seven year itch?

Renuka: Oh no, but why there's no word about it all day.

Narsimma: You know how I'm bogged down to blow up that big fish.

Renuka: What a shame, six years over and we haven't added.

Narsimma: Why hasn't the reward on my head got multiplied?

Renuka: It's no time to joke as we're at the crossroads of life.

Narsimma: You know that's the sacrifice the revolutionaries have to make.

Renuka: But still we're human with human wants, aren't we?

Narsimma: True, but there is no way we can be parents.

Renuka: What's that we've achieved after all the self-denial?

Narsimma: Don't you see the changes around? Now nobody dares demean the *dalits*.

Renuka: Maybe, but they still remain poor, don't they?

Narsimma: Do we have a magic wand to make them rich.

Renuka: Now I am sure they remain poor as long as we're around.

Narsimma: Renu, don't you sound reactionary?

Renuka: So be it. Until we vacate the stage, no entrepreneur would ever step onto it, and unless industry goes rural, the village poor remain poor. And I'm sure about it.

Narsimma: What if we give up arms, won't the *peddollu* rule the roost all again.

Renuka: Why don't you realize, it's as farmhands that *dalits* are at the landlords' mercy. If only the villages are industrialized, won't the landlords lose their grip over the peasants?

Narsimma: Since when are you in the pay of the capitalists? [Laughs.]

Renuka: Jokes apart, let's seek amnesty and work differently.

Narsimma: Well, as you know, I've crossed the Rubicon, not once but twice.

Renuka: And I crossed it when you had put that innocent kid to death. You don't know what a dilemma I was in then. I was obsessed with the idea of saving his life, and I racked my brains as to how to go about it. It even crossed my mind to kill you and others to let him live. But then, I realized your life *was* more valuable to the *dalit* struggle.

Narsimma: Oh, really! That's my Renu I'm proud of. But you too know that was the most difficult sentence I had ever pronounced.

Renuka: It's the one death that came to haunt me ever since. How poignant his death was for he died crying for his mother. It was then that I realized how paramount motherhood is to a woman's life.

Narsimma: Is nursing the *dalit* cause any less paramount to you as a woman. And as for death, as we chose to live by the sword, we shall be prepared to fall by it. But still a revolutionary never dies in vain. Won't his death stir others to carry on the struggle?

Renuka: What about the deaths we had caused, can we live without remorse? Unlike that kid, can we face premature death without fear, and a sense of betrayal by life itself? Oh, how he died without fearing death. Maybe, he's too young to grasp the import of life, leave alone death.

Narsimma: Won't death ensure that we don't live long enough to suffer on that count.

Renuka: Why not we take solace in building lives instead of destroying homes? I'm sure it would help our souls. Let's begin paving the *dalit* political way to power.

Narsimma: Want to join politics that last resort of the scoundrels.

Renuka: As we're no scoundrels, won't we make a difference to the politics?

Voice Over: Greyhounds, Greyhounds.

[Narsimma tries to rollover with Renuka who resists.]

Renuka: *Baava*, let's surrender. [She raises her white *dupatta*.]

Narsimma: Lets run Renu; it's no time to vacillate.

Renuka: I'm fed up with this life *baava*. Let's give up ourselves.

Narsimma: Won't I prefer to die in a real encounter than in a fake one.

Renuka: I'll see that you're not harmed. I'll stake my life for that. [She rolls over him suggesting a protective embrace.]

Voice Over: Run for cover, they've neared us.

Narsimma: *Chalo*, have you gone mad or what?

Renuka: Won't you stay back for my sake..

Narsimma: Come on Renu, it's not the way to force the issue.

Renuka: Don't say *nakeko*, *baava*. I want to love you and live with you.

[Sound of a hail of bullets and approaching foot steps. Renuka holds Narsimma tightly in her embrace even as he tries to wriggle out.]

Renuka: I want to bear your child *baava*.

[But as the Greyhounds come near, Narsimma wriggles himself out of Renuka's grip and tries to drag her but she continues to hold him. In the end, he manages to escape and the Greyhounds go after him in hot pursuit. A crestfallen Renuka sits still on the ground.]

[Enter: Captain Ranjit Kapoor of the Greyhounds as the gun shots cease.]

Captain Kapoor: Sorry Renu-ji, he's dead.

Renuka: Oh, what about others?

Captain Kapoor: Well, they all escaped.

Renuka: Oh, if only I could have prevailed over him.

Captain Kapoor: We understand your hurt and appreciate your sacrifice madam.

Renuka: Did he have any last words for me?

Captain Kapoor: He begged us not to harm you in any way.

Renuka: It's a consolation that he died without feeling let down.

Captain Kapoor: Don't we know Renu-ji that you've chosen it as a last resort.

Renuka: Oh, if only I was able to persuade him. But what to do when he was so distrustful of you guys. See how fake encounters discourage change of heart.

Captain Kapoor: That's sad indeed, but Renu-ji we too are human, after all. Given that we're senselessly targeted, no denying that we too tend to be insensitive. Don't think that I'm trying to justify the fake encounters. I'm only putting them in the proper perspective.

Renuka: How I wish his death makes both sides introspect.

Captain Kapoor: I'm sure this poignant tale would. Well, I've orders to free you.

Renuka: Thanks for keeping your word. [She pauses as if to know his name.]

Captain Kapoor: I'm Captain Ranjit Kapoor.

Renuka: Well Captain, I've better things to do than rotting in the jail.

Captain Kapoor: And those two millions will be yours as well.

Renuka: Are you implying that I betrayed my man for booty?

Captain Kapoor: Oh no, Renu-ji, don't we know, you chose to risk his life to end his mayhem.

Renuka: Well, that's the only solace I've to my sense of loss.

Captain Kapoor: Just reconsider Renu-ji that money may be handy to help the needy.

Renuka: True, but won't that demean me in my own eyes?

Captain Kapoor: Hats off to your sensitivity madam.

Renuka: Thank you Captain. Better use it for the needy families of the policemen who died at his hands. At least, that should give some solace to his lost soul.

Captain Kapoor: It's praiseworthy really. But don't say no to the rehabilitation package.

Renuka: It's not my rehabilitation that's on my mind now. Captain, it's the cause of *dalit* good that rules my heart. I've realized that fugitives can't improve the *dalit* plight from their jungle hideouts. If only we take the fight into the political arena, we've the numbers to boot. Where my

man failed with his *naxal* bullets, I shall succeed with the ballot papers. I want to ensure that I haven't sacrificed my man in vain.

[Captain Ranjit Kapoor, in attention, salutes Renuka, and it's the final-curtain.]

Men at *work* on Women at work

Dramatis Persona

Men at Work:

Naveen (40) Materials Manager, Bricks & Bats Ltd.

Nayak (55) Manager, HRD, Hares & Hounds Ltd.

Rakesh (50) Managing Director, Hares & Hounds Ltd.

Sunil (35), Assistant Manager, Personnel, Hares & Hounds Ltd.

Gopal (55) Assistant, Marketing., Hares & Hounds Employees Union

Balram (35) Inspector of Police.

Sanjay (40) General Manager, Marketing, Brims & Dregs Ltd.

Kumar (35) Assistant Finance Manager, Skins & Hides Ltd.

Diwakar (50) Finance Manager, Skins & Hides Ltd.

Bhagawan (45) Lawyer.

Women at Work:

Navya (30) Naveen's wife and Sanjay's P.A at Brims & Dregs Ltd.

Rachana (26) Navya's friend and Kumar's Assistant at Skins & Hides Ltd.

Rekha (59) Company Secretary, Hares & Hounds Ltd., who with Navya and Rachana starts MAWAW, Movement against womanizing at workplace.

Nritya (21) Navya's sister and Nayak's Stenographer at Hares & Hounds Ltd.

Preeti (26) Personal Secretary to Rakesh at Hares & Hounds Ltd.

Margaret (45) Manager Personal, Hares & Hounds Ltd.

Ramya(40) Deputy Manager, Finance, Hares & Hounds Ltd.

Divya (25) Receptionist, Bricks & Bats Ltd.

Anasuya(35) Maid servant of the Naveens

Mithuna: Accuser of Naveen sans appearance.

Children at play: Ranjan (7) and Nrupa (5), son and daughter of Naveen and Navya.

Scene - 1

[Curtains up: Drawing room of the Naveens. Nine chimes of the clock (not in the scene).

Naveen is seen solving the *The Hindu* 'crossword'. The telephone in the hall starts ringing.]

Navya: [Not in the scene.] Naveen, are you there?

Naveen: Very much dear. [He goes to answer the call.]

Naveen: It's Naveen here. [Pause] Wait a minute [Closes the mouthpiece.] Navya, Rachana is on the line for you.

[Enter: Navya from the kitchen portion (left side of the stage) and takes the receiver from Naveen.]

Navya: Hi, Rachana.

[Naveen goes into the master-bedroom (left side of the backstage)]

Navya: You are mistaken, Nritya is expected only tomorrow. [Long pause] Why not, we can meet in the evening.

[Navya disconnects the phone. Naveen comes into the hall with a briefcase in one hand and shoes in the other.

Naveen [Wearing the socks]: What's the matter?

Navya: Rachana wants to bring her friend's auntie Rekha on some important business.

Naveen: Bet, if not Amway its Gold Quest to lure you into becoming an Independent Business Owner. See how they network. Rachana became your friend after being introduced by someone, you may not even remember. She runs a ladies hostel in which you wanted her to accommodate your sister and in turn she wants you to entertain her friend's auntie. What a way to network.

Navya: Why not if it comes to that. You know I'm idling all day and it's boring.

Naveen: When kids hang around at home it's tiring, and it's boring as they grow up to hang out with their friends. Why, this networking would be no less boring. Well, it's all about parroting the worn out lines day in and day out. What's worse, you end up being a nuisance to your acquaintances.

Navya: I thought of taking up a job but Rachana feels it amounts to standing in the way of the needy. Like she did, she wants me too start something on my own.

Naveen: Why not get involved in some social activity.

Navya: That's what I told Rachana. Maybe, this Rekha's visit has something to with that.

Naveen: Wait and see if Rekha turns out to be an Amway auntie with an axe to grind. If it's the case don't count on me to network for you.

Navya: Well, if it's some social work, I'm bound to bother you.

Naveen: [Goes near her and strokes her head.] Won't I then leave no stone unturned.

Navya: [Leans on him lovingly] I always know that I can count on you. I'm expecting them by six, why not you come by then.

[Naveen extends the ring and the middle fingers of his right hand towards Navya.]

Navya: What are you aiming at?

Naveen: Let's see what's in store for me.

[Navya kisses the middle finger.]

Naveen: It's all about woman's sixth sense.

Navya: Why tease me, tell me, what's the matter?

Naveen: I will tell you if I don't click.

Navya: Isn't it strange?

Naveen: My dear, life is like that.

[Navya goes into the kitchen and reappears with the lunch box. Naveen takes it and readies himself to leave.]

Naveen: Bye darling [Kisses her on her cheek]

Navya: [coyly.] Bye.

[Exit: Naveen. Anasuya comes out from the kitchen portion with a plastic cover containing the leftovers.]

Anasuya: *Amma*, you are lucky to have such a husband

Navya: How is your man, is he keeping his word to give up drinking.

Anasuya: He is drinking more than ever. Why, he says that he won't be able to drink once he stops drinking.

Navya: That is some logic, isn't it? [Navya laughs heartily.]

Anasuya: I don't know *amma* what to do with him. But when sober there is no man like him.

[Exit: Anasuya. Navya goes into the kitchen. Navya re-enters and goes to the master bedroom.

In time, two chimes of the clock (not in the scene) and Navya comes out from the children's bedroom (the right side of the backstage) and goes into the kitchen portion. Navya reappears wiping her hands with the *pallu* of her *saree* and goes into the master bedroom. Thereafter, the clock chimes thrice and Navya comes out of the master bedroom and picks up 'The Hindu' lying on the centre table. Shortly Ranjan and Nrupa with tired looks and bag loads of school books enter.]

Nrupa: I'm hungry mummy.

Navya: Go have a wash; I shall prepare some *garam garam upma* for both of you.

[Ranjan and Nrupa go into the children's bedroom and Navya into the kitchen portion. Navya reappears with two platefuls of *upma* and goes into the children's bedroom. Shortly Navya comes into the drawing room with a carom board with Ranjan (holding a box of coins) and Nrupa. Navya spreads the board and as the kids set the coins they converse.]

Ranjan: After Nritya comes we can play doubles every day?

Nrupa: I shall be her partner.

Ranjan: She no fool for that.

[Ranjan and Nrupa come to blows and Navya intervenes.]

Navya: She is not going to stay with us anyway.

Nrupa: But where she will stay?

Navya: In Rachana auntie's ladies hostel.

Ranjan: Why not she stays with us, mummy.

Navya: It's better that way.

Nrupa: But how?

Navya: You are too young to understand all that now.

[They get along for a while with the game of carom bank (In the first round, each player keeps the coins he pockets and that makes his bank. While the red is priced at Rs. 5, the whites and blacks are valued at Rs. 2 and Rs.1 respectively. In the second round each player stakes equal money on the board and the process is repeated till a winner emerges.) Six chimes of the clock (not in the scene) and they wind up the show without a clear winner and go into the children's bedroom. Shortly, Navya appears in the drawing room and picks up a periodical and sits in the sofa. Thereafter Ranjan and Nrupa too come out with a couple of shuttle cocks and their racquets.]

[Exit: Ranjan and Nrupa saying bye to Navya. The door buzzer alerts Navya to the arrival Rachana and Rekha.]

[Enter: Rachana and Rekha with their handbags.]

Rachana: Meet Mrs. Rekha.

Navya: Welcome madam.

Rachana I've just come to know that Rekha madam works at Hares & Hounds where your sister is going to join.

Navya: Oh what a relief it is.

Rekha: Maybe fortuitous for it sets the right tone. Thank you for agreeing to see me.

Navya: What a way to embarrass this nobody.

Rekha: But Rachana thinks otherwise.

Navya: Friends tend to either overrate you or underrate you, don't they?

Rekha: How I wish that Rachana underrates you.

[Navya asks Rekha and Rachana to sit in the sofa while she sits in the chair.]

Navya: What would you like to have madam, coffee or tea?

Rekha: Tea, preferably with *elachi* and sugar without *kanjoosi*.

Navya: I see you are quite humorous.

Rachana: That would do for me too.

Navya: What, *elachi* or *kanjoosi*?

[Navya goes into the kitchen leaving Rekha and Rachana in all smiles.]

Rekha: Your friend is quite interesting.

Rachana: If you can rope her in, it would be a big catch for you.

Rekha: Don't ever imagine that I will let you go. I need both of you.

[Navya comes back with three cups of tea in a tray, and they begin to sip it from their cups.]

Rekha: We don't get to have such tea here. What's the secret if I may know?

Navya: I've learnt it from my sister Nritya. What a sweet girl she is and to be honest I'm against her taking up a job. I know how faint hearted she is. I told my father to get her married instead. But she was adamant and my dad gave in. Well, being born so late after me, she's his *laadli*. God forbid, if she has to face harassment at the workplace that I hear about, she won't be able to cope up with that.

Rekha: Don't worry about Nritya for men at our office are a decent lot. Even otherwise, your worrying about her won't stop men at work *work* on women at work and it's no stopping them if women start sitting at home. It would be like setting the clock backwards. [One chime of the

clock (not in the scene) indicating it was six-thirty] Isn't it a good omen? We have to mend men in their own den.

Navya: I think the only way out for women is to mend their own ways. I believe that women bring it upon themselves by being half-hearted about male advances. I learn that all women are no angels for many do flirt with men either for fun or out to sponge on them. I know most men do try to interest women they fancy but it is the baser lot who resort to harassing them. Maybe it's not a cut and dry case any way.

Rekha: No denying, but one has to nuance between the luring female and the harassing male. While a crafty female won't be able to lead an unwilling man up the garden path, any stupid fellow of some rank can spoil it for the chastely female at the workplace. Whatever, the flirty female syndrome cannot be bracketed with the dirty male menace. It's not that the two ills at the workplace cancel out each other warranting our inaction. Let men take care of flirts among us while we work on men who *work* on women.

Navya: I do agree but I still feel it is for the individual woman to tackle the problem.

Rekha: But still there is a need for an institutional mechanism to rein in the errant men, and the Supreme Court ruling in the Visaka's case is all about it.

Navya: What is it?

Rachana: Sexual harassment at the work place is all about sexually coloured remarks or physical contact and advances or showing pornography or a demand or request for sexual favour and or any other unwelcome physical, verbal/non-verbal conduct being sexual in nature. And in case of a complaint of sexual harassment, every employer must provide a complaints committee headed by a woman with half its members being women. What is equally important is that the

committee should also include an outside organization- which is familiar with the ways and means by which men resort to sexual harassment. We may fill in the gap as there are not many if not any and we want to take you on board.

Navya: Being unfamiliar with all that, what can I bring to the table?

Rekha: That's no constraint. Why Rachana is also is not exposed to any such situation. I can see that both of you are employed for a while to come face to face with the ugly facets of womanizing at the workplace.

Navya: Give me sometime to think it over. Besides, I've to discuss with Naveen as well.

Rekha: [Smiling.] You have time only till I retire from my job in a couple of months.

Navya: Before that, I hope you would be able to stabilize things for Nritya.

Rekha: Like you would have done, had you been in my place.

Navya: See the irony of my sisterly care. It is to avoid the *saala- saali* flirting in my place that I want her to stay at Rachan's hostel. Unlike the sexual harassment at workplace, there is no escaping from the alien sexual enthusiasm at home.

Rekha: It's another facet of female vulnerability. You have a thinking head on your shoulders and that should help you to shoulder our cause. I wait for your word to get on board. Meanwhile, you may go through these case studies on sexual harassment at workplace that I downloaded from the net.

[Rekha pulls out a spiral bound volume and gives it to Navya.]

Navya: Thank you, I'll go through it.

Rachana: [Gets up from her seat.] See you with Nritya tomorrow.

Navya: In the evening that is.

[Rekha and Navya too get up from their seats.]

[Exit: Rachana and Rekha, after bidding adieu to Navya.]

[Navya browses through the material that Rekha gave her and shortly Ranjan and Nrupa come back from play. Navya nudges them into the children's bedroom for wash and she resumes reading the material. Seven chimes of the clock (not in the scene)]

[Enter: Naveen with his briefcase and the lunch box. Navya goes up to him.]

Navya: [Taking the lunchbox.] What's the news?

Naveen: I had a sumptuous meal.

Navya: What about my sixth sense?

Naveen: I said that I will tell you if I fail.

Navya: So you have clicked?

Naveen: It's not that I failed to pass.

Navya: Why are you talking in circles?

Naveen: Because there is nothing straight about it.

Navya: To hell with you.

Naveen: Okay, but did Amway auntie turn up?

Navya: Stop saying that. Why as it turned out Rekha is the Company Secretary of Hares & Hounds.

Naveen: I'm relieved more than you as it soothes your nerves.

Navya: She wants to start a NGO to nail down the womanizers at workplace. Be a good boss or else.

[Naveen catches his ears with his hands crossed.]

Navya: Well, she wants to take me on board.

Naveen: You can cross the bridge when you come to it.

Navya: So you are not against the idea.

Naveen: If I oppose, you may lose your face.

Navya: How's that?

Naveen: What if she propagates that your man is a MCP.

Navya: Well, I won't let that happen. [She strokes his head affectionately.] [Curtains down.]

Scene – 2

[Curtains up: The Naveens' drawing room where Ranjan and Nrupa were slow in getting ready to go to school. The clock (not in the scene) eight chimes.]

[Enter: Navya hurriedly with the lunch packs for them.]

Navya: [Annoyed] Oh, you, I know why you are dragging your feet.

Ranjan: Mummy, didn't you tell us that Nritya auntie comes before we leave for school.

Navya: What am I to do when the train runs late? Your daddy rang up and said that it won't reach before ten.

Nrupa: Why he forces us to go school when we love to play with auntie.

Ranjan: Please mummy, allow us to bunk school today.

Navya: Don't you know your daddy won't allow that.

Ranjan: But why?

Navya: Because he loves you and wants to see you becoming MBAs from IIMs.

[Honking of a horn]

Navya: Hurry up, the auto uncle has come.

[Exit: Ranjan and Nrupa literally dragging their feet with their school bags and lunch packs.]

[Enter: Maid servant Anasuya with a broom and as she begins to sweep the floor.]

Navya: What a pity we deny our kids a certain present for the sake of an uncertain future. Why it's the pressure of the times. Thanks to our dad and the times, what a wonderful childhood Nritya and I had. But would Nritya's boss play the father to her.

Anasuya: *Amma* every man is not like *ayya*. How men ogle at the maid servants as they go about their work? You can understand how jittery it feels but changing households won't help as men are same everywhere. But for the fear of their wives, men would be forcing themselves on the maid servants.

Navya: Oh, it's another facet of the male malaise. That being a woman's plight in another woman's place, where she can be safe from the ogling men. I wonder how Nritya would cope up with that.

[Enter: Naveen with two suitcases and Nritya with two travel bags. Naveen rushes into their bedroom and Anasuya takes the bags from Nritya and takes them into the guest room (to the right of the stage).]

Nritya: Hi *akeka*.

Navya: [Hugging Nritya] Welcome to being a Hyderabadi.

Nritya: Doesn't it sound like *barbadi*. [Laughs]

Navya: [Frowns.] It's no good talking like that.

[Anasuya comes back to picks up Nritya's suitcases.]

Nritya: How are you Anasuya?

Anasuya: Your *akka* takes good care of me *chinnamma*.

[Anasuya moves the suitcases into the guest room. Anasuya comes out of the guest room, and takes leave of Navya and Nritya.]

[Exit: Anasuya and Navya and Nritya go into the kitchen.]

[Naveen comes into the drawing room with his briefcase and shoes. He goes about wearing his socks and shoes as Navya with lunch pack in hand followed by Nritya enter.]

Nritya: *Bava*, hoping for a drop, thank you for the lift.

Naveen: Why I forgot that your *akka* is packing you off to the hostel.

Navya: Don't be unfair. I only want her to be on her own.

Naveen: I'm just joking.

[Naveen's mobile rings and he answers the call (mime.)]

Naveen: My Secretary says the M.D is already missing me.

Navya: If it's not for *akka's* ears, may I take it is your secretary who is missing you.

Navya: Why put unwelcome ideas into his head.

Naveen: Unwelcome to whom is the question. [He smiles heartily.] Wonder how the instincts of a woman as woman, and her constraints as wife contrast. Bye.

[Exit: Naveen as Navya and Nritya wave him good bye.]

Navya: Don't take him seriously. There is no seven year itch yet even after fourteen years. He's a lovely man.

Nritya: Why forget about your sweeties, Ranjan and Nritya. How I love to be with them. Tell me if your wanting me to be on my own is not a *bahana*.

Navya: Yes and no. Well, I don't want any complications for you and me.

Nritya: What complications?

Navya: You are too young to visualize them.

Nritya: If only you care to tell me, I'm old enough to understand.

Navya: When the wife lets her sister stay in the house, her man takes it as a license from her to seduce his *saali*.

Nritya: Why it's like fearing one's own shadow.

Navya: You won't say that when you are of my age.

Nritya: Well, that is all about the generation gap.

Navya: Okay *baaba*, you are jet age type and I am of bullock cart class.

Nritya: Whatever, you are sweet and still cute.

Navya: You know how worried I was about your taking up a job. But I'm relieved after getting acquainted with Rekha. She works in the firm that you are going to join.

Nritya: Whether she would be of help to me or not, I am glad that you are feeling easy.

Navya: After retiring in two months, she's planning to be a social activist against sexual harassment at workplace. She wants to take me on board as well.

Nritya: Why not.

Navya: I am also inclined but before that I have a lot of ground to cover.

Nritya: *Akka* I am famished so to say.

Navya: Don't I know one can hardly eat that railway stuff.

[The clock chimes twelve times and Navya and Nritya go into the kitchen portion only to reenter the drawing room after lunch.]

Nritya: Now I think your cooking is better than mummy's.

Navya: Well, after all these years, she must have got tired of it all.

Nritya: [Yawns] I didn't have a wink on the train.

Navya: That's what happens when you get a berth near the exit.

[Nritya goes into the guestroom and Navya begins reading the spiral bound volume that Rekha gave her. At length, the clock (not in the scene) chimes four times. Nritya comes out from the guest room and joins Navya.]

Navya: I suppose you slept like a log.

Nritya: Yes, but where are the kids? You said they would be back by three-thirty.

Navya: It won't take long for you to realize that in Hyderabad, the snarling traffic takes time forward. Why not familiarize yourself with what might lie in store for you. [Navya gives the volume to Nritya.] Who knows you may change your mind to become a housewife instead of a workingwoman.

Nritya: Let me be a woman by working before becoming a wife.

[Nritya browses the material as Navya peeps out to see if Ranjan and Nrupa are in sight.]

Navya: Think about the devils and here they come.

[Enter: Ranjan and Nrupa with a weary look that becomes lively on seeing Nritya. Throwing the school bags and lunch packs on the floor, Ranjan and Nrupa rush into Nritya's outstretched arms. Nritya kisses both of them and they kiss her in return.]

Nritya: Oh, how sweet you look.

Ranjan: Auntie, the whole day we were thinking about you only.

Nritya: Don't you know that you should concentrate at school.

Nrupa: We didn't want to go to school but daddy said 'no bunking please'.

Ranjan: Mummy says you won't stay with us.

Nrupa: Why so auntie?

Nritya: If I'm here, it will be *chutti* to your studies. I will come on Sundays. Is that okay?

Ranjan: It's not okay.

Nrupa: Why it's bad.

[Nritya takes them into her embrace and cajoles them (mime)]

Navya: Now go and have a wash while I prepare Maggi for you.

[Nritya picks up the school bags and goes with Ranjan and Nrupa into the children's room.

Navya picks up the lunch packs and goes into the kitchen portion. Navya reappears with two plates of Maggi on her way to the children's bedroom. Shortly all appear in the drawing room and Navya watches as Nritya plays hide and seek with Ranjan and Nrupa. The clock (not in the scene) chimes six times.]

[Enter: Naveen. Ranjan and Nrupa go into sulking. Naveen goes up to them and cajoles them (mime)]

Nritya: Hi *bava*, are you done with your darlings.

Naveen: Hi, when shall I book the return ticket?

Nritya: What do you mean?

Naveen: why I thought she had brainwashed you into not taking up the job. Oh, how she was after me to compile a dossier on every male employee at the Hares & Hounds. Why, she is uneasy with the company's name itself. I understand that they styled the firm to reflect their

marketing strategy of hunting with the hounds and running with the hares. How on earth they can do that is anybody's guess.

Nritya: Don't tell me *bava* that your Bricks & Bats is any less funny.

Navya: See she hasn't even joined there but she is already siding with them. What loyalty.

Naveen: Whatever why not I request their management to let the elder sister stand guard her younger sister at the workplace to ward off the male wolves. Well, there is precedent after all. Won't film actresses' mothers come in tow with their daughters?

Navya: You seem to be stuck up with the old English. There are no actresses any more, male or female, an actor is an actor.

[the telephone rings and Navya answers the call.]

Navya: It's Navya here. [Pause] Hi Rachana, we will be there in half an hour.

[Exit: Naveen, Navya with a suitcase each and Nritya with two travel bags followed by Ranjan and Nrupa.] [Curtains down.]

Scene -3

[Curtains up: Office of Hares & Hounds Ltd. Nayak is in his chambers to the left back of stage and Nritya is seated in its right front portion. The clock (not in the scene) strikes twelve times and Nayak dials Nritya on the intercom.]

Nayak: Come on in Nritya.

[Nritya goes to Nayak with a notebook and takes her seat opposite to Nayak.]

Nayak: How do you like our Hares & Hounds dear?

Nritya: They are quite friendly Sir.

Nayak: Who, hares or hounds?

Nritya: I don't get you Sir.

Nayak: Don't they say women are hares and men are hounds.

Nritya: [Smiles.] Why both.

Nayak: I know you are Miss but are you engaged.

Nritya: No Sir.

Nayak: Are you in love?

Nritya: No Sir.

[Nayak gets up and goes near Nritya. She gets up but he gently nudges her back into her chair.

She sits uncomfortably as he holds her shoulders.]

Nayak: Oh, what a perfect Miss not to be missed.

Nritya: [Looks up at him a little scared and pushes away his hands.]

Nayak: Are you a modern girl?

Nritya: Sir I don't know what you mean.

Nayak: What else is modernity but to think and act freely?

Nritya: That way I am modern Sir.

Nayak: What do you say about premarital sex?

Nritya: Sir, you may please excuse me. [Gets up to go]

Nayak: You may go if you please but it helps you to hear what I say. [He nudges her back into her seat and she pushes away his hand.] Being a virgin bride isn't a guarantee to be a fulfilled wife and vice versa. But extramarital affairs are bound to put the wife at odds with her husband in the

long run. That's why clever girls savour the spice of life before they come to endure the staleness of married life.

Nritya: What are you aiming at Sir?

Nayak: Why, I want to be your friend, philosopher and guide. [He caresses her bare back.]

Nritya: I find your philosophy quite discomfoting Sir. [She pushes away his hand.]

Nayak: But my friendliness can further your career.

Nritya: I'm like your daughter Sir.

Nayak: What were your subjects of study?

Nritya: I'm a commerce graduate Sir.

Nayak: That's the problem with the non-biology gang. Even if it is half a pass at them, these women are quick to say, don't you have a mother, sister etc. What stupidity. Why to drive out the silliness from women's heads, study of biology must be made compulsory.

Nritya: [Keeps mum.]

Nayak: Put an end to the fatherly nonsense and begin to see the attractions older men hold for young things like you. Well, if it not attraction, let it be expediency. Who wants to be hired in the morning only to be fired in the evening? It's not the way to start a career. Think about it.

[Nritya goes to her seat and sits perplexed while Nayak continues to ogle at her from his chamber. The clock (not in the scene) strikes one and they both open their lunchboxes. They both finish their meal and the telephone rings in the chamber and Nayak answers the call (mute).
Nayak goes to Nritya with a file in hand.]

Nayak: I've an urgent meeting to attend. I'll be back by five to take you out for a movie. Be ready.

Nritya:[Keeps mum.]

[Exit: Nayak in a hurry.]

[Nritya is seen lost in her thoughts in her chair. The clock (not in the scene) strikes five and she comes out of her stupor.]

[Enter: Nayak. He goes into his chamber and calls Nritya on the intercom (mime). Nritya picks up a bunch of letters and goes up to him. Having placed them on the table she turns to go back to her seat.]

Nayak: Nritya.

Nritya: [Stops and turns towards Nayak.] Yes Sir.

Nayak: Have you thought of any movie?

Nritya: I thought you were only testing me Sir.

Nayak: Sit down.

Nritya: [Takes her seat.]

Nayak: Don't you know that you should always carry your notebook and pencil when I call you.

Nritya: I'm sorry sir.

[Nayak pushes a paper and pencil towards Nritya that she takes and awaits his dictation.]

Nayak: Would you like me to dictate your termination letter?

Nritya: But why Sir.

Nayak: Do you know how a corrupt cop behaves?

Nritya: I don't know Sir?

Nayak: Why he harasses before he obliges that too if bribed. And that bugs you, won't it?

Nritya: [Keeps quiet.]

Nayak: And it bugs man if a woman grants only after tormenting him. I'm no teen to be contented with pushes and prods on the sly. It's neither here nor there either for me or for you. What's worse; I might make a nuisance of myself.

Nritya: That's true Sir.

Nayak: I don't believe in seduction for it is uncertain besides being time consuming. I don't have time on my side any way. Let it be quid pro quo, you give me what you have and I will get you where you want to reach. If you are not willing so be it. But I have to fire you to hire a willing YPT.

Nritya: It's unfair Sir.

Nayak: You will know by and by that life is not all that fair. If you can't, you have to make way for someone willing. The choice is yours, hit out or get out.

[Exit: Nritya slowly as Nayak watches her hopefully.]

[Curtains down.]

Scene - 4

[Curtains Up: The conference hall of Hares & Hounds Ltd. The clock (not in the scene) strikes eleven times.]

Voice Over: As Nritya had complained about Nayak's sexual harassment of her, the Complaints Committee of Hounds & Hares Ltd., is about to meet to take up her case. The committee is headed by Rekha, the Company Secretary [Enter: Rekha.] and comprises of Margaret, Manager Personnel [Enter: Margaret.], Ramya, Deputy Manager, Finance [Enter: Ramya.], Sunil, Assistant

Manager, Personnel [Enter: Sunil] and Gopal, Assistant, Marketing [Enter: Gopal]. Preeti, Personal Secretary to the Managing Director, [Enter: Preeti] would assist the committee.

[All except Preeti take their seats on the table on which pads and pens are placed for their use.

Preeti stands next to Rekha with a bunch of papers.]

Rekha: Miss. Preeti, I don't see any from NGO in the committee. Didn't I say someone familiar with sexual harassment should be associated with this case?

Preeti: Sorry madam, we couldn't find any.

Rekha: What a shame.

Ramya: Why not start a forum of your own after retirement. I shall follow suit when my time comes.

Rekha: Why, won't I welcome you?

Gopal: What about taking me on board madam.

Rekha: Maybe it's an idea to court the devil in the fight against the devil.

Sunil: Why tar all men with the same brush even before the complaint is tabled.

Rekha: Miss. Preeti, place the material before the committee.

[Preeti distributes the copies of Nritya's complaint that they go through in silence.]

Rekha: Let's first examine the complainant.

[Exit: Preeti.]

[Enter: Nritya followed by Preeti.]

Rekha: Are you Miss. Nritya?

Nritya: Yes, madam.

Rekha: Are you married?

Nritya: No, I'm single.

Rekha: When did you join the company?

Nritya: On 14 March.

Gopal: Oh, it's hardly a week.

Rekha: In which department are you?

Nritya: In the HRD.

Ramya: What's your designation?

Nritya: Stenographer.

Ramya: Is it your complaint that Mr. Nayak sought sexual favours from you not to terminate your services.

Nritya: That's true madam.

Rekha: Was he forthright in his demand?

Nritya: Quite so madam.

Gopal: Is there anyone you can vouch for your allegation.

Nritya: There is no one as he said what he said in his chambers on the day I reported to him. On my complaint I was moved out of the department the next day.

Rekha: Preeti, please ask Mr. Nayak to come in.

[Exit: Preeti.]

[Enter: Nayak followed by Preeti.]

Rekha: Are you Mr. Nayak?

Nayak: Yes, Mrs. Rekha.

Rekha: What are you in the organization?

Nayak: I'm the Head of the HRD.

Ramya: Had Ms. Nritya ever reported to you?

Nayak: Yes, she did.

Ramya: And for how long.

Nayak: Luckily it was a one day ordeal for me.

Margaret: What do you mean by that?

Nayak: Why she was such a pain in the neck.

Rekha: Ms. Nritya complained that you threatened to fire her if she failed to grant you sexual favours. What have you got to say on that?

Nayak: Actually it was she who was warming up to me.

Nritya: He's lying, the old lecher.

Rekha: Mind your language Miss. Nritya.

Margaret: Mr. Nayak, what was your response to her alleged advances?

Nayak: I didn't fall for her as she is not my kind of girl.

Nritya: Oh God, he's adding insult to injury.

Nayak: Miss. Nritya, what was your complaint but a character assassination.

Rekha: Mr. Nayak, the agenda is to go into Nritya's complaint and not to get into a debate about her appeal to you.

Nayak: I say her devious complaint is devoid of truth.

Rekha: Mr. Nayak, why should Nritya scandalize herself by making a baseless allegation against you?

Nayak: That's the crux of the matter and the malady of the times. It's all about overriding ambition to make it big by hook or crook. Miss. Nritya wants to climb up the career ladder fast and furious never mind a slip or two on the moral line. Why in someone so fresh and young, this attitude is quite amazing. Well, I didn't want to play ball with her as that would have lowered our Hares & Hounds. Worried that I would report against her, she scandalized me before hand. Now it is for the committee to consider the ill affects of having such a lose woman in the company rolls.

[Nritya rushes to a window and jumps out of it. Others too rush to the two windows (at the back of the stage] to peep down.]

Rekha: [Exiting in a hurry] My God, the poor thing could be dead.

Gopal: [Exiting behind Rekha.] It's all Mr. Nayak's making.

Nayak: Who expected this? [He sinks his head on the conference table.]

[Exit: Ramya, Preeti and Sunil, all sighing and Margaret, crossing herself.]

[Curtains down.]

Scene – 5

[Curtains up: Partially visible body of Nritya face down (not the head) is seen lying in a pool of blood on the ground. Rekha, Gopal, Ramya, Preeti, Sunil, Margaret are around it with their backs to the audience.]

[Enter: Rakesh hurriedly.]

Rakesh: [Examines Nritya] Oh, she's dead. What went wrong?

Rekha: Sir, she was upset by Mr. Nayak's character assassination.

Rakesh: Well, we will deal with that later.

[Rakesh signals to Preeti and as she goes to him, he whispers in her ears (mime)]

[Exit: Preeti.]

[Rakesh takes Rekha aside.]

Rakesh: Mrs. Rekha, I understand you know her sister.

Rekha: Yes Sir.

Rakesh: I know how it hurts you, but [He pauses]

Rekha: Our Company's reputation is at stake.

Rakesh: I know you are part of it for thirty-five years now.

Rekha: It's hard on my conscience Sir.

Rakesh: There is no way out for us but to keep quiet.

Rekha: [Keeps mum.]

Rakesh: Why don't you call up her people?

Rekha: I've to shut up to save one and open up to hurt another.

Rakesh: Don't think the irony is lost on me.

[Rekha moves away from Rakesh into a corner and talks to Navya on her mobile (mime).]

Rakesh: Sunil, why not you call up the cops.

Sunil: Yes Sir.

[Exit: Sunil.]

Rakesh: Gopal, let the guards take care till the cops come.

Gopal: Yes, Sir.

[Exit: All of them but Gopal.]

[Curtains down]

Scene - 6

[Curtains up: Split setting of the chambers of the Managing Director, Hares & Hounds Ltd. One third of the stage on the right is Managing Director's office, in which sits a downcast Nayak. Preeti stands near the Managing Director's chair with a bunch of papers pertaining to Nritya's complaint and the related matters. Two thirds of the stage to the left is the visitors' room with chairs and a centre table.]

[Enter: Rakesh followed by Rekha, Ramya and Margaret. Rakesh goes into his chamber as others sit in the visitors' room. Preeti hands over the papers she was holding to Rakesh.]

Rakesh: Oh shit, what a mess this is.

Nayak: Sorry Sir, I was out of wits.

Rakesh: Why not own it up and be done with it.

Nayak: Its better I too jump to my death.

Rakesh: Why, to make it worse for us.

Nayak: If I confess, what face I will have to show to my children.

Rakesh: You should have thought about it when you brought it upon yourself.

Nayak: Sir, please Sir.

Rakesh: Preeti, go and shred them right now [He hands over the papers back to her.] No, no, why court trouble for destroying evidence should things go wrong [Takes back the papers and locks them in his drawer.]

[Enter: Sunil and Gopal and join the women in the visitors' room. Preeti too joins them and Nayak is seen pleading with Rakesh (mime)]

Sunil: Inspector Balram is expected any time now.

Preeti: Boss is mad with Mr. Nayak.

Ramya: But will he go against him?

Rekha: But we will, won't we?

Margaret: Come out clean and be fair to Nritya's soul.

Sunil: Why wash our dirty linen in public? Won't the stink reach your own homes?

Gopal: What if we get fired for spilling the beans?

Rekha: What self-serving arguments. If only some NGO was involved.

Margaret: Why that would've cooked Nayak's's goose for good.

[Nayak gets up from the chair and folds his hands in gratitude.]

Nayak: Thank you Sir.

Rakesh: But you've to put them in the silent mode.

[Nayak goes into the visitors' room and Rakesh picks up the phone. While Rakesh makes a number of phone calls (mime), Nayak pleads with his colleagues (mime) and Rekha is seen resisting the most (mime).]

[Enter: Inspector Balram in uniform and all fell silent and Nayak retreats into a corner. As Balram takes a look at all those present, Preeti goes up to him]

Balram: I'm Inspector Balram.

Preeti: Please be seated Sir.

Balram: No need for that, I want to see your M.D.

Preeti: Mr. Rakesh is expecting you Sir. Please wait.

[Preeti goes up to Rakesh and announces Balram's visit (mime) Rakesh goes up to Balram, greets him and leads him into his office (mime). And they take their seats.]

Rakesh: Sorry for the bother Mr. Balram

Balram: Why it's my duty.

Rakesh: If only there are a few more like you, India would be on top of the world.

Balram: Any way, who pushed her out of the window?

Rakesh: Sir, how can you say that?

Balram: Well, if its suicide, what was the provocation?

Rakesh: We are at a loss ourselves Sir. I thought she had a great future. We're upset that it should've ended that way that too in the office.

Balram: Has anyone witnessed it?

[Rakesh is seen talking to Balram and his gestures suggest that he knew the higher ups in the department. He rings up someone on phone and hands over the receiver to Balram. Balram talks reverentially and gives back the receiver to Rakesh who disconnects the line after expressing his gratitude (mime).]

Balram: I agree the D.I.G is your buddy but would he take the flak if things go wrong. Why not I register it as a case of suspected murder and then see how things shape up.

[Rakesh is seen desperately pleading with Balram to hush up the case while the latter is seen explaining the difficulties involved. Rakesh offers bribe and Balram raises the stakes. In the end Rakesh shakes Balram's hands.]

Balram: Let me go through the motions.

Rakesh: Why not Sir.

Balram: May I talk to her female colleagues.

Rakesh: You are welcome.

Balram: One by one that is.

[Rakesh goes into the office portion and all flock to him. He talks to them (mime). Rekha goes into the M.D's chamber. Balram and Rekha are seen talking to each other (mime) and in the end the latter gets up and goes into the visitors' room. As the others mob Rekha, Ramya goes up to Balram, and the process is repeated with Margaret and Preeti (all in mime). Rakesh goes back into his chamber after Preeti comes out of it.]

Balram: I see you manage your people admirably. But it may not so easy for me with her people.

Rakesh: Why Sir, we've covered the costs.

Balram: But there can always be overruns.

Rakesh: If it comes to that won't I underwrite them.

Balram: Good, let me go to her people and see how the tide turns over there.

Rakesh: Why trouble yourself, her sister is expected any time now. Meanwhile you can savour our coffee.

[Rakesh calls Preeti on the intercom and asks her to fetch them some coffee (mime). Rakesh and Balram chat (mime).]

[Exit: Preeti.]

Gopal: Looks like its smooth sailing for our Nayak.

Sunil: That is if Nritya's sister won't puncture the rudder. Would she buy the suicide theory?

Who knows she may be privy to what went on in Nayak's chamber.

Gopal: Why scare him Sir, he's half dead already.

Sunil: Well, I'm just showing him the danger end and no more.

[Enter: Preeti with two coffee cups in a tray and goes serve Rakesh and Balram. Preeti goes back to her seat. Rakesh and Balram sip coffee from their cups.]

[Enter: Navya in disarray as all watch her she goes up to Rekha.]

Navya: How is Nritya?

Rekha: [She hugs Navya with tears in her eyes.]

Navya: Oh God, where is she take me to her.

Rekha: No dear, you can't bear the sight.

[Navya becomes unconscious and collapses on the floor.]

[Exit: Preeti to fetch some water as Rekha takes Navya into her lap.]

[Enter: Preeti with a water bottle and she sprinkles some water on Navya's face. Navya regains her consciousness.]

Navya: Where is her body?

Rekha: The police moved it to the Gandhi Hospital.

Navya: Take me there.

Rekha: Let your husband also come.

[While others try to console Navya (mime) and Preeti goes into Rakesh's chamber and informs him of the developments (mime). Rakesh comes out of his chamber to see Navya.]

Rakesh: I'm sorry madam.

Navya (Wiping her tears): Oh, how she brought it upon herself.

[Enter: Naveen and a sobbing Navya falls into his hands.]

Navya: Let's go and see her.

Rakesh: Madam, Inspector Balram is here and he would arrange things.

[Rakesh leads Navya and Naveen into his chamber and introduces them to Balram who receives them by getting up from his chair [mime]. Rakesh motions Navya and Naveen to sit and as they take their seats, Rakesh and Balram too take their seats.]

Balram: It feels sad really.

Navya: [Sobs silently.]

Naveen: I wonder why she should commit suicide.

Rakesh: It's no good talking ill about the dead but as it involves the life of the living, I've to be frank with you. In hindsight I see she has a troubled psyche. Wonder how she mistook Mr. Nayak's patronizing behaviour as sexual harassment. Why he's on the wrong side of fifties with a thirty-year-old clean slate. When he tried to set the record straight before the complaints committee, she took it as a personal affront and lost her balance. Devastated by her act, now Mr. Nayak looks on the wrong side of sixties.

Navya: Well, the day I came to know of her complaint, I wanted her to pack up and go home. But she was not to listen.

Rakesh: Maybe, you can throw some light on her private life. Inspector Balram may like to have a word with you. [Rakesh moves to get up from his seat] I better leave you alone.

Balram: Why, you may as well stay.

Rakesh: As you please [He sits back in his chair.]

Balram: Madam, I've got to look at her death from all angles.

Navya: I understand Sir.

Balram: Is your sister put up with you?

Navya: She stays in a ladies hostel.

Balram: Was there any domestic discord or was she jilted by someone.

Navya: I don't think either was the case.

Balram [Gets up]: I understand your loss and we shall investigate the matter. If you come across any information that incites your suspicion, please let me know. [Balram opens his wallet, pulls out his visiting card and hands it over to Naveen.] Please come along to identify the body and to record your statement.

[Exit: Balram with Navya and Naveen seen off by Rakesh. Rakesh talks to Rekha and others (mime).]

[Exit: all except Rakesh. He goes into his chamber and broods over the matter with his head buried in his hands placed on the table. Curtains down]

Scene – 7

[Curtains up: In the Naveen's drawing room Navya is morose in the sofa. Seven chimes of the clock (not in the scene). At the sound of the door buzzer, Navya gets up and goes to the door.]

Navya: Nice you've come.

[Enter: Rekha and Rachana and they shake hands with Navya.]

Rekha: How are your parents?

Navya: They have a long way to go.

Rekha: Well, time is a great healer

Navya: But I wonder whether I could have averted the mishap

Rekha: It's a case of ifs and buts but you can make a difference to Nrityas in the making.

Rachana: You know madam had resigned on moral grounds.

Rekha: Well, after that immoral silence.

Navya: Looks like it was all pre-destined. What was her *barbadi* jest but a premonition?

Rachana: What was it about?

Navya: [In tears] When I said she was welcome to being a Hyderabad, didn't she joke that it sounded like *barbadi*.

Rekha: But for her ill-fate, why a decent guy like Nayak should have misbehaved as he did? When I confronted him, he confessed his guilt and expressed regret. I asked him why he behaved out of character; he said that as he is nearing sixty, he began to see the beginning of the end of his sex life. Why, having stuck to his wife all his life; he thought that he missed the thrills on the frill. It was his sense of deprivation that drove him towards Nritya. When I asked him

why he pressurized her the day she joined, he said he wanted to overwhelm her without giving her time to think for herself or consult with others.

Navya: Whatever, he got away with it having abetted, didn't the police close the case once and for all.

Rekha: Since he was not brought to justice, you can say so. But he resigned on his own to atone for his sin.

Navya: Would that bring her back to life?

Rekha: But it won't take his life forward the way he wanted it to be. Why her tragic death farcically ended his quest for variety before it ever began.

Navya: That's true. But till Rachana put things in the proper perspective, I was upset that you didn't stand up and be counted in Nritya's case.

Rekha: Thank you for your understanding; well I may even say forgiveness. How I pressurized Rakesh not to hush up the case and how Nayak and his wife begged me to relent I only know. Well, I didn't have it in me what it takes to be on the just side of the dilemma. If only an outsider was in the commute, even if she couldn't have saved Nritya's life at least she would have ensured that Nayak got booked for abetting her suicide. If anything, my failure to protect Nritya's fair name underscores the need for us to form a NGO.

Navya: I am with you in any movement against womanizing at workplace.

Rachana: MAWAW for short.

Navya: Why, it sounds nice.

Rekha: Let it sound a death knell to the errant. [Rekha raises her hand and opens her palms;

Navya and Rachana make it high-fives.] But for that, both of you need to familiarize yourselves

with men at *work* on women at work. Navya, you would join Brims & Dregs, producers of major IMFL brands and you, Rachana, Skins & Hides, leather carpet makers. I would sound the concerned at both the firms.

Navya: [Contemplates for a while.] After the Nritya fiasco, Naveen won't like my working even for a day.

Rekha: Why not I speak to him.

Navya: It won't help. Well, I never did anything behind his back but for the larger good let us keep it from him.

Rachana: Who would protect us from men as we train ourselves to protect women from them?

Navya: Why it's our zeal for a cause.

Rachana: To catch men with their pants down.

Rekha: But if you go overboard, they will get away, citing that women run faster with their skirts up than men with their pants down. [All laugh. Curtains down.]

Scene - 8

[Curtains up: Split setting. Right portion is the office chamber of the General Manager, Marketing, Brims & Dregs Ltd. Left portion is the ante-room of the Personnel Assistant. Navya is seated in the ante-room. Intercom rings and she talks on the phone (mime). After she completes the clock (not in the scene) strikes twelve.]

[Enter: Sanjay holding a brief case.]

Navya: Sir, M.D. is looking for you.

Sanjay: That is as I was missing you. Well, connect me to him.

[He walks into his chamber and picks up the phone and is at conversation (mime). Navya goes into his portion with a bunch of papers and having placed them on the table is about to turn back. He gestures her to stay and she sits in a chair opposite to him as he continues on the phone (mime). He disconnects the phone.]

Sanjay: What do you think of the baseline of our corporate ads?

Navya: What is it Sir?

Sanjay: Fill it to the brim and drain it to the dregs.

Navya: Isn't it apt for liquors.

Sanjay: It's relevant for the SEWs as well.

Navya: What is that Sir?

Sanjay: Don't you know I am no Sir Sanjay

Navya: I just said Sir and no more.

Sanjay: Smart, I like it but...

[He gets up, goes to her and bends behind her.]

Sanjay: [Whispers to her.] Don't you know that Sir to a SEW is Mr. Spent-force

Navya: [Feels uncomfortable] I don't get you Sir.

Sanjay: [Breathing over her back.]: Why, are you not a sexually experienced woman?

Navya: What you are talking Sir? [She gets up from the chair.]

Sanjay: [Hugs her from behind.] Know it's your sex-appeal at work.

[Navya wriggles herself out of his hold but Sanjay nudges her back into the chair.]

Navya: Leave me Sir.

Sanjay: Try asking an iron rod to leave a magnetic hole.

[He holds her by her shoulders. She struggles to get up from her chair. He finds a mole on her exposed back.

Sanjay: Navya it's eureka. Oh, a mole on your back.

Navya: What for you?

Sanjay: Oh, how it fascinates me. Won't that stand you in good stead? You know what and in which posture to afford you a varied experience.

[She wriggles herself out of his hold and he lets her go. As she moves away from him, he pinches her bottom. She settles down in her seat and shortly thereafter he calls her on the intercom. She goes back into his chambers, he motions her to sit and she does.]

Sanjay: I'm sorry I've got carried away.

Navya: It's okay Sir.

Sanjay: What is okay, my ardour or my apology?

Navya: Don't you know?

Sanjay: My ardour is never an apology to an amorous dame.

Navya: Why pester a disinterested woman?

Sanjay: What am I to do when I am interested?

Navya: Why woman should give a damn to every Tom, Dick and Harry who comes to fancy her?

Sanjay: Ask any rapist and he would tell you.

Navya: Isn't it like a thief borrowing from a robber's lexicon.

Sanjay: Why isn't it a higher knowledge? It's the refrain of the rapists that having enjoyed the fare it's unfair of women to accuse them of rape. As with rape so with the so called sexual

harassment, it's about woman's inward exhilaration couched by outward indignation. Like rape gets better for woman as it lasts longer, so is the case with the sexual harassment for sure.

Navya: [Gets up] I don't think neither you are paid to harass me nor I am hired to be harassed by you.

Sanjay: Cool dear. [Sanjay goes up to Navya and gently nudges her into the chair.] If it's hard this way, I'll make it soft another way [Lightly brushes her breast and she recoils] but there is nothing really soft about ball games barring the handball that is if it's not about throwing the ball against the wall. Why, in golf, it gets clubbed before it is nudged into the hole. What a tame end, but hockey is different. It is taken into the D before it is slammed it into the goal, something manly, isn't it? But how piteous is the ping-pong, at least in tennis, the balls are bigger and get respite. And savage is the squash, what do you say?

Navya: Oh, stop it Sir.

[Navya tries to get up and Sanjay nudges her back into the chair.]

Sanjay: I'm glad you want the balls are handled better than that. Why, volleyball is a via media. A dozen men get to handle the ball and scores of them voyeur. If the dames are at it, two dozen balls get agitated as well. What with those bikinis, won't the sight get better in the beach volleyball? But it's the rough and tough rugby that is true to life as it allows men to hug the ball. Wonder how in football it's a foul to handle the ball. But it's cricket that is sexy with its field placements like say, no cover, no extra cover while there is a deep gully between two fine legs.

Navya: It's all foul Sir.

Sanjay: Talk about foul and nothing to beat caroms at it. Why, with four holes to fill, there is no peg on board.

Navya: Stop it Mister. [She gets up]

Sanjay: Well, Sir to Mister is one step closer, isn't it? Call me Sanjay and we would leap frog to it, won't we?

Navya: After all, there is a limit. [She goes back to her seat in a huff.]

[Sanjay picks up a note book and begins to sketch Navya and having finished the drawing, he calls her on the intercom (mime). Navya goes back to into Sanjay's chamber.]

Navya: Yes.

Sanjay: Is Her Ladyship an artist?

Navya: So, if not harassment it should be mocking then.

Sanjay: Given your lovely fingers, I guess you could be one.

Navya: I am not, is it okay?

Sanjay: Still you could be an art lover. [He gives her the sketch book] Judge this one.

Navya: [Holding the sketch book] I take objection to this.

Sanjay: I don't blame you for that but you won't be complaining if only you model in nude. How else can I do justice to your figure?

[Navya slowly but deliberately begins to slide her *pallu*. Sanjay looks at her bulging blouse in heightened anticipation and she holds it back coquettishly. Sanjay goes nearer to her and Navya, feigning to protect her self, puts her hand into her blouse. [She presses the button to stop the recording and then another to start rewinding the tape in the audience view]. Sanjay looks in wonderment as Navya drops her *pallu* exposing her valley to him.]

Sanjay: What a valley!

Navya: Of your fall.

[Navya pulls out a pocket tape recorder from within her blouse. As Sanjay stands stunned, Navya pulls her *pallu* back over her blouse. Recovering himself, Sanajy tries to grab the tape recorder from her hand. Navya pushes Sanjay with all her strength and he falls on the floor. Navya plays the tape recorder. Sanjay gets up from the floor and attempts to grab it from her. She runs out of the place leaving him stunned and worried. Curtains down.]

Scene – 9

[Curtains up: Split setting of the office of Skins & Hides Ltd. Cabin of the Finance Manager on the left and the Finance Department on the right. Diwakar is in the cabin with Rachana. Kumar sits in the office portion. Rachana comes out of the cabin and takes her seat at the adjacent table to Kumar's. The clock (not in the scene) strikes four.

Rachana: How I wish every boss is like our boss.

Kumar: May I know what you saw in him that we failed to see all these years.

Rachana: He doesn't misbehave with women.

Kumar: What a simpleton you are.

Rachana: It's no flattering.

Kumar: I think its early days for that [He smiles.]

Rachana: [Though pleased, she tries to hide her feelings.]

Kumar: Once I overheard a conversation between an old woman and a young girl. Well, they were egg vendors at our hostel mess. When the young thing said that boys misbehave with her, the oldie averred they were all nice to her. [Laughs]

Rachana: It's insulting.

Kumar: What if I say you are terrific.

Rachana: Won't I complain of harassment?

Kumar: That's what Deepti did when the boss lost his eyes for her. But the only difference was she carried the complaint to his wife and that was that. Well, he acquired the look of a castrated bull after that. Deepti resigned having had her last laugh but his wife got a couple of surveillance cameras installed in his cabin. I suppose to be doubly sure.

Rachana: Don't joke.

Kumar: It's no joke that it pays to report on man's womanizing ways to his wife. Wonder why women won't realize that.

Rachana: Give me your wife's number, just in case.

Kumar: She's going to welcome your call.

Rachana: But why, if it's not a joke.

Kumar: You will know when we get close.

Rachana: How clever, incite a woman's curiosity to induce her to come closer

Kumar: It's for the woman to choose to be or not to be. But why should I open my life to someone not closer to me.

Rachana: Looks like you are a seasoned hand.

Kumar: I can vouch that I'm thirty-five and no less.

Rachana: I think there is lot that one can learn from you.

Kumar: One needn't come close to me for that.

[Diwakar talks to Kumar on intercom (mime). Kumar takes the file to Diwakar. Rachana watches Kumar as Diwakar pulls him up [mime] Kumar goes back to his seat.]

Rachana: I could see that boss is annoyed with you.

Kumar: Of what avail being a boss if he won't pull subordinates for his shortcomings.

Rachana: Maybe he's jealous.

Kumar: You give me cause to complain.

Rachana: Why do you think so?

Kumar: Is it not inducing womanizing.

Rachana: Jokes apart, what it is all about.

Kumar: Take men as sperms and women as eggs, as you should, and it's the Sperm-egg Syndrome that governs the male female attitudes. Like hordes of sperms seek a single egg, scores of men chase a desirable woman. As with eggs, so with women, having taken one, they would ignore others. But like an odd egg that lets in multiple sperms, some women revel in multiple partners.

Rachana: What are you suggesting?

Kumar: It's natural for men to besiege a desirable dame and it's for her to let the superfluous suitors pass by.

Rachana: Why it's but shifting the onus on women.

[Diwakar with some files in hand reaches them.]

Diwakar: Kumar hold the fort till I come back. .

Kumar: Yes Sir.

[Exit: Diwakar.]

Kumar: Picking up the threads from where we left them, there was an episode which proves that men are far too ill-equipped to guard against scheming women.

Rachana: What is that?

Kumar: There was a lady clerk in the marketing department who was a past master of soft sell. It was her tactic to let the targeted man know that she was short of money. What with the man perceiving her as vulnerable, she starts flirting with him to begin fleecing him in time. Well, all the while keeping him at an arms length. But were he to tighten his purse strings in frustration, she invites him home insinuating her willingness.

Rachana: What next?

Kumar: When he goes to her in heightened anticipation, she would introduce her mother-in-law who supposedly came on an unscheduled visit. Having proved her intent to grant him, she would fleece him before a couple of repeats give her game away to him. When she picks up a new prey, the wounded keeps mum for fear of being ridiculed. It went on for a year before she was exposed. But before that, she induced Diwakar's predecessor to sanction a departmental loan of two lakhs and stand guarantee for her. And the matter is in the court now.

Rachana: But who belled the cat.

Kumar: I don't believe in being boastful.

Rachana: I thought you are a gentleman.

Kumar: What if I'm a ladies man.

Rachana: It's shameful being a married man.

Kumar: How women bemoan if marriage turns man into half a man.

Rachana: There is no winning an argument with you.

Kumar: Why, you are a wonderful conversationalist.

Rachana: What's her name?

Kumar: Who's name, my wife's or the one I crave.

Kumar: Mind the tense, Mr.?

Kumar: She is ever evocative.

Rachana: Oh, you are impossible.

Kumar: But I do see possibilities.

Rachana: [Smiles.] Won't the soft-pedaling be harder on women than the hard sell?

Kumar: How am I to know?

Rachana: Wait till I figure it out.

[The clock (not in the scene) strikes five and they get ready to go.]

[Enter: Diwakar and he talks to Kumar and Rachana (mime). He goes into his chamber, picks up his briefcase and lunch box and comes out. Kumar too picks up his briefcase and lunch box while Rachana keeps her lunch boxes in her handbag.]

[Exit: The three of them. Curtains down.]

Scene – 10

[Curtains up: Split setting of the office of Bricks & Bats. In the conference room [right portion]

Naveen, Manager, Materials, is deposing before the Complaints Committee on the sexual harassment at the workplace [mime]. In the left portion is Divya.]

[Enter: Navya and goes to the reception desk.]

Navya: Miss, I'm Navya from MAWAH. I would like to meet your Managing Director.

Divya: Well he is out of station and is expected only the next week..

Navya: [Hands over her business card.] I am from a NGO dealing with sexual harassment at the workplace. Maybe I can see the Personnel manager.

Divya: [Divya glances at Navya's business card.] What a coincidence! Right now the Complaints Committee is hearing a case.

Navya: Oh, really. Is there anyone from a NGO?

Divya: I don't think so.

Navya: Then why not send my card to the concerned person.

Divya: Let me see if she would like to see you now.

[As Navya is seated in the visitors' sofa, Divya goes into the conference room with Navya's business card. When Divya gives the card to the lady heading the complaints committee, she is seen talking to the others [mime] A perplexed Naveen comes out of the conference hall and goes up to Navya.]

Naveen: Believe me, it was all false.

Navya: [surprised.] What is it about?

Naveen: I thought you got wind of Mithuna's complaint against me.

Navya: So you lead a double life.

Naveen: I'll explain everything.

Navya: You should have done that before.

Naveen: I didn't want to upset you dear.

Navya: Now you made it worse for me.

Naveen: Bear with me, I'll tell them and come.

[As Naveen goes into the conference room, Divya comes out of it. As Naveen explains things to his colleagues [mime] they wear a surprised look. At the same time, Navya is seen talking to Divya [mime]. Even as Naveen comes out of the chamber, Navya storms out of the office. A stunned Naveen follows her. [Curtains down.]

Scene – 11

[Curtains up: In her drawing room that evening, Rekha in serious discussion with Rachana (mime). The clock (not in the scene) strikes six.]

[Enter: Navya (with a suitcase in each hand) with Ranjan and Nrupa]

Rekha: Is it *miya bibi jhagada* or what?

Navya: It's no mere *jhagada*, its jeopardy.

Rachana: Why what happened?

Rekha: Naveen has thrown me into a dilemma.

Rekha: So has Kumar our Rachana.

Navya: Who is that?

Rekha: The Cupid at her office

Navya: Why is it an unrequited love?

Rekha: He's already married.

Navya: Oh how men mislead women

Rekha: Is Naveen cheating on you or what?

Navya: If that's the case, I would have been sulking at home hoping that man always comes back to his wife.

Rachana: What then?

Navya: He was harassing a woman at his office.

Rachana: Oh God, I can understand your dilemma. But what's his version?

Navya: I think his was a partial confession. As coincidences go, he met Mithuna that is her name, on the very day we met. He did admit that he coveted her bowled over by her charms. When he realized she was a flirt, he says that his ardour for her evaporated. But when she shifted gear and began flirting with one and all he saw it was telling upon their performance. Well, the complaints committee upheld his stance that she fixed him as he tried to discipline her and the management fired her.

Rachana: What's the dilemma then?

Navya: After Nritya affair, I'm not going to believe the verdict of any committee. Why, he would have complained against her when she didn't yield to his advances. Besides, having put Sanjay on the mat if I let Naveen off the hook, won't I have to answer to my conscience?

Rekha: Even if he was guilty, what can be done now?

Navya: Why can't I divorce him to make men realize that womanizing at workplace could be hazardous at home?

Rachana: Don't be crazy.

Rekha: Why become more Christian than the Christ to ruin your children's lives. [She takes the nonplussed Ranjan and Nrupa into her arms.]

Navya: Won't the double jeopardy be doubly deterring for the hopefuls.

Rekha: Don't be silly and make me feel guilty for radicalizing you.

Navya: Well, after that experience with Sanjay, I am obsessed about fighting against the errant men.

Rekha: I don't think you have any grounds for divorce at all.

Navya: Maybe but can't I desert him?

Rekha: What about the children?

Navya: If I can keep them it's fine. If not I would find meaning to my meaningless life by dedicating myself to the MAWAW.

Rekha: Why not I take you to Lawyer Bhagawan? Rachana also needs to understand the implications of bigamy.

Rachana: I don't think there is any law against a live-in relationship.

Rekha: What a shame that you want to disturb a woman's married life.

Rachana: Well everything is fair in love and war.

Navya Why not get acquainted with his wife and take her to a couple of movies of the fifties and sixties. Bet if not you, she would imbibe the spirit of self-sacrifice to make it easy for him

Rekha: Jokes apart, why build castles in the air when you have neither declared your love to him nor he indicated his to you.

Rachana: Madam might recall that love manifests itself in looks much before it gets expressed in words.

Rekha: Let Bhagawan (Looks up to the heavens) judge after Lawyer Bhagawan appraises Him about the law of our land.

[Rekha gets up from her seat followed by Rachana and Navya.]

[Enter: Naveen. Navya instinctively takes hold of Ranjan and Nrupa.]

Naveen: Spoil your life if you must. [He moves towards Ranjan and Nrupa as Navya hugs them closer to her.] I don't want your stupidity to ruin their lives.

[Naveen tries to take hold of Ranjan and Nrupa and Navya resists him as Rekha and Rachana watch in dismay. A tug of war ensues between Naveen and Navya for the possession of the bewildered Ranjan and Nrupa who alternately cry 'mummy' and 'daddy'. Naveen prevails in the end and takes hold of the crying Ranjan and Nrupa and drags them towards the exit.]

Navya: I swear I'll drag you to the court.

Naveen: Leaving your home, you've become lame.

Navya: Wait, I'll show you what I am

Naveen: What a sight it makes, a lame woman dragging her man to the court.

[Exit: Naveen with Ranjan and Nrupa yelling 'mummy'.]

Rekha: I think you must bend for your children's sake.

Navya: Well, I'm more focused than ever. Let's go to Lawyer Bhagawan.

[Exit: Navya, Rachana and Rekha. Curtains down.]

Scene - 12

[Curtains up: Lawyer Bhagawan's Office. Bhagawan is at his desk poring over some papers. The clock (not in the scene) strikes seven.]

[Enter: Rekha, Rachana and Navya.]

Bhagawan: Hi Rekha. I've read about your MAWAW in The Hindu and wanted to compliment you. Why, work may not kill man but surely it kills his social life.

[Bhagawan asks them to take their seats and as they sit his mobile rings. He checks the caller number and answers the call.]

Bhagawan: I've some clients with me. You can come and collect the decree.

[Bhagawan switches off his mobile.]

Rekha: Sorry for barging in with my battalion.

Bhagawan: You know you're always welcome.

Rekha: Thank you and let me introduce the co-activists of MAWAW. This is Navya [Bhagawan and Navya greet each other] and this is Rachana [Bhagawan and Rachana greet each other].

Bhagawan: Is it about a legal dilemma or a liberal donation. [Bhagawan laughs heartily.]

Rekha: You've put an idea into my head. Be MAWAW's honorary legal advisor.

Bhagawan: Done, I deem it an honour.

Rekha: Thanks a lot. Now we have a twin dilemma, one is about bigamy and another is about divorce.

Bhagawan: Why not we deal with the prosaic before we go to the poetic. Which of these two ladies seeks divorce?

Rekha: Men are men whatever be their calling.

Bhagawan: If not, where's the charm for women.

[Rekha briefs Bhagawan about Navya's case (mime)]

Bhagawan: I think you should give him the benefit of doubt.

Navya: I've no doubt about his guilt

Bhagawan: What if Mithuna is a questionable character?

Navya: Lawyer *saab*, this is no argument in the court.

[Bhagawan pulls out three case files and places before them. Navya reads one and her colour changes. Rekha and Rachana too peruse one each.]

Rachana: [Exclaims.] Oh, it's our company's suit against Mithuna. Without taking her name, Kumar told me about her.

Bhagawan: How do you know him?

Rachana: He's my boss.

Bhagawan: And he's my client.

Rekha: The world is small indeed and the other side of the sexual coin is no less ugly

Navya: [Holds Bhagawan's hand.] If not for you, it would have been a certain ruin for me.

Bhagawan: It's all God's will.

Navya: Let me go and apologize to Naveen. [She gets up from her chair.]

Rekha: Why not ask him to drive down. He can be here before you can persuade some *autowallah* to take you home.

Navya: Not a bad idea. Lend me your cell

[Rekha gives her mobile to Navya. Navya goes to a corner and talks to Naveen on the mobile (mime).]

[Enter: Kumar. He is surprised to see Rachana in profile.]

Bhagawan: Think about the devil...

[Rachana turns her head in all curiosity and rises from her seat surprised.]

Kumar: I hope Ms. Rachana has no brief for an original suit against me.

Bhagawan: Why you have picked up the legal jargon as well.

Kumar: Am I not in the right company on a wrong issue.

Bhagawan: [Handing over a document to Kumar] Now you are free to set right your life.

Kumar: I owe it to you really. I am sure if not for you; I would have been in the limbo till the very end.

[Kumar opens his briefcase and having placed the document in it pulls out his bank cheque book. He signs a leaf, puts the cheque book in the briefcase and closes it. Kumar gives the cheque to Bhagawan]

Bhagawan: Why a blank cheque?

Kumar: Just to show my boundless gratitude within my limited bank balance.

Bhagawan: [Embraces Kumar.] You touched me like no other client. I wish your next wife would see life from the right side of it. [Bhagawan checks himself] Oh, I've got carried away. I am sorry for breaching the client confidentiality.

Kumar: Why blame your emotional involvement that ended my marital stalemate.

Rekha [Goes up to Kumar.]: I'm Rekha. I want to have a word with you.

Kumar: Welcome, if it's not platitude.

Rekha: I want to play a matchmaker.

[Rachana's face brightens up and readily she becomes tense.]

Kumar: Thank you. I shall give you my resume.

Rekha: I have it from Rachana underscored with love.

Kumar: [Goes up to Rachana with apparent joy.] Will you accept my love and lead me in life.

Rachana: If only you vow not to put your charms at work on the women at work, ever.

Rekha [to Rachana]: But before that you pledge to work against men at *work* on women at work

Rachana: Only against men unfairly at *work*.

Bhagawan: [in jest.] Shall I get the affidavits ready for both of you to sign?

Navya: Why forget me. Don't I need an affidavit affirming trust in my man?

Rekha: With a rider that mischief in the office can misfire at home.

[Rekha receives a call on her mobile and she nods in agreement as she talks (mime).]

Rekha: It's about a complaint at Tits & Tats for MAWAW to get cracking.

[The clock (not in the scene) strikes eight.]

Bhagawan: Why it sounds good tidings for MAWAW.

Rekha: And bad omen for men at *work* on women at work.

[Enter: Naveen with Ranjan and Nrupa. Navya rushes to Naveen while Ranjan and Nrupa run to

Navya. Naveen hugs Navya and she holds Ranjan and Nrupa on either side. Curtains down.]

Castle of Despair

A stage play

Dramatis Personae:

Rajiv: Forty year old businessman.

Ramya: Rajiv's thirty-five-year-old wife.

Deva: Rajiv's thirty-five-year old businessman friend

Divya: Deva's thirty year old wife and Ramya's close friend.

Rau: Forty year old lawyer and Rajiv's long lost friend.

Inspector Slesha: Rau's thirty-year old wife.

Nayak: Fifty-year-old lawyer and Rajiv's friend.

Raju: Forty-five year-old Bank Manager and a friend of Rajiv.

Dr. Aslam: The Rajivs' fifty-five year old family physician.

Rangaiah: The sixty-five year old servant at the Rajivs' house.

Scene – 1

[Curtains Up: The Rajivs' well-furnished drawing room at the right side with an adjoining bedroom on the left side. A backside opening in the drawing room connects the rest of the backstage bungalow. Rangaiah is seen in the drawing room dusting the furniture.]

[Enter: Rajiv with briefcase in one hand and cell phone in the other tucked to the ear.]

Rajiv: Rangaiah, has Bank Manager Raju called on the landline?

Rangaiah: No, Rajiv *babu*.

Rajiv: Is Ramya at home?

Rangaiah: No *babu*, she has gone out with Divya *beti*.

[Rangaiah goes backstage and Rajiv continues to redial on the cell phone. Rangaiah returns with a glass of water that Rajiv takes.]

Rangaiah: You know you are more than my lost son to me.

Rajiv: Don't I feel free with you than I was with my father? Why, you are a confident of sorts to me from childhood. But why do we need to vouch for all that now?

Rangaiah: If you don't get angry I want to say something.

Rajiv: What's holding you?

Rangaiah: I'm scared of the new Rajiv *babu* in you.

Rajiv: What do you mean?

Rangaiah: I see you are a changed man all charged up for the pipes project. What's the need for you to bother about it being a landlord yourself? Moreover, you have a flourishing steel business as well. You know how uncomfortable Ramya *beti* is about your obsession.

Rajiv: Rangaiah, you are living in a world that time had left behind and Ramya is unable to step into the new one despite my pushing and prodding. Nowadays landlords are passé and businessmen still carry the shopkeeper tag. Industry is the in-thing but its dog- eats- the-dog out there. Realize that the gentleman of leisure your late master was is a dead species now.

[Enter: Raju with his briefcase.]

Raju: Sorry Rajiv.

Rajiv: Raju, I was really mad with you. Ask Rangaiah if you don't believe me.

[Rangaiah greets Raju and goes backstage.]

Rajiv: You were not at the bank and your cell is ever engaged.

Raju: I couldn't call you to tell about the summons from my zonal office. There was no way anyway. You know how a call from our zonal manager sends us into jitters. Oh, the way he hauls us over the coals right in front of our subordinates! What a nasty fellow!

Rajiv: Don't we all know that its man's frustration at home giving vent to itself at the workplace.

Raju: Seems so from what is rumoured about his wife. More to the point, even as he let me go after a good dressing down, my wife took over on my way here. Why, this damned cell phone could be the brainchild of a nagging wife. But as the Hyderabad road sense is no less scary, self-driving is not a sensible option either.

Rajiv: Isn't the bumper-to-bumper on the road as unending as the red tape in your bank. Won't my year-old application for term loan prove that?

Raju: You know I'm only a clog in an inertial wheel.

[Enter: Rangaiah with *elachi chai* for them.]

Rajiv: Why not get a little momentum now.

[They both begin to sip the beverage.]

Raju: Wah Taj!

Rangaiah: *Saab*, its Ramya *beti's* recipe as you know.

Raju [to Rajiv]: So, Ramya is a good teacher as well.

Rajiv: Besides being a strict wife that is.

Raju: Without wife for a jockey, a man can't run life's course. That's for sure. Is she not at home now?

Rajiv: She went out with Divya for some shopping. What a compelling attraction shopping has for women, more so, window shopping.

Raju: Why a window-shopping wife is any day better than a nagging one.

[Rangaiah collects the tea cups and goes backstage.]

Rajiv: But why all this dodging. You know I'm dying to ground my project. You promised to get back to me by this evening, didn't you?

Raju: To make the long story short, your pipes project might remain your pipedream forever.

Rajiv: But why?

Raju: They feel it's like facilitating the delivery of a white elephant for my nursing.

Rajiv: Someone must be mad over there.

Raju: Well, to borrow from cricketer Mohinder Amarnath, they are a bunch of jokers anyway. Leave alone the mega term-loan for your proposed venture; they are dodgy about measly working capital to a profit-making unit!

Rajiv: How would that help me anyway?

Raju: Eureka! Why not I borrow from the prodding of the courts for out-of-court settlements?

Rajiv: Enough of borrowing my friend as the topic is about lending.

Raju: Oh, if only you are a little less impatient and our people have a little more alacrity. Of what avail is working capital once his unit becomes sick?

Rajiv: Is it your idea that I should wait to pick up that sick unit or what?

Raju: I've a much healthier mind than you may like to credit me with. What if you lay a pipeline to his oil unit with the margin money of your proposed venture for mutual benefit? Besides being sensible it sounds nice, doesn't it?

Rajiv: You know I want to be an industrialist and not a money lender.

Raju: Be patient for once. What's your problem if he takes you as a partner? Won't that open the doors for some future projects of your own?

Rajiv: Instead, why not I take over the unit? Won't your bank facilitate that?

Raju: But why should he sell it to you?

Rajiv: To follow suit, let me borrow from Casanova.

Raju: I suppose the topic is not about sexual exploits. Looks like you want to delve into it taking advantage of your wife's absence.

Rajiv: Jokes apart, I tell you he had a better grasp of life being a playboy than you guys have of money being bankers.

Raju: Is it so?

Rajiv: During one of his sojourns, he had for co-lodgers a poor widow and her three daughters. Seeing him dole out money to all and sundry, when the hapless woman had gone to him to make up leeway, he sought as barter the charms of her eldest daughter.

Raju: What an indecent proposal!

Rajiv: Protest she did but to no avail. Why he was all logic, cold logic you may say. Whatever be his charity, he reasoned it out with her, it wouldn't last forever and before long she would have to approach other men for succor. Well, their line would be no different from his and her response too could be the same. But for how long was the question. It was only time before she would lose hold on her daughters' chastity. When push would come to shove at some future time, won't she let them grant their final favour to someone or the other? That being the case, he said, why should he not be the lucky guy?

Raju: What an abominable fellow he was!

Rajiv: I don't think so.

Raju: Well!

Rajiv: Lest she should mistake his character, he clarified that he wouldn't have attached any strings if her daughters were plain looking.

Raju: Didn't she spit on him thrice over in spite of that?

Rajiv: Well, she let him have her eldest one and he had the other two on his own.

Raju: Isn't it an exploitation of the meanest kind!

Rajiv: Why, it's life's reality of the ironic kind. Logically seen, it's very sound, but sentimentally approached, it's all fury. Whatever, can't you visualize the parallel?

Raju: I do see but as you know I won't approve of it.

Rajiv: So be it. By the way, who's the guy we were talking about?

Raju: He's Sampath one of my valued clients.

Rajiv: What's his background like?

Raju: Why bother about that when you are averse to my proposal?

Rajiv: How do you know he won't be interested in my proposal?

Raju: Well who knows, ask Nayak who also happens to be his lawyer.

Rajiv: Whatever, don't lose track of my application.

Raju: Don't I owe it to my clients to pursue their cases. Now it's time I attended to Rani's errand.

I will see your wife sometime later.

Ramya (voice over): Why don't you come in Divya?

Divya (voice over): No, Ramya, Deva would have reached home by now. See you tomorrow, bye.

Ramya (voice over): Bye.

[Enter: Ramya.]

Ramya: Hi Raju *garu*, how is Rani?

Raju: She's fine at my account and expense that is.

Ramya: Oh, all you men! Are you not worse for it when it comes to portraying the better-half as the worst-half?

Rajiv: But with the honourable exception of His Exalted Obedience.

Raju: Well, Her Exalted Eminence would be waiting for me, good night.

Ramya: Tell her Divya and I will soon catch up with her. Good night.

Rajiv: Good night.

[Exit: Raju as Rajiv sees him off. Ramya goes into the bedroom.]

[Curtains down.]

Scene - 2

[Curtains Up: The Rajivs' drawing room and the adjacent bedroom.]

[Enter: An excited Rajiv into the drawing room yelling for Ramya. He drops his briefcase on the sofa and goes into the bedroom in search of her. Not finding her there, he goes backstage, yelling for her.]

Ramya (voice over): Why, what's wrong with you?

Rajiv (voice over): That's the problem with you middle-aged women.

Ramya (voice over): Okay *baba*, what has turned my old boy into a horny lad now? [Pause] Rajiv, don't be mad.

[Rajiv, carrying a demure Ramya in his hands, comes out of the backstage and goes into the bedroom. He drops her in the bed and then draws her towards himself.]

Ramya: Wait until dark.

Rajiv: Is not sex the physical manifestation of emotional expression? Why, it's the barrier-less bearer of man's inner impulses.

[Lights are off as Rajiv cuddles with Ramya.]

[Lights are on as Ramya rearranges her dress.]

Ramya: If only we can turn the clock back?

Rajiv: What a thought when it's time to leap frog in life.

Ramya: Beware of a fall dear.

Rajiv: Why not start a course in the art of pessimistic living. Just as Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has his following, you're sure to have your share of fame. Never mind my predicament as a celebrity's husband.

Ramya: Be serious, your obsession to advance has become a drag on my life.

Rajiv: Relax Ramya; I've got a grip on the lifeline to success, almost that is.

Ramya: Looks like you are riding a bigger horse than ever.

Rajiv: It could as well be a carriage of four for the empress of my heart.

Ramya: And our Ravi the heir apparent to your industrial empire in the making. Why not summon him back from the States leaving his course in M.S. mid-course. Oh, my dream merchant, you give me nightmares really.

Rajiv: Let Nayak come to set your mind at rest.

Ramya: Why talk in circles?

[Rajiv leads her into the drawing room, opens the briefcase and pulls out a document and gives it to her.]

Ramya: What's this?

Rajiv: Game changer.

[Ramya goes through the document.]

Ramya: Who is this Mr. Sampath by the way?

Rajiv: He's a technocrat, a good one I may say, but with very little business sense.

Ramya: So he has put his unit up for sale, is it?

Rajiv: Well, not yet. It's my idea to make him do that.

Ramya: But how!

Rajiv [pointing to the document]: By signing on the dotted line.

Ramya: Why should he sell his *batta katta* unit to you? What wishful thinking!

Rajiv: It was nothing short of a miracle that he came thus far, in spite of the banker's lending hand that is. He's hard up for funds to run the unit and the financial stress is bound to make him wind up the show any time now. Won't I grab that and proceed.

Ramya: Enough of this wild goose chase, I long to go back to our laid back times. You know I'm getting sick of you and your devious ways for quick bucks. Haven't you inherited enough to last our lifetime and more? You're not doing any badly either at your business. What could be a better setting for leading a contented life? Why this urge for more and more of the moolah?

Rajiv: Don't you see this could be the document of our destiny?

Ramya: Or a pathway for frustration.

Rajiv: Wonder why you always sing a sluggish tune forgetting there is a woman behind every successful man?

Ramya: Maybe, to push him into the cesspool of greed only to find him dragging her along.

Rajiv: Isn't it silly to dub the hard-nosed as greedy?

Ramya: Why, eying what is not your due is plain greedy, isn't it?

Rajiv: The world doesn't care how you make your money but weighs you with the moolah you have. Well, it's the credo of the dull to deride success one way or the other.

Ramya: God save you, if you have one.

Rajiv: Don't you know God helps those who help themselves.

Ramya: Isn't it also said that those whom Gods want to destroy they make mad.

Rajiv: Besides your beauty nothing makes me madder than your madness.

Ramya: Don't you know I'm mad with you because I love you?

[Enter: Nayak ushered in by Rangaiah. Rangaiah goes backstage.]

[Nayak greets Rajiv and Ramya, they greet him in turn.]

Rajiv: I thought you would bring Mr. Samapath along with you.

Nayak: I'll come to that later. I hope I haven't kept you waiting for too long. Blame it upon the hazards of our haphazard traffic.

Ramya: Don't we, Hyderabadies learn to live with the pregnant traffic ever?

Rajiv [winks at Ramya]: Of what avail is an ever pregnant wife, what do you say?

Ramya: Is it a plea for bigamy? [Turns to Nayak] What do you say lawyer *garu*?

Nayak: I recall a limerick about the trial of a man who had three wives. When the judge had asked him, why three, the guy said, one is impossible, bigamy, sir, is a crime.'

Ramya [to Nayak]: What about having on hand my plaint for divorce?

Nayak: Won't my conflict of interest rule that out.

Ramya: That is in spite of the notorious double tongue.

Nayak: Isn't it a professional hazard? But I can put you to Rau.

Rajiv: You mean my class fellow Rau! Is he still going round the courts in his worn-out black coat?

Nayak: Soon he's going to be sworn in as a judge of the Delhi High Court.

Rajiv: What, Rau, a high court judge, are you joking.

Nayak: Why, even as he was growing intellectually all the while, you got stuck in your belief that you had outgrown him.

Rajiv: Why didn't you tell me before?

Nayak: Is your role model of success a low profile lawyer on the right side of justice?

[Rangaiah brings some tea for them.]

Rajiv: If it's all merit well and good but if it's a case of political pull God help mother justice.

Rangaiah, don't you recall my friend Rau who was always in our house, now he's going to be a high court judge.

Rangaiah: Don't I know you were closest to each other. Oh how you used to gossip in the name of combined study. I'm sure he remembers me too. Why don't you invite him home?

Rajiv: Who knows he might put on airs now. Well, we will see. [Turns to Nayak] Have you got Mr. Sampath around? I've readied the agreement to be signed and sealed.

[Rajiv shows the document to Nayak who keeps it aside without going through the same.]

Nayak: Honestly, I didn't have the heart to tell him to sell his unit to you. Don't I know what he had to endure to realize his dream? But why did you raise the bar?

Rajiv: To lower the risk.

Nayak: What risk do you run by the way?

Rajiv: I don't see the partnership on offer working out for me in the long run.

Nayak: Why it's a win *win* deal for you in the short as well as the long run. I wonder why you fail to see it that way and wish I had the money myself.

Ramya: Why any doubt! It's all fair and square whichever way one may look at it.

Nayak: Rajiv, it pays for man to go by the wifely instincts, won't it?

Rajiv: But its no romantic matter is it? Why talk about a distant future in an uncertain life. If it comes to bargaining, it's ten percent over its fair market value and I'll let him keep his job by doubling his salary. What can be a better incentive than that?

Nayak: No denying if it were to be a distress sale. But as he is desperate to run the show, I asked him to try his luck with Deva.

Rajiv: What a double-cross it is Nayak? Having sent Sampath to deal with Deva, you've come to see my defeat, isn't it? But mind you, being my *chela*, Deva won't fall for the bait. He knows how keen I am about this.

Nayak: Sorry, you got it all wrong Rajiv. I could have conveyed Sampath's mind to you over phone itself. But I've come here only to make your disappointment less hard to digest. Well, if my memory serves me right it's Musil who said that life becomes unimaginably confused when we think of ourselves but it becomes very simple when we think in terms of helping others.

Rajiv: Maybe that's the philosophy for philanthropists but do realize businessmen are made of a sterner stuff. I hope you would agree that I will find it hard to forgive you.

[Rajiv goes into the bedroom and lies on the bed.]

[Exit: Nayak leaving a perplexed Ramya.]

Ramya: Life becomes unimaginably confused when we think of ourselves but it becomes very simple when we think in terms of helping others. Oh, how beautifully said. Well, would Rajiv ever realize that?

[Curtains down.]

Scene – 3

[Curtains Up: A morose Rajiv and a concerned Ramya in their drawing room.]

Ramya: Since there is no word from Deva, maybe all is not lost.

Rajiv: My worry is not about Deva. I'm only wondering how to bring Sampath around.

Ramya: After all, it's another day. Won't a little give and take sort this out?

Rajiv: Do you want me to walk the halfway street all my life.

Ramya: What can be done when life bars one from its highways?

Rajiv: Why not take a detour to destiny?

Ramya: Its better that you stick to the road of contentment.

Rajiv: I'm sick and tired of you and your sermons. Won't the so-called contented deride success from their rooftops of inadequacy. What hypocrisy, sour grapes. Scratch their surface and you will find layers of limitations. That's why contentment is nothing but conceding ones' limitations.

[Ramya answers an incoming call on her cell phone.]

Ramya: Hi Divya?

Divya (voice over): Are you at home.

Ramya: Very much, what's the matter?

Divya (voice over): We've something to tell you.

Ramya: Missed your periods or what?

Divya (voice over): You know its no more *do ya teen* but *ek ya do*.

Ramya: After gems of twins, you don't need any more, do you?

[Switching off the phone, Ramya turns to Rajiv.]

Rajiv: So, my *chela* has snubbed Sampath. It would serve Nayak as well.

Ramya: *Chela* or not, Deva is a gem.

Rajiv: Why, you always side with him.

Ramya: Because I find him sensible.

Rajiv: Why not say he's your contented classmate?

Ramya: So be it but why forget Divya. Are they any losers?

[Enter: Deva and Divya.]

Rajiv: Don't you look buoyed?

Divya: Is it so? I thought I've taken it in my stride.

Rajiv: What's up your sleeve anyway?

Deva: So to say, it's no more than your leavings.

Rajiv: Why talk in circles?

Deva: It's about Sampath's offer.

Rajiv: Don't you know I am not yet through with it?

Deva: But Nayak said you were not for it!

Rajiv: Why didn't you check up with me?

Deva: Nayak is your own man, isn't he?

Rajiv: So are you, aren't you?

Deva: Why doubt?

Rajiv: But still you undermine me, don't you?

Deva: No. I just want to sail on a deserted ship.

Rajiv: You thought I'm naïve to miss the voyage myself.

Deva: Maybe you've a different agenda.

Rajiv: Why don't you say I'm a grabber?

Ramya: What happened to you Rajiv? Won't you stop now?

Rajiv: Didn't you hear me tell Nayak that Deva wouldn't go against me. Won't he have the last laugh? Oh what would he think of me now? A boastful bastard at the very least, isn't it? [Turns to Deva] You know I always believed you are my own man. How could you let me down?

Deva: Had you told me, I would've dropped the deal like a hot brick.

Rajiv: don't you know loyalty is not begged.

Ramya: Is it his fault that you took him for granted.

Deva [to Rajiv]: I will stand by you if you get right back into the act.

Rajiv: Unless you tell him you are out of it, he's no fool to come around to me.

Deva: Why not go by his terms. I think he's more than reasonable.

Rajiv: So you think I'm unreasonable, don't you?

Deva: Rajiv for God's sake why not sort it out with him and be done with it.

Rajiv: Is it that you don't want to let it go on your own?

Deva: Why don't you understand? Won't I lose my face if I backtrack now?

Rajiv: Don't you owe it to me to save my face, though late?

Deva: Yes my friend, but not at the cost of my credibility.

Rajiv: Why don't you say you don't want to lose the bonanza?

Deva: If it were the case, why didn't you grab it in the first place?

Rajiv: Because I couldn't foresee you stabbing in my back.

Divya: Oh, how could you be so unkind to him!

Ramya: Rajiv, you're being petty really.

Rajiv: Et tu, Ramya. What an unkindly cut from my wife in support of another man.

Deva: Divya, let's go before we make it worse for her.

Ramya: What is left for him to shame me more?

Rajiv: You would know after they leave. [Turns to Deva] If only you had shown half the concern to your friend as you bear to his wife, things wouldn't have come to this pass.

[Exit: Deva and Divya followed by Ramya.]

[Rajiv goes to the backstage.]

Ramya (voice over): Sorry Deva, it's just his pique at work and it would pass.

Deva (voice over): Ramya, let's leave it at that. Good night.

Ramya (voice over): Good night Deva.

[Rajiv reappears with a Whisky bottle, a water bottle and a glass tumbler.]

[Rajiv begins to mix his drink.]

Divya (voice over): Ramya, see you tomorrow. Good night.

Ramya (voice over): Bye Divya.

[Enter: Ramya and walks past Rajiv.]

Rajiv: Isn't it strange that you're less concerned about your husband than about his friend?

Ramya: You don't seem to know how insane you've become.

[Ramya goes into the bedroom and Rajiv continues to drink in the drawing room.]

[Curtains down.]

Scene - 4

[Curtains up: Rajiv and Ramya are in deep sleep in their bedroom.]

[The alarm clock strikes twelve times, Ramya gets up languidly and goes backstage. Shortly thereafter, she returns with a cup of coffee and goes up to Rajiv.]

Ramya [at the entrance to the bedroom]: Bed coffee, hot coffee for a hothead.

[As Rajiv doesn't stir, Ramya keeps the coffee cup on a side table. She sits on the cot beside Rajiv.]

Ramya: Get up man.

[Rajiv doesn't respond. Ramya prods at him and realizes he is dead.]

Ramya: Oh, how sad he has died before he could find his lost soul. But could he have redeemed it had he lived any longer? Unlikely, isn't it? Its better he died than lived on to abuse my life more than ever.

[Ramya makes a few calls on her cell phone (mime). Then she clings on to Rajiv's body and yells for Rangaiah.]

[Enter: Rangaiah.]

Ramya: See how he has orphaned me!

[Rangaiah feels Rajiv's body and breaks down.]

Rangaiah: How sad, *babu* has died so young.

Ramya: Am I not worse off being widowed so young?

Rangaiah: Why so *beti*, won't Deva *babu* take care of you?

Ramya: We'll come to that later but let's move the body out of my bedroom.

[Ramya and Rangaiah manage to lay the body in the drawing room. Rangaiah spreads a white bedspread over it.]

Rangaiah: Oh the poor master has lost his life and he won't be raising from the dead either.

Ramya: Get lost; do you expect me to do a *sati* with him or what?

[Enter: Deva and Divya.]

[They rush towards Ramya. Divya takes Ramya into her arms. Ramya sinks into Divya's lap and Deva caresses Ramya.]

Deva [to Ramya]: Oh the way he was cut up with both of us.

Divya: But how did the end come?

Deva: Dr. Aslam would be able to tell us. Has anyone informed him?

Ramya: Why, I called him. Don't we need a death certificate now? I told Nayak to come as well to find out if Rajiv had left any will.

[Enter: Dr. Aslam and Nayak one after the other.]

[Dr. Aslam examines Rajiv's body and closes its eyes.]

Divya: What went wrong with him Doctor *saab*?

Dr. Aslam: Looks like it's a stroke.

Deva: Without a warning that is!

Dr. Aslam: Why I had been warning him not to pump himself with his faulty success pump all the time. But sadly he wouldn't listen. Why, the mantra of our time is to fast-fruit life before age ripens it. In a way, he lost his way in life much before death has snatched it away from him.

Divya: Maybe it's true with every life, doctor.

Nayak: More or less, yes, but it's truer with people like Rajiv who place success above all else. Why they even shut out all that is associated with their early life believing they had outgrown their humble beginnings. Losing their life's moorings thus, they allow themselves to marooned

by bogus characters. But there are honourable exceptions. Why, didn't bandit Valmiki become sage Valmiki?

Dr. Aslam: How come?

Nayak: It's a cultural question that's understandable. When the bandit accosted some saintly soul who it was I don't know, well it's a cultural dilution of the day, the good man asked the bad guy to ascertain from his family members whether they were prepared to share his sins. To the bandit's shock and dismay, everyone of his family, including his wife, refused to share the sins of his banditry, the source of their livelihood! And that turned the bandit into a sage poet who bestowed Ramayana to the world of letters.

Dr. Aslam: Nothing surprising about it really as intellectual growth makes man ever humbler. The problem with man is he mistakes his bulging bank balances as a sign of his outgrowing his humble friends.

Ramya: Sadly Rajiv was a victim of that myopic of success.

[Exit: Nayak, Dr. Aslam and Rangaiah.]

Divya: Had he lived, maybe he would have repented.

Ramya: Do you honestly believe that he could have?

Divya: I'm not sure but what if he had died out of remorse.

Ramya: It's unlikely the way he had behaved only yesterday.

Divya: Well, of what use it is talking about the dead.

Ramya [to Divya]: That's true. Won't you make some coffee for us?

[Divya goes backstage.]

Ramya: You know he died believing I'm in love with you?

Deva: But is it so?

Ramya: [clutching at Deva's arm]: Don't you know?

Deva: Maybe, but I didn't believe I could be so fortunate.

Ramya [sinking into his arms]: And now?

Deva [hugging her]: I can't rejoice more.

Ramya: Don't we owe it to him for making our dreams come true?

[Deva reaches out to her lips.]

[Curtains down.]

Scene - 5

[Curtains up: Ramya in the bedroom and Rajiv in the drawing room sofa both lay asleep.]

[Rajiv wakes up in a trance seemingly perturbed. He looks up at the wall clock.]

Rajiv: Oh God, it's nearing six! Don't they say early morning dreams come true?

[He goes into the bedroom to wake up Ramya.]

Ramya [drowsily]: What's the matter?

Rajiv: What a dreadful dream!

Ramya: What's new about it?

Rajiv: It's a bad omen.

Ramya: O ho, damn superstitions.

[Ramya fails to get up, Rajiv moves into the drawing room after a good stare at her even as

Rangaiah enters with a broom.]

Rangaiah: What's wrong Rajiv *babu*?

Rajiv: I had a dreadful dream.

Rangaiah: Rajiv *babu*, are you not upset at the unexpected developments.

Rajiv: What happened to my life Rangaiah? It's as if it has turned on its head all of a sudden. Oh, how I started snubbing Rau after our graduation and gave him enough hints that I had outgrown him? And imagine, he's going to be a high court judge now! Still I would have held my industrial head high enough for him had I got my project grounded or took hold of Sampath's unit. Since it's not the case and as Nayak is bound to carry my failure to Rau, won't he have a hearty laugh at my expense?

Rangaiah: Rajiv *babu*, are you not stretching things too far. Who knows, Rau *babu* may not be a fishing- in-the-troubled waters type.

Rajiv: Rangaiah, because you are a simpleton you think everyone is like you. Oh, how I've lost my face with Nayak and allowed Rau to have his last laugh. Why, is it not owing to Deva's betrayal? Oh, how he had shamed me. Won't I pay him back in the same coin? But how is the question. [He pauses to think] Why not hurt him where it hurts most.

Rangaiah: Don't get carried away by your hurt Rajiv *babu*. I'm really worried as I recall that incident when you were at Rau *babu's* throat for befriending Ravi whom you used to hate no end. It was only by chance that I could save him in the nick of time.

Rajiv: Now it's worse than that, isn't it?

[The bedroom alarm clock rings six times. Ramya gets up and goes into the drawing room.]

Rangaiah: I'm worried more for that.

[Exit: Rangaiah as Ramya walks up to Rajiv.]

Ramya: What's troubling you? Is that your dream or what?

Rajiv: Hasn't my life become a joke for you?

Ramya: Why do you hurt yourself?

Rajiv: Why should I when you are at it anyway.

Ramya: How am I hurting you?

Rajiv: Maybe, that dream has only portrayed my premonition.

Rajiv: What's that?

[Rajiv keeps mum though Ramya repeatedly asks him to tell her what was bothering him.]

Ramya: Why it can't be a delirium born out of your failed dream?

Rajiv: Can a wife be more insensitive than that to her husband's concerns?

Ramya: Why not I fetch some coffee to ease your nerves a little.

[Ramya goes backstage.]

Rajiv: Oh, how I loved her? What an artful bitch she has turned out to be. What a devoted ass of a husband I am! And what a cheating whore of a wife she is? Oh God, why this to me! What I've been missing being faithful to her? Well, dames by their dozen. What a tragedy really!

[Ramya returns with some coffee for them. She offers him one cup but he doesn't take it. Keeping the cups on the teapoy, she sits beside him to soothe him. But he gets up and she catches him by his arm.]

Ramya: Why are you being so childish?

[Rajiv keeps mum.]

Ramya: Be a man and be done with it.

Rajiv: Don't you see you disgust me?

Ramya: But why?

Rajiv: Don't act innocent.

Ramya: What do you mean by that?

Rajiv: Why, are you not churlish?

Ramya: Me, churlish!

Rajiv: Why doubt.

Ramya: Mind it; I'm no mirror image of yours.

Rajiv: Enough of your high-mindedness.

Ramya: What madness!

Rajiv: Is it any worse than artfulness?

Ramya: Me, artful. Any more compliments?

Rajiv: If only you drop your veil I'll tell you more about you.

[Ramya pauses being perplexed.]

Rajiv: You don't want me to see your ugly moles and hideous warts, do you?

Ramya: What is there for me to hide from you?

Rajiv: You should know that better, don't you?

Ramya: Oh me, what are you aiming at?

Rajiv: That which you've been hiding from me all along.

Ramya: What is that?

Rajiv: Don't you know it yourself?

Ramya: Why beat around the bush?

Rajiv: It's better than carrying-on behind my back, isn't it?

Ramya: What did you say! me carrying-on behind your back?

Rajiv: Is it news to you?

Ramya: So, our life has come to this pass.

Rajiv: Because I was naïve to your ways with that Deva fellow.

Ramya: I knew you are a big dreamer and a bad loser but never could I imagine you are such a nasty character. Perhaps I should have guessed. Oh! how I wasted my life with you.

Rajiv: Why waste more of it?

Ramya: Maybe you are right for once.

Rajiv: Having been wronged for long that is.

[Exit: Ramya in a huff.]

Rajiv: She didn't look guilty, did she? But can she deny that she has a soft spot for Deva? Oh how he has become the bane of my life by first charming my wife and then hijacking my agenda. What if in her fit of anger she turns to Rau for legal counsel. Won't that double the ridicule? What an accursed fate that had brought him into my life! Don't I owe it to me to avenge myself upon him?

[Enter: Divya seeking Ramya.]

Divya [to Rajiv]: Hi.

Rajiv: Hi.

[Divya goes backstage.]

[Rajiv hails for Rangaiah.]

[Enter: Rangaiah as Divya returns.]

Divya: Where is Ramya?

Rajiv: Wait, I'll tell you. [Turns to Rangaiah] Go and fetch her.

Rangaiah: *Babu* she didn't tell me where she was going.

Rajiv: Why, she must be with one of the women in the colony. [Turns to Divya] Can't you make a guess?

[Rangaiah lingers on at the exit.]

Divya: Why spoil her party; I'll come later.

Rajiv: But I want to detain you for a while. [Turns to Rangaiah] What's holding you up?

[Exit: Rangaiah.]

Divya: What's the matter?

Rajiv: You first tell me what you thought about me the other day.

Divya: Why, you were so nasty with Deva, more so with Ramya.

Rajiv: Did you ever think why I behaved the way I behaved.

Divya: Why, I thought you couldn't digest the prospect of Deva's progress.

Rajiv: So you got it all wrong and I can't fault you for that.

Divya: What else then?

Rajiv: It was only a trigger to vent my ire at both of them.

Divya: Why any ill-feeling at all!

Rajiv: Do you expect me to rejoice for being cuckolded.

Divya: What nonsense?

Rajiv: Right now they would be in each others' arms, I don't know where.

[Divya remains mum.]

Rajiv: Won't that make some sense at least for them?

Divya: Do you want me to swallow that rubbish?

Rajiv: Don't you see my misery unable to digest that?

Divya: Maybe you are imagining things. Don't I know you are not well?

Rajiv: Do you think my grief itself is imaginary?

Divya: You surprise me really.

Rajiv: So was I when I caught them in the act.

Divya: But still...

Rajiv: If I let you catch your man with my wife, would that do?

Divya: Won't I be shamed no end then?

Rajiv: Having endured the ordeal, I can tell you what it would be like. It would be worse than you can ever imagine what it might feel like.

Divya: I can understand [she takes his arm] I'm sorry really.

Rajiv [holding her arm]: What a relief your empathy gives me. [He rests his head on her shoulder]

Won't you give me you shoulder to cry over?

Divya [caressing his head]: Can't I share your agony being in the same boat?

Rajiv [hugging her]: Dear, let us weather out the storm together.

[As Rajiv tries to take Divya into his arms, she smoothly withdraws from him.]

Rajiv: What a pity even a woman can't hold her pity for a cuckold for long.

Divya [taking his hand]: Please don't hurt yourself with self-pity.

Rajiv [holding her hand]: Divya please, I need your understanding to get over her deceit?

Divya: You can count on that.

Rajiv: When the tragedy sinks in you, don't you crave for a lover's solace?

Divya: I am too dazed to visualize that.

Rajiv: Why don't you see the mirror image of your hurt soul in my wretched bosom?

[Divya stares at him long and hard. He gently forces her into the bedroom even as she protests.]

Divya: No Rajiv, no, please, leave me.

Rajiv: Believe me; I'll die if you deny.

Divya: Oh, it's not fair.

Rajiv: Is it fair to deny us our solace.

[Rajiv forces himself on Divya.]

[Lights go off to indicate the impending act as he forces himself upon her.]

[Enter: Ramya as lights are switched on.]

[Ramya goes straight into the bedroom as Rajiv was about to make it into the drawing room.

Once in, Ramya finds a distraught Divya rearranging her dress. Divya sinks into Ramya's arms.]

Ramya: Oh, how come?

Divya: Why, haven't you brought it upon me?

Ramya: What do you mean?

Divya: Are you not carrying on with Deva?

Ramya: Don't be crazy.

Divya: Don't you know Rajiv is mad about it.

Ramya: He may be imagining things or worse still...

Divya: I tried to console him and he forced himself upon me.

Ramya: You must be a fool to have believed him.

Divya: Why is it not true?

Ramya: Never, I swear upon you.

Divya: But his manner made me believe him.

Ramya: Don't I seem sincere to you?

[Divya looks into Ramya's eyes.]

Divya: Oh, if only I've had more faith in you, I wouldn't have allowed myself to be tricked by him.

Ramya: Aren't we women, besides being human.

Divya: Oh what a cheat he turned out to be!

Ramya: I didn't know he could play act too.

Divya: But for his wiles, I would've resisted him more vigorously than I did.

Ramya: Don't I understand that?

Divya: What an irony that truth should deprive me of some solace though perverse. And now I am worse off for the reality, am I not?

Ramya: It's one of those ironies of truth.

Divya: Oh, why did the devil enter into his head to ruin my life?

Ramya: Well, it was all along lurking behind his ambitious wings. What with his greed baring it, it came to the fore. Didn't we all see that yesterday?

Divya: Damn the devil but how can I face Deva now?

Ramya: Dear, treat it as a bad dream and let life take over for time to dissipate the distress. I can understand how difficult it could be, but for Deva's sake, you must put all this behind.

Divya: I'll try, but whatever happens, promise you stand by me.

[Ramya hugs Divya.]

Ramya: I'm yours dear, more than ever.

Divya: Now I really feel easy.

[Ramya caresses and kisses Divya before she goes to Rajiv.]

Ramya: If you carry your villainy any farther, I myself will end your accursed life.

Rajiv: Ramya, please listen.

[Ramya goes behind the stage and comes out with two suitcases that she keeps in the drawing room. She goes into the bedroom and comes out with Divya.]

Rajiv [holds Divya's hand]: I'm really sorry, forgive me if you can.

Ramya [pushes Rajiv]: Leave us alone.

[Ramya and Divya pick up a suitcase each.]

[Exit: Ramya and Divya leaving Rajiv.]

[Curtains down.]

Scene - 6

[Curtains Up: In the drawing room Rajiv looks lost.]

[Enter: Rangaiah with an envelope.]

Rangaiah: Rajiv *babu* someone gave it for you.

[Rajiv tears open the envelope and starts reading the letter aloud]

“Rajiv:

You would have realized by now that all is over between us bar divorcing. My new found advocate who happens to be your long lost friend would call on you to discuss the terms of separation. I hope he would find you sensible for once.

Once yours,

Ramya”

Rajiv: See Rangaiah, your Ramya *beti* wants to divorce me. What’s worse she has engaged Rau as her lawyer to rub some salt on my wounded psyche. Oh how gleefully he would have taken her *vakalat* to upstage me. So, the one I slighted once is going to put me in the dock now. Can life get more ironical than that!

Rangaiah: I can’t believe that *babu*. There is something that doesn’t meet the eye here.

Rajiv: Whatever, didn’t I bring it upon myself? When did I lose my way in life? Could it be when I began to think I outgrew Rau? Oh how I took it for granted that he could be living somewhere in the wilderness of life suffering from an inferiority complex. How I was to know that fate would bring us together to let him catch me on the wrong foot! What a mess I’ve made of my life!

[Sound of the calling bell.]

[Exit: Rangaiah only to readily return.]

[Rangaiah talks to Rajiv (mime) and Rajiv’s colour changes.]

[Exit: Rangaiah as Rajiv goes to the entrance with apprehension.]

[Enter: Slesha in *vardi* with a baton in her hand. She pulls out her ID card from her shirt pocket and flashes it.]

Slesha: I’m Inspector Slesha.

Rajiv: What brings you here Inspector?

Slesha: Investigation into a rape case.

[Rajiv is shocked but he quickly recovers.]

Rajiv: How can I help you madam?

Slesha: By giving truthful answers to my questions.

Rajiv: Of course, you can count on that.

Slesha: Do you know Ms. Divya?

Rajiv: Why not, she's my friend Deva's wife.

Slesha: She has accused you of raping her.

Rajiv: Oh God. How could it be!

Slesha: That's beside the point, isn't it?

Rajiv: Don't you see I'm shocked no end?

Slesha: Why it's apparent from the beginning.

Rajiv: How it can be different when the police come knocking at the door.

Slesha: The alarm of the guilty and the anxiety of the accused don't look alike, do they?

Rajiv: How am I to know that?

Slesha: You would know when I begin my interrogation.

Rajiv: I'm no expert in these matters but I hear I can have my lawyer on hand.

Slesha: Besides the law, I don't mind suffering your lawyer's presence.

[Rajiv tries to call Nayak on his cell phone but the line is ever engaged.]

Rajiv: Don't you think in use phones measure the ongoing gossip in society.

Slesha: By any chance, is your wife a gossiping type?

Rajiv: One may say she's a gospel type.

[Enter: Rangaiah]

[Rangaiah hands over a business card and tells Rajiv that Rau had come to see him (mime).]

Rajiv: Think of the devil and here it comes. Would you please excuse me for a moment?

[Slesha nods her assent.]

[Exit: Rajiv with Rangaiah.]

Rajiv (voice over): Congrats Rau my old boy! Let me take a hard look at the justice in the making. Why, you haven't changed a wee bit really! Why, I would've recognized you in a crowd. Though I'm expecting you, it's Godsend in a way. I'm in a soup right now, well, not the one your client is brewing for me. Won't you help me for old-time's sake?

Rau (voice over): Why, what's the other bother?

Rajiv (voice over): I can be booked for rape anytime now.

Rau (voice over): Oh God, but how come!

Rajiv (voice over): I'll tell you but first help me see the back of my tormentor.

[Enter: Rau (in lawyer's suit) led by Rajiv.]

Rau [to Slesha]: You here!

Rajiv: Do you know her!

Rau: Well, as much as a man would know his wife, no more and no less.

Rajiv: Nothing is truer than fact being stranger than fiction, isn't it?

Slesha: Maybe, but can I take it Mr. Rajiv, that you've engaged a lawyer in advance anticipating the complaint?

Rajiv: Come on Inspector, you know that's not the case. Wouldn't you know that your husband and I haven't seen each other for ages?

Slesha: Lawyer *garu*, is it such a coincidence that you come to see your long lost friend when I'm acting on a complaint of rape against him!

Rau: So what?

Slesha: How does that answers my question?

Rau: What if it doesn't?

Slesha: Don't you know criminal investigation warrants citizens' cooperation?

Rau: I came to see him at his wife's behest.

Slesha: Is it for negotiating the terms of separation?

Rau: I can't satisfy your curiosity as it's a matter of client confidentiality.

Slesha: We will come to that later. [Turns to Rajiv] I would like to talk to your wife.

Rajiv: She's not at home.

Slesha: Can't I guess that much. Where is she now?

Rajiv: I don't know about it myself.

Slesha: So, the plot thickens even more, isn't it? Is it possible that after raping your friend's wife, you had murdered yours to eliminate the witness to your crime?

Rau: Inspector, don't let your imagination run amuck. Know she's very much alive and kicking.

Slesha: Put her on the line then.

[Rau pulls out his cell phone and Slesha on a second thought stops him in his tracks.]

Slesha: I want Mr. Rajiv to talk to her on his cell.

Rau: What's the hitch if I contact her myself?

Slesha: I've my reasons for wanting him to do that.

[Rajiv tries to contact Ramya on his cell phone but she doesn't answer his calls.]

Slesha: Don't I see, she's not receiving your calls. Why this estrangement?

Rau: An unanswered telephone call is no proof of a marital discord.

Slesha: What if she's cut up with him because of the alleged rape.

Rau: It's for the police to find that out, isn't it? But I expect you to respect my client's right for silence on this issue.

Slesha: Dear lawyer *garn*, habits seem to die hard. Why put the cart before the horse. Don't you know the matter is still under investigation and is yet to be committed to trial? [Turning to Rajiv]

Is your wife estranged from you because you had raped Ms. Divya?

Rau: When he didn't even admit to the alleged rape, your question doesn't brook an answer, does it?

Slesha: Oh I see. But he can guess nevertheless?

Rau: But guesswork makes no evidence, does it?

Slesha [turns to Rajiv]: Do you admit to your estrangement?

Rajiv: It's just a storm in our marital teacup.

Slesha: What was the cause of it?

[Rajiv contemplates for an answer.]

Rau: Why not elicit that from Ramya? I can ask her to come now.

Slesha [checking up with her wristwatch]: Ask her how long it would take her.

[Rau makes contact with Ramya and talks to her (mime).]

Rau: She said she would be here in half an hour.

Slesha [to Rajiv]: Meanwhile, I would like to go over the alleged crime scene. Do you insist on a search warrant?

Rajiv: Please, I've nothing to hide anyway.

[Slesha goes into the bedroom leaving Rajiv and Rau. While Slesha was at work in the bedroom Rajiv and Rau deliberate.]

Rajiv: If not for you, I wouldn't have any respite from your wife.

Rau: It's just a case of lawyer's instincts at work and no more.

Rajiv: Maybe it's a straw but it still carries hope, does it not?

Rau: I'm sorry I can't be of much help to you. Don't you see my wife hasn't finished as yet and your wife too has some unfinished business with you?

Rajiv: I know I've no right to expect either.

Rau: But still, for old time's sake, I'll get you an ace lawyer to handle the rape case.

Rajiv: Don't bother about that as I am seeing life in a fresh light. Why, the worst of fates cannot be worse than my wasted past. If only I could relive my past, I would never lose a friend like you at the threshold of life? I know it's neither here nor there but whatever comes now, I'll take it in my stride rather stoically.

[As Slesha joins them with a folded bedspread in her hand, Rau's cell phone rings and he answers the call (mime).]

Rau: Ramya says she got stuck in a traffic jam.

Slesha: Oh damn it; I've only half an hour to spare.

Rau: What if she calls on you later?

Slesha: No, let her wait here for me.

Rau: My client may not prefer that.

Slesha: Is it okay if we meet here in two hours from now?

Rau: That gives me time to brief her about the developments.

Slesha: Oh the way you lawyers help your clients is nothing but unlawful.

Rau: Whatever, it's permissible under the law, isn't it?

Slesha: When was it a policewoman won an argument with a lawyer husband?

Rau: Well, on your cue, I'll make it with my client.

Slesha: By the way, Mr. Rajiv, did you realize that you haven't denied Ms. Divya's accusation?

[Exit: Slesha and Rau leaving Rajiv in contemplation.]

[Curtains down.]

Scene - 7

[Curtains Up: Rajiv in disarray in the drawing room. After a short while Rangaiah brings some tea from the backstage.]

Rajiv: Rangaiah, what a quick fall after a slow raise! Or is it a slow fall from a stable life? Whatever, it was my ambition that has undone me. No, it was my greed that was the culprit. Well, aren't ambition and greed the two sides of the coin of success? So what difference does that make anyway, either way? How my quest for success made me mean to bring about my ruin in the end? How Ramya used to caution me against it by counseling contentment. If only I paid heed to her ardent pleas, my life wouldn't have come to this sorry pass. Didn't Rau condescend

to descend at my comeuppance? Or am I still wearing my blinkers for failing to see his empathy for me?

[Rajiv begins to sip from the cup.]

Rangaiah: Rajiv *babu*, my sixth sense tells me that all would end well

Rajiv: But is it not clear I'm going to end up in jail. How am I to live with my guilt and bear the shame as well? Maybe it could be different with Ramya's support? Now that she has chosen to unyoke her life from mine, how am I to endure the terminal pains for the rest of my life?

Rangaiah: Once Ramya *beti* notices the change in you everything would change.

Rajiv: But sadly I've pushed her beyond the point of no return. More than my abominable offence, the deceitful way in which I had committed it might have broken her heart.

Rangaiah: I don't know why but I'm still hopeful.

[Exit: Rangaiah.]

[Rajiv in contemplation paces up and down the room for a while and settles at the desk and pens a letter and reads it aloud.]

“Dear Divya

Oh how fate had contrived with my ambition to make you a victim of my pique. What irony that I should've felt robbed by Deva when I was myself trying to loot Sampath! What perversion to hurt you to redress my own hurt. That's the ironic tragedy of my final fall!

It pains me even more that I failed to give a thought to what Nayak said only a few days back. Didn't he tell someone had felt that life becomes unimaginably confused when we think of ourselves but it becomes very simple when we think in terms of helping others? Now that I missed out on life, what death would hold for me? Why wouldn't it become simpler if I were to

erase someone else's shame through it? Won't my end help the two women I had wronged begin life afresh? It would for sure. Isn't the very thought impelling me to embrace death.

I suggest that you too should see the past in a fresh light. Why feel humiliated thinking about the old fiend who had hurt you. Why not let the pristine soul of the dead Rajiv elevate your life. Well, to begin with, it may seem hard to believe but if you dwell upon the difference, it would be easy to grasp the nuances of it.

Forget the old fiend and forgive the new soul for denying you.

Rajiv.”

[Rajiv hails for Rangaiah]

[Enter: Rangaiah. Rajiv wants him to deliver it to Divya (mime).]

[Exit: Rangaiah with the letter. Rajiv paces up and down and ensures that Rangaiah had left the place. He was about to enter the bedroom.]

[Enter: Ramya and Rau and Rajiv turns back.]

Rajiv: Ramya, you may relieve Rau as any way I'm going to release you. Well, my trial is over in my court of conscience and I need your pardon as I undergo the punishment.

Ramya: It's easier asked than given. How is your change of heart going to redress my hurt and her shame? Whatever, I'm at a loss to react to your self-discovery after ruining three lives including yours. I wonder how I can help you rebuild your life when the next fourteen years of it is going to be behind the bars.

Rau: Not if you withdraw your complaint, I can take up his case to ensure that he walks out a free man at the first hearing itself. Why, his confession to Slesha is worthy of the court dustbin and

no more. Any district court lawyer would make out a case of consensual sex given the familiarity the family friendship had bred.

Rajiv: Oh stop it my friend. I was mad to violate her chastity but I won't be mean to slur her character to save my skin.

Rau: So be it if you are prepared to spend your life in jail losing your wife as well.

Rajiv: So what. If Ramya forgives me, won't my penitence in jail make our reunion sublime in the end?

Ramya: That only means you want me to languish as your chaste wife all the while.

Rajiv: I'm sorry; I've failed to see it from your point of view.

[Rajiv goes into the bedroom and locks the door. Ramya and Rau suspecting the untoward frantically knock at the door and plead with him to come out (mime). Rajiv pulls out the revolver from underneath the bed.]

[Enter: Slesha.]

[She takes out the bullets from her shirt pocket and shows them to Ramya and Rau. Rajiv comes out of the bedroom and sees the bullets in Slesha's hand.]

Rajiv: Oh what a life that won't let me die even. Why am I not dying out of shame having been caught in the act?

Slesha: Why, from the look of you I knew you would push yourself over the precipice and so I had emptied the cartridge.

Rajiv: If only you could have visualized the impending joy of dying in my face as I clicked the revolver, I'm sure you wouldn't have tried to stop me from dying.

Slesha: Can't I feel your misery from the pain I see in you now.

Rajiv: Believe me, the pain you see is but the loss of that joy. If only you could grasp my soul, you would get the essence of my mind. The thought that my death would make it easier for the two women I had hurt made me rejoice at the threshold of death. But having stopped me from dying, you had only made life difficult for them and me as well. Aren't you guilty on both the counts?

Slesha: Far from it. You would have died leaving your poor image for an obituary. Why not live to better that before death visits you on its own. As for Ramya, she would've lived in guilt for pushing you over the precipice. With you gone how would Divya have the joy of forgiving.

Rajiv: By losing Rau and by extension you, oh, how I've missed my life all these years.

Slesha: By striving to build the castle of despair for you and your spouse ending up in debasing your friend's wife.

[Enter: Divya with the letter in her hand rushes in with Rangaiah. Rangaiah holds Rajiv's hand as Divya leads Ramya and Slesha into the bedroom and shows them the letter. They talk to each other (mime).]

Rangaiah: I lost a son when I was still young and can I lose another when I am old. Why didn't you think of me Rajiv *babu*?

Rajiv: Rangaiah, what do you expect from a man who couldn't even think of himself. Thank our Rau's wife that I'm still alive.

Rangaiah [to Rau]: Rau *babu*, I want to live in the old days during the last days of my life. I'm glad you've as good a wife as Rajiv *babu* has.

Rau: Thank you for your abiding affection and the good opinion about Slesha.

Rajiv I'm glad my wife made such a difference to your life.

Rajiv: Now it's left for your client to remain a convict's wife or not.

Rau: Let me talk to her.

[Rau joins Slesha, Ramya and Divya. Slesha talks to him (mime).]

Rau: Wonder how the play had developed beyond the script! Oh how life came up with a bigger plan than our little one to put sense into Rajiv's wayward head.

[Rau accompanied by the three women rejoins Rajiv and Rangaiah.]

Ramya: Isn't it said that to err is human but to forgive is divine.

[As Divya gives his hand to Rajiv, he embraces Ramya.]

Rajiv: Thank you both, it feels like beginning life afresh.

[Enter: Deva.]

[Rajiv turns sad all again and others too are surprised. In turn, Deva looks questioningly at Slesha in police uniform and Rau in his lawyer's dress. Ramya begins introductions by holding Slesha.]

Ramya: Isn't it ladies first? Meet Inspector Slesha Rau my childhood playmate [She looks at a surprised Rajiv] and this is lawyer Rau, Slesha's husband and Rajiv's lost and found friend. And this is Deva our family friend.

Slesha [to Rajiv]: We met only the other day when she came seeking Rau's counsel.

Rajiv: I take it that you are Godsend to help me pull down my castle of despair.

Deva [to Rajiv]: Don't I smell the scent of enlightenment. What better time to say sorry to you.

Rajiv: Deva, you don't know how ashamed I am. [He turns emotional.]

Ramya: Deva can understand, calm down dear.

[Ramya leads Rajiv into the bedroom.]

[Rau and Slesha engage Deva (mime) as Divya looks on.]

Ramya: Don't make it worse for them with your confession. I've seen to it that Divya has kept it to herself. All this drama is Rau's idea to shake you up from your slumber of success.

Rajiv: Oh, how he made me even humbler than ever.

[Rajiv and Ramya join the others in the drawing room. Rajiv goes to Rau and Slesha to hold their hands in gratitude and then turns to Deva.]

Rajiv: Deva please help me treat the Sampath episode as a bad dream.

Deva: Let bygones be bygones. You may deal with him whichever way you choose.

Rajiv: No Deva, don't I know now how treacherous success is? Oh, how it changes its goal post whenever one is at a striking distance from it. I envy you for wanting to quit the rat race before it could ruin your life.

Rau: Why blame success when the fault lies in the way we approach it. Haven't you heard Emerson's success quote that's a hit on the net?

Rajiv: No, what is that?

Rau: Among other things, he feels that to know even one life has breathed easier because you've lived is to have succeeded.

Ramya: Oh, to hear it said itself feels so nice.

Slesha: I'm proud to say he has tasted success many times over.

Rau: Thank you for your high praise. But that's beside the point I am making. I suggest that Rajiv and Deva join hands with Sampath to help build that fledgling unit to contribute to our country's economy. It's not about the generation of wealth that one should be skeptical about. It

is the way the rich spend money that should bother the sane minded. For instance, it's one thing to build bigger and better workplaces and another to do the same for personal ostentation.

Deva [to Rajiv]: What do you say now?

Rajiv: Still I would leave Mr. Sampath to your care. With Ramya, I would like to find our way for personal fulfillment through social enrichment.

Rau: Best of luck to all of you.

Ramya [to Rajiv]: I'm happy you've realized humility is the essence of life.

Rajiv: And that wife is the scent of it.

Rau: Why not, if a man is upright in this topsy-turvy world, much of the credit for that should go to his wife.

Rajiv: On that note, let it be my privilege to propose vote of thanks to the good Samaritans, my eminent friend Rau and his worthy spouse Slesha for the beneficial roles played by them in the drama of my chequered life.

[Rangaiah and others clap as the audience joins them with Rajiv.]

A love on Hold

A radio play

SCENE - 1

INT – It's the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport at Shamshabad in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India. That winter evening, Sekhar was waiting to receive Pratap, his childhood friend and classmate, settled in the U.S.A.

SFX – Soundtrack of Airport activity such as the announcements of the flight schedules, the take-off and landing of the aircraft.

EXT - The exit point of the 'arrivals' section is crowded with people waiting to welcome their relatives, friends or visitors among the incoming passengers.

SFX - Buzz of the motor cars bringing in more people and the sound of the car doors being slammed. The passengers begin appearing at the exit and those in waiting hail their names.

SEKHAR: Hi, Pratap.

PRATAP: Hi, Sekhar.

SFX - Buzz of an aircraft taking off.

SEKHAR: (OFF) Raju bring the vehicle. (PAUSE) Mother India welcomes its prodigal son.

PRATAP: Let me see what's in her lap for me.

SEKHAR: What else but love and warmth.

PRATAP: If only that's in tune with my longing.

SEKHAR: What you've got to long for here. Why, you never bothered to contact any of us all these years.

PRATAP: That I'll tell you.

SEKHAR: Only me.

PRATAP: Who else is interested?

SEKHAR: Vimala your old flame.

PRATAP: She lost her man it seems.

SEKHAR: That's a year-old tragedy.

PRATAP: Of my week-long knowledge.

SEKHAR: How did you come to know about it? I don't know of any you're in touch with.

PRATAP: It was by chance that I've heard somebody talk about the tragedy at a gathering.

SEKHAR: Oh, your empathy at work. So, it's flattered to be deceived.

PRATAP: I plead guilty.

SEKHAR: No need to be apologetic. It's in jest.

PRATAP: It's just the catalyst. (PAUSE) How's she, the poor thing?

SEKHAR: She's gotten over it.

PRATAP: I'm glad to hear that.

SEKHAR: Our guys at Amalapuram want you there.

PRATAP: I'm flattered really.

SEKHAR: Without being so, I'm glad you've made it at last.

PRATAP: After twenty years that is.

SEKHAR: It's a long time in our short life.

PRATAP: Dragging time in a drab life.

SEKHAR: Be serious; tell me all about your life.

PRATAP: Want to be done with me here and now.

SEKHAR: Count on me till you're done with Vimala.

SFX – It's a roar of an aircraft take-off followed by the sound of a car coming to its screeching halt.

PRATAP: So, what I see confirms what I've heard.

SEKHAR: What's that?

PRATAP: This world class airport and your first rate sedan. Are they not in tune with the 'emerging India' buzz?

SFX - The car doors are slammed thrice followed by the sound of the speeding car.

SEKHAR: You deserter, you took the first flight to the U.S. when India was in dire stairs.

PRATAP: Why blame me for not wanting to sink in our socialistic mire. Who did foresee then that our own P.V. would clean up the things with his reform broom? Tell me if you know a soothsayer who had predicted. I want to consult him.

SEKHAR: Is it for a prediction about the U.S. recession?

PRATAP: Don't think the U.S. is only about materialism. I'm altruistic in my quest for a zest-filled life.

SEKHAR: What's up your sleeve?

PRATAP: You hold the key now.

SEKHAR: Why did you hold-up all these years?

PRATAP: What do you want to know first, the reason for my inaction or the cause of action?

SEKHAR: Let's get into action...

PRATAP: In Vimala's reflection.

SEKHAR: Oh! The old flame still singes.

PRATAP: It's nothing cut and dry about it Sekhar. It's all mixed impulses and hazy emotions. My initial impulse was of a childhood friend, I wanted to share her grief. Then my love on hold came to the fore. I've here to explore know not what.

SEKHAR: In the shadow of her widowhood.

PRATAP: Has she lost much, you know what.

SEKHAR: What if and if not.

PRATAP: Don't tell me you don't know how it matters.

SEKHAR: What if she's balloon like.

PRATAP: Sadly, it would be a platonic retreat.

SEKHAR: I know but ...

PRATAP: It's not fair I press you for her statistics.

SEKHAR: I too don't see her statistically.

PRATAP: One competitor less, isn't it?

SEKHAR: So you presume she inspires.

PRATAP: Oh, don't kill me, tell me ...

SEKHAR: You can ask my wife, her cousin of sorts.

PRATAP: Why didn't you tell that before?

SEKHAR: It's like the pot calling the kettle black. You didn't think of me all these years and you expect me to remember you had a crush on Vimala which is history now.

PRATAP: With her too?

SEKHAR: How am I to know?

PRATAP: Okay *baba*, come to the point.

SEKHAR: She's no less a Liz Hurley herself.

PRATAP: Oh, you've an update on middle-aged women.

SEKHAR: Without eyeing them (V.O. a car horn)

PRATAP: Now I'm full of hope.

SEKHAR: Is it because I don't eye her.

PRATAP: What about other possibilities.

SEKHAR: With a widow you mean.

PRATAP: Partly right but I'm single to boot.

SEKHAR: I've heard you married an American.

PRATAP: We were divorced for ages.

SEKHAR: But still, I've to discourage you.

PRATAP: Why, she wants to be forever wedded to her husband's memory or what?

SEKHAR: She's not the one to live in the past any way.

PRATAP: Then what's the hitch?

SEKHAR: It's her daughter.

PRATAP: Why should she be a hurdle?

SEKHAR: Its emotional stagnation my boy, India is not sexually modern.

PRATAP: What is she doing?

SEKHAR: M.B.B.S pre-final.

PRATAP: I'm glad Vimala would see herself in her daughter as a doctor. What's her name?

SEKHAR: Prati.

PRATAP: (OFF) Pratap and Prati, sound similar, don't they?

SEKHAR: What are you thinking about?

PRATAP: Oh, what dreams Vimala had of becoming a doctor? I had a hard time consoling her when she missed the bus.

SEKHAR: Well, I don't know. So you were closer than we thought you were. But still, she may not like to hurt her daughter's future. If she ties up with you, her daughter's marriage would be jeopardized.

PRATAP: Damn the cultural prejudices. How they make life materially complex.

(PAUSE)

SEKHAR: Don't lose heart; love hath its way, more often than not.

PRATAP: With your pushing and prodding, hope it leads us to the altar.

SEKHAR: So that I'll do the décor. Well, I've booked for you in the Krishna Oberoi, but still I prefer you stayed with me.

PRATAP: It's okay that way.

SEKHAR: With my wife and son having gone to my in-laws place. PRATAP: What a shame! I didn't enquire about Vijaya and Suresh.

SEKHAR: Understandable preoccupation, isn't it? For the record, Suresh is doing his M.B.A program in the Central University here.

SFX - Their car drives into the corridor of the Krishna Oberoi. Sekhar and Pratap come out of the car as the latter's luggage was picked up by the chauffeur.

SCENE - 2

EXT - Sekhar and Pratap and go up to the reception at the Krishna Oberoi and the receptionist allots Room No. 303 to Pratap. The hotel attendant transports the luggage as the friends go up to the elevator. Once out of the elevator at the third floor, they all reach Room No. 303.

INT – The attendant opens the door and Pratap and Sekhar go in. As the attendant leaves the room, the friends settle down.

b/g – Sound track of classical instrumental music.

PRATAP: Oh, what a hotel.

SEKHAR: They say it's the best.

PRATAP: To begin the stay with Glenfiddich.

SEKHAR: Welcome toast from a U.S. citizen

SFX - Setting the table for a drink and the creaking sound of breaking the seal of Glenfiddich bottle. Clinking sound of glass as the friends set out to drink.

PRATAP: Cheers to *Mera Bharat Mahan*.

SEKHAR: Cheers to P.V the P.M. who made it possible.

PRATAP: Why disjoint the mind Manmohan Sing?

SEKHAR: What to cheer about him now?

PRATAP: Why?

SEKHAR: Means you're not up to date. P.V's *chela* is now Sonia's *chamcha*.

PRATAP: Politics can wait tell me all about you.

SEKHAR: Why the protocol of a hypocrite. Let's begin with Vimala.

PRATAP: Oh, you.

SEKHAR: Enough of close to the chest, show your love-card.

PRATAP: Printed in the press of Sarat's Devadas.

SEKHAR: The classic of an unfulfilled love.

PRATAP: Pending the ending, our life had run the fictional course as we grew up together. Like Devadas and Parvathi we too became fond of each other and to the same affect. Vimala's dad said no, I got into depression and my uncle too me to the U.S. Devadas embraced Bacchus but I latched on to Mammon. But our beloveds got glued to their respective spouses. Now the story seems to fork. Devadas might've died unfulfilled but I've a possibility, of possession.

SEKHAR: Is there a Chandramukhi you had spurned?

PRATAP: If I were Devadas, I wouldn't have been a stupid to slight such a lover.

SEKHAR: But you married any way.

PRATAP: My wife failed me emotionally and I dulled the pain with materialistic malady.

SEKHAR: If I'm not curious

PRATAP: Martha is her name and no faulting her. Why, she had her own expectations of life. We were childless, but that was not the hitch. Well, there is a price to pay for the so-called

progress. And that's interesting. What the primitive man could've expected from life than food and sex. Maybe they were better off for that.

SEKHAR: Better off or worse off, what's life without progress. What more we had than a girl's furtive glance in our teens? See now, every fool has a girl friend. Oh, how I wish we were teens these days.

PRATAP: But still parents remain spoilers.

SEKHAR: At least not in the educated classes. Thank the laws; they are scared of saying no for the fear of being booked.

PRATAP: What of women's lib?

SEKHAR: Why, Vimala wears her *bindi*. She says husband's death can't take away woman's birth rights.

PRATAP: A mate is a birth right too.

SEKHAR: But I told you the hurdle is her daughter.

PRATAP: I'm sure we can get her around.

SEKHAR: It's hard as it is and

PRATAP: It's as if you're again it.

SEKHAR: You may know Vimala doesn't share our materialistic ethos. If you marry her by miracle, you may not stick together for long. She would never cross our shores and you can't remain fish out of water here.

PRATAP: Maybe so, but let me see what life has in store for us.

SEKHAR: I don't see any scope for hope. You want to get into her ex's shoes. But Bhadru walked his life only in sandals, that too as an Engineer in the Department of Roads and Buildings. Bribe is more of a norm there than exception.

PRATAP: I heard he was killed in a contrived road accident.

SEKHAR: Well, he was known to take on the errand, that too head on. And a roguish contractor did him in a stage-managed road mishap.

PRATAP: It's said one's nature is one's fate.

SEKHAR: Its other way round, mind goes the way fate takes it, *buddhibi karmananusarine*.

PRATAP: It seems the Eastern and the Western philosophies are the obverse and the reverse of the same thought-coin.

SEKHAR: And that shows in the ways and values of life.

PRATAP: True, what are Vimala's ways and means?

SEKHAR: They have an ancestral house in Himayatnagar and she helps run a small pickles unit.

PRATAP: Nice simple living..

SEKHAR: With high thinking. The pickles succor the family of their car driver. Sadly, he too died in the accident.

PRATAP: He should've known, discretion is the better part of valour.

SEKHAR: There you are. Your name symbolizes chivalry, but the same applies to you. Why burn your heart a second time with the same flame.

PRATAP: That's all about first love, in my case, the only love.

SEKHAR: Who knows, she too feels the same way.

PRATAP: What makes you think so?

SEKHAR: She's has agreed to go with us to Amalapuram.

PRATAP: Oh really! When is it?

SEKHAR: Day-after tomorrow's Gowthami Express.

PRATAP: Don't you think it's encouraging?

SEKHAR: What if it's for old time's sake.

PRATAP: So be it. Art of life lies in making good of half chances. If we travel by car, I'll have more room to maneuver.

SEKHAR: And I can see games lovers play.

PRATAP: In the shadow of love on hold.

SEKHAR: If she agrees we'll go the day-after tomorrow..

PRATAP: Why not by the morrow.

SEKHAR: What about your jet log?

PRATAP: Isn't it a silly question?

SEKHAR: Vimala may answer that better. Wish you a dreamy night.

PRATAP: After all those dreary years. Thanks a lot.

SEKHAR: Be ready by eight, bye.

PRATAP: Wait.

(PAUSE) This is a Rolex for you to be on time.

SEKHAR: Thank you, I'll cherish it.

PRATAP: It's my pleasure. These are for Vijaya and Suresh.

SEKHAR: I'm glad. Good night, bye,

SFX – Slamming sound of the door.

SCENE - 3

EXT – Sekhar self-drives his sedan into the corridor of the Krishna Oberoi and as he gets out of it, a hotel staff drives it away. Sekhar goes into the hotel lounge and takes the elevator to make it to Pratap's room. SFX - Door buzzer followed by door opening.

PRATAP: Has she agreed?

SEKHAR: We're going to pick her up on the way.

PRATAP: Can I thank you enough?

SEKHAR: No thanks, she didn't need any persuasion.

PRATAP: What did she say?

SEKHAR: She said she would join us, no more and no less.

PRATAP: What of her tone?

SEKHAR: Rather dry I suppose.

PRATAP: Oh, come on, don't tell me that.

SEKHAR: Did you expect her to jump for joy or what?

PRATAP: What to expect from the mistress when the messenger is so candid.

SEKHAR: Anything but coyness. I shall tell her I didn't find you eager either. Why, I expected you in the lounge, waiting impatiently.

PRATAP: Know I've been trying all my dresses on me.

SEKHAR: Why bother about that, you don't carry your age any way.

PRATAP: Why don't you make her see me through your eyes?

SEKHAR: You may be better off with her eyes.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: *Chalo*, onto the un-chartered course of love.

SFX - Sound track indicates the locking of the door, getting into and getting out of the elevator, opening of the car boot, opening and closure of the car doors and the speeding of the car.

SEKHAR: Are you nervous or what?

PRATAP: It's a flux of fact and fiction.

SEKHAR: I feel she's also in a similar fix.

PRATAP: (V.O. a car horn) Now I'm really nervous. Maybe, raised expectations, oh, what an irony life is!

SEKHAR: Perhaps, I'm too practical to understand all that.

PRATAP: Life worries you less as you miss much of it.

SEKHAR: But business worries you no less

PRATAP: But anxieties of love are wearisome.

SEKHAR: Didn't Faiz say there are worries in life other than the love-induced and there are fulfillments too other than love-making.

PRATAP: Maybe, but my festering love-wounds sorely need the balm of our union.

SFX – The car comes to a halt.

SEKHAR: We're at the ground zero.

PRATAP: Thanks for bringing me this far.

SEKHAR: Now it's for you to find the right entry.

SFX – Indicative sounds of their car having come to a halt, Sekhar and Pratap were getting down from it.

SCENE - 4

EXT – Sekhar and Pratap get down from the sedan near Vimala's house in Himayatnagar. Sekhar opens the iron-gate and they enter the compound.

SEKHAR: Beware, Prati could be around.

SFX - Sekhar presses the door buzzer and Vimala readily opens the door.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA (OFF): He loves me still, his eyes show that.

PRATAP (OFF): She's glad to see me, her face radiates!

(PAUSE)

VIMALA (OFF): Isn't he looking around for Bhadru's photograph, he's staring at it, how his face has changed.

SEKHAR: Hi, Prati, meet our classmate Pratap Varma, a U.S. citizen.

PRATI: Hi uncle.

PRATAP: Hi, I hear you're a nice girl.

PRATI: Uncle, don't go by Sekhar uncle's words.

PRATAP: What do you say Vimala?

VIMALA: Nice but not easy.

PRATI: Oh mummy.

PRATAP: Why, that's the way it should be, given a little flexibility. (PAUSE) Will the mother and daughter do me an honour?

VIMALA: I thought you are in the States, Pratap, not in Victorian England.

PRATAP: Glad you've retained your spark. (PAUSE) Please let these Rolexes help you time your moments.

(PAUSE)

PRATI: Lovely it is, thanks uncle.

VIMALA: Thanks Pratap, it's nice of you.

SEKHAR: It's time we get started. Wish we could have taken Prati along but she would be a fish out of water. Who would have time for her chatting about our old times?

PRATI: I'm glad mummy is making the trip. I was after her to go out a bit but she wouldn't listen.

VIMALA: Why not we have some filter coffee before we leave.

PRATAP: I'll have a mug-full. It is ages since I had any.

VIMALA: I've guessed that and got the decoction on hand.

PRATI: Let me prepare mummy.

VIMALA: No, I've some scores to settle with Pratap.

PRATAP: So, you haven't forgotten that. Prati, once I'd put salt into your mummy's coffee. You can payback later, but not now.

VIMALA: Okay, I'll keep it on hold. But there is no escaping.

PRATAP: I'll surrender my passport to you.

VIMALA: I'll serve you in flat five minutes. (OFF) It feels we've picked up where we'd left.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: Prati, any idea of going to the U.S for higher studies?

PRATI: No uncle. My Hippocratic Oath is some time away. But mummy had already sworn me into Indian medical service.

PRATAP: Nice but not easy, your mother is.

VIMALA: Sekhar, why didn't you tell me that Pratap runs an immigration agency in the U.S? I would have let a 'No-entry' board greet him.

SFX – Indicative of Vimala serving them coffee.

PRATAP: Jokes apart, with the right incentive, I'm a candidate for remigration.

SEKHAR: Who won't welcome you with open arms?

PRATAP: Don't be too sure my boy.

VIMALA: I'm ready.

SEKHAR: To welcome or to leave.

VIMALA: Both.

PRATAP: Let me handle your luggage.

VIMALA: Why bother?

PRATAP: If age didn't wither you chivalry didn't desert me.

SEKHAR: Vimala, oh, the same old Pratap for you.

VIMALA: What to do, what can't be cured should be endured.

PRATAP: Am I supposed to take it as a compliment?

PRATI: Thank you Pratap uncle, I've never seen mummy so lively.

PRATAP: Maybe, old-timers meet ushers in new times.

SFX – Indicative sounds of opening of the compound gate, the car boot and closing the same, the opening of the back door to facilitate Vimala’s entry and closing it thereafter. Opening of the car front doors by Pratap and Sekhar and closing the same and the sound of ignition.

VIMALA: Prati dear, take care.

PRATI: Wish you all a happy journey, bye.

SEKHAR and PRATAP: Bye Prati.

SFX – Indicative of the car speeding away.

SCENE - 5

EXT – Journey by car with the hustle and bustle of the morning life in Hyderabad.

PRATAP: Think about school times, you think of teachers’ nicknames. *Birada, Pakodi, kothhimeeri katta.*

VIMALA: What about the nicknames you had for girls?

PRATAP: I don’t remember any but..

VIMALA: Halwa.

PRATAP: Are you still fond of it?

VIMALA: I’ve stopped having it.

PRATAP: But why?

VIMALA: Who was to tease me?

(PAUSE)

SEKHAR: Pratap, Rama Rao *maastaru* is keen on seeing you.

PRATAP: I don’t know why, he thought I would come well in life.

SEKHAR: And so it is.

PRATAP: Yes and no.

VIMALA: You’ve always been like that, ‘yes and no’. Am I right?

PRATAP: Yes and no, and I can’t I fault you for thinking so.

SEKHAR: Pratap, why talk in circles.

PRATAP: Because I can’t be forthright.

SEKHAR: What's the restraint?

PRATAP: It's my constraint.

SEKHAR: What is it?

PRATAP: That I can't tell you without being forthright.

SEKHAR: Why back to square one via your nonsensical route.

SFX – Car screeching to a halt.

SEKHAR: Oh, what an ass he is? If he came under, I would've been hauled up for manslaughter not amounting to murder? Oh the goddamn legal jargon.

PRATAP: Is the Indian road sense any less nonsensical? We've hardly clocked a kilometer and I'm already crazy really.

SEKHAR: The chaos on the roads was no less yesterday.

PRATAP: Wasn't my mind more chaotic yesterday?

SEKHAR: Yes and no.

VIMALA: Pratap, he won't leave you till you commit yourself

PRATAP: Okay then, bank deposits "yes", emotional withdrawals "no" and future course "don't know".

SEKHAR: It's the way life these days. What do you say Vimala?

VIMALA: Ladies come last ...

PRATAP: With their last word.

VIMALA: Glad you haven't lost your wit a wee-bit.

PRATAP: And you, your ability to appreciate.

SEKHAR: Why make me feel left out?

VIMALA: Are you not in the driver's seat.

SFX – A lorry whizzes past.

PRATAP: Is he drunk or what?

SEKHAR: Drink or no drink they drive insane.

PRATAP: I've come here to mend my life, not to break my bones.

VIMALA: Don't worry; if it comes to that I'll tend your bones.

PRATAP: Won't I mend my life as you tend them?

VIMALA: How am I to know?

SEKHAR: You may know you're in safe hands.

PRATAP: But still, we've a long way to go, to and fro.

SEKHAR: Why worry, you'll get used to our traffic ways by then.

PRATAP: Only to lose my way on the U.S. roads.

VIMALA: But you said you would come back for good.

PRATAP: That is, if I don't go back out of heart.

SEKHAR: Vimala, have you ever heard of an Indian American discarding his suffix.

PRATAP: Why do you prejudge to prejudice her mind?

VIMALA: I've a mind of my own and you know that.

PRATAP: But out of sight is out of mind.

VIMALA: Not with the nursery to degree kind of ...well, I don't suffer from Alzheimer's disease, at least for now.

PRATAP: I tell you those days make the almanac of my life.

VIMALA: Well tucked in the attic to gather dust.

PRATAP: I can't fault you for faulting me.

VIMALA: That Houdini like vanishing act and the prodigal son like hibernation. What to make out of that?

PRATAP: Silence of the lamb.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: Let bygones be bygones, won't you let me dust my almanac.

VIMALA: You may need a broom for that. Wait till I fetch it.

PRATAP: Meanwhile let me clear the air. I felt sorry for you when I heard about your tragedy

VIMALA: (OFF) Hypocrite.

PRATAP: I took the first available flight.

VIMALA: I'm glad you care.

PRATAP: I wish I were there right then.

VIMALA: Maybe, it would have helped (PAUSE) or might not have. Now I've come to see it more as a tragedy of our country.

PRATAP: When Sekhar told me about it, I too thought so. I'm ashamed for what the world thinks of us Indians.

VIMALA: Why feel apologetic at all. Why, was it any worse than the senseless outrages in the U.S campuses? Bhadru's killers had an ill-motive at least. But there, don't sick-minds routinely gun down the unwary. What a shame, the so-called gun culture.

PRATAP: Leave alone the U.S., tell me what went wrong here.

VIMALA: Blame the businessman, present company excluded.

SEKHAR: I've my share of sins and there is no shying away from that.

PRATAP: But give the devil where it is due. But for their enterprise India wouldn't have been what it is economically.

VIMALA: It's like not seeing the wood for the trees. It is they who corrupted our society and weakened its moral fabric.

SEKHAR: What do you mean by that Vimala? It's the so-called government servants who started it all. Will they ever touch a file without greasing their palms? If I'm right, Nehru said that bribes act like lubricants in the smooth running of the government machinery. And what's his daughter's take on corruption? Didn't Indira Gandhi say it was a global phenomenon? Mind you, both of them together ruled the country for the best part after independence, what do you say about it?

VIMALA: Well, the need to bribe the black sheep is not same as corrupting the entire flock. That's what the business community did over the years. Who hasn't heard of their bribe talk, *khushi se dete hai* or *sabhi lete hai* and such? Bhadru used to say only ten percent officials were corrupt in the seventies. I need not tell you less than ten percent could be honest now.

PRATAP: What do you say Sekhar?

SEKHAR: In hind sight, I think she is right.

VIMALA: Seems we've lost the foresight forever.

PRATAP: What about having some *garam chai* to rev up a little.

VIMALA: Why not, we've a *dhhabha* nearby.

(PAUSE)

SFX – Indicative of the car being parked near an open air eatery and the passengers alighting from the same.

SCENE - 6

EXT - Pratap, Sekhar and Vimala take their chairs at a table in the open

VIMALA: Sekhar will you find out if there is a toilet somewhere here.

SEKHAR: Wait, let me go and check up.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: How can you think of a passable loo in this filthy place?

VIMALA: I understand your obsession for cleanliness. But if you focus on what is lacking, you lose sight of all that is different.

PRATAP: Now I realize, much of your appeal is the way you think.

VIMALA: Are you dismissing me as a bluestocking?

PRATAP: Won't my body language answer that.

(PAUSE)

SEKHAR: Vimala, it's in the backyard.

(PAUSE)

SEKHAR: You've set her heart on the right beat.

PRATAP: But I've lost my heart all again. Never mind your Liz Hurly hint, how to imagine she would be so fascinating. But if I can't have her I'll have a twice broken heart to mend. And that would be my undoing.

SEKHAR: I don't think you've to worry about it. I've a hunch she would not like to miss out either. But she may not like to migrate to the U.S.

PRATAP: What I've got to do with the U.S any way. Know I am counting on you to tilt the scales.

SEKHAR: If need be, with the combined weight of my wife.

PRATAP: Quiet, she's coming along with some bearer. (OFF) What a lovely frame in that graceful gait.

VIMALA: Hi Pratap, you seem to have lost yourself.

SEKHAR: Why are you after the poor fellow?

VIMALA: Sekhar, better get your eyes checked up.

PRATAP: Why, don't I see that koya dora approaching us.

VIMALA: Wonder how these koya doras are such good face readers!
It's an idea to let him predict Pratap's future.

PRATAP: Why not let me enjoy in the suspension of belief.

VIMALA: Why, don't you see he's focusing on you?

(PAUSE)

KOYA DORA: I've got it from our goddess Poleramma. *Beta*, you are at the crossroad now. Is it not true?

PRATAP: When your goddess tells you, why do you ask me?

KOYA DORA: Oyoye. (PAUSE) You loved and lost. She agreed but not her father. You went west and married. Amassed wealth but not happy, no love, no children.

SEKHAR: Pratap is it all true; I mean to the last million. No yes and no please.

PRATAP: Yes, including a meager fortune.

SEKHAR: It's a sort of yes and no again. But why didn't you tell me about that?

PRATAP: You know I'm never boastful. I've a small chain of Indian eateries over there.

SEKHAR: Understatement again, Koya Dora, what about his wife?

Koya Dora: I'll see his hand. (PAUSE) She left you, ten years ago, right.

PRATAP: True.

SEKHAR: What about his future?

Koya Dora: He won't go back. (PAUSE) Gets a beautiful wife, (PAUSE) she bears him a son,
(PAUSE) long and happy married life. Give some money to please Poleramma.

(PAUSE)

KOYA DORA: Poleramma says I should take the money from *beti's* hand.

PRATAP: Vimala, would you mind obliging him.

KOYA DORA: *Beti*, Poleramma says you'll get what you want.

SEKHAR: What about my future Koya Dora?

KOYA DORA: Give me your hand. (PAUSE) You're happy with your family. You'll be a very rich man. Your son goes abroad.

SEKHAR: Will he come back or not?

KOYA DORA: I have to see his hand. (PAUSE) Poleramma blesses all of you.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: Wonder how he's on dot about my past!

VIMALA: They've a knack of telling the past and gain confidence.

SEKHAR: What about their ability to foresee into the future.

VIMALA: That time only would tell.

SEKHAR: If this Koya Dora has his way, Pratap can blissfully wait and you can choose for sure, but what about me? God forbid, if his prediction comes true, I will be lost without my Suresh by my side.

PRATAP: Why don't you take advantage of his prediction?

SEKHAR: What advantage in a disadvantaged situation?

VIMALA: Wait Pratap. Sekhar, thank the Koya Dora for not taking advantage of his disadvantageous prediction.

SEKHAR: It's fine if you are thankful to him but not me. He gave you a blank cheque and me a bleak future, didn't he?

VIMALA: Why are you cut up with him? You should be thankful to him.

PRATAP: Vimala, what this rubbing salt into his poor wounds.

VIMALA: You may not know but Sekhar knows the way the soothsayers operate. But this Koya dora neither offered to do some *puja* nor wanted Sekhar to wear a *tayattu*. What's more it was a free consultation.

PRATAP: Any doubt he would've fallen for the bait, hook, line and sinker.

VIMALA: Well, I've nothing against astrology if it's not handled by charlatans. If things are destined to go wrong, they will go wrong, never mind their fake supplements. I believe it pays to know the realities of life. I don't think there was ever a way of making life a smooth sailing affair, all the way. Better, we learn to weather out the storm till it subsides. After all, it can't last forever.

SEKHAR: I don't see the clue to my rider lies in your theorem.

PRATAP: Then why not draw from the American way of life. What's this parental urge to get glued to bearded children? Why not let them go on their own from adolescence as the Americans do.

VIMALA: Isn't it the other extreme? What is adolescence if it's not vulnerable? It's stupid to abandon children at the crossroads of life. It's insensitive even; we know freedom without responsibility spoils, moreso at the tender age.

PRATAP: Maybe, if we average both cultures, we have the optimum.

VIMALA: I think you've got it.

SEKHAR: Let's go then. (RAISED YONE) Bearer, bring the bill.

PRATAP: Sekhar, do you remember what lifting little finder in the class meant.

SEKHAR: Well, you can relive yourself but it's an open affair here.

PRATAP: I'm relearning to be an Indian in India.

VIMALA: Is it under the koya dora's influence or what?

SEKHAR: What laggards these bearers are. Let me go and see what the hitch is.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: Pratap, why don't you answer my question?

PRATAP: As he said you'll get what you want, I think the answer to your question lies in his prediction.

VIMALA: What a puzzle for an answer.

PRATAP: What you want might solve the puzzle.

VIMALA: What I want is what I may get.

SFX – Pratap and Vimala break into laughter

SEKHAR: If you are not making fun of me, I'm glad to see Vimala laugh again.

VIMALA: Thank you.

PRATAP: Let me go into the wilderness.

VIMALA: I hope you don't get lost

SEKHAR: Don't worry, I'm going with him.

(PAUSE)

SFX - Indicating that they get into their car and proceed on their way.

SCENE - 7

EXT –Continuation of their journey in the hustle and bustle of the vehicular traffic.

SEKHAR: I may say, no friend like a childhood friend.

PRATAP: I would add, no sweetheart as the first love.

SEKHAR: I don't know. Ours is marriage kind of love.

PRATAP: Would it be any different with women Vimala?

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: Man or woman, love is love, isn't it?

PRATAP: But the love in question is the first love.

VIMALA: My answer is, silence is golden.

SEKHAR: Is it a conspiracy of silence?

PRATAP: Are you not poking your nose too much.

SEKHAR: Maybe, for you, personal space is spacious but for us privacy yields to inquisitiveness.

PRATAP: Both cut both ways. I repeat, average these two for optimizing the way of living.

VIMALA: One day I may have to sit with you and arrive at the mean.

SEKHAR: Then I would stand guard (PAUSE) Look, how the guy is frantic for some help. It's clear his car broke down and he would've left the jack in his garage.

PRATAP: Let's find out.

SFX- Indicating the stoppage of the car.

PRATAP: Hi, what's the matter?

DR. RAGHU: Lift up to Hayatnagar please.

SEKHAR: Vimala, don't mind accommodating him.

SFX - Opening and the shutting of the car door.

DR. RAGHU: Thank you madam. I'm Dr. Raghu.

VIMALA: Never mind, I'm Vimala. He's Pratap and he's Sekhar.

PRATAP: Doctor, you may know her daughter Prati is a doctor in the making.

DR. RAGHU: Nice to know, in which year is she auntie?

VIMALA: Pre-final in the Gandhi Medical College.

DR. RAGHU: I did my M.S. in the Osmania.

VIMALA: What a chance meeting.

DR. RAGHU: It's my pleasure really.

PRATAP: No less ours, meeting a young and handsome doctor.

SEKHAR: Possibly an eligible bachelor.

DR. RAGHU: I can only say I'm a bachelor.

PRATAP: When it comes to eligibility, you might have heard the saying. It's for the mother-in-law to know what a good son-in-law one makes.

DR. RAGHU: I've heard the father-in-law version.

PRATAP: What difference does that make if one is not snubbed?

SEKHAR: Having a doctor at home is fine. But at corporate hospitals it's like you are thrown at the wolves.

DR. RAGHU: No denying sir, but do you know why it is so?

SEKHAR: Whatever be the provocation, I don't see any justification. Oh, how they short change you at every turn. Why the unwarranted tests and the uncalled for hospitalization. By the way, when did a doctor last felt his patient's pulse by hand? Bemoan the society with doctors without integrity?

DR. RAGHU: I will come to that later but our problem is our selective condemnation. We speak of political corruption, bureaucratic kickbacks and business bribes, but not in the same vein. We don't see the corrupt spring from our midst but don't descend from Mars.

SEKHAR: Don't tell me, you can put judges and doctors on the same footing.

DR. RAGHU: Why do you want place them on a moral pedestal raised on an immoral ground. Don't they see others take an unholy dip in our polluted waters? It's stupid to expect they go home dry and clean. What about our dual morality. We're critical of corruption but not our corrupt caste-men.

SEKHAR: All that is fine, but why the fleecing at the corporate hospitals?

DR. RAGHU: If you know about the capital involved and the return on investment, you get the answer. Have you ever thought why healthcare has become a corporate business in our country?

SEKHAR: That way you can explain away every shortcoming.

DR. RAGHU: I'm talking about specifics. You know our people and politicians alike bankrupt our country. We as a people evade, if not avoid, paying taxes. You know how the politicians are ruining our economy with their populist schemes.

SEKHAR: Well India is no Utopia.

VIMALA: Bhadru, used to say corruption makes us collectively poor. Well, Raghu, he's my late husband. (PAUSE) You could've heard about the engineered accident of an engineer.

DR. RAGHU: Who didn't, but who thought I would meet you some day.

VIMALA: Maybe, that's life all about, it makes and breaks. Back to the corrupt, they won't have it easy any way. One may have a Benz but it doesn't help much on our congested roads. It goes like that with everything else.

SEKHAR: It won't be easy for Raghu till he clears the mess in the corporate hospitals.

DR. RAGHU: In the no-profit-no-loss hospitals of our own Gates and Buffetts.

PRATAP: Would our doctors like to work in such hospitals?

DR. RAGHU: Why not, if they get their due and the patients are not billed unduly.

PRATAP: What if I provide money, would you run the show.

DR. RAGHU: What a fillip that would.

VIMALA: Are you into it already!

DR. RAGHU: I run a twenty-bed hospital at Hayatnagar.

PRATAP: It's my word and money is no constraint. Give her your contact number and we'll call you up.

DR. RAGHU: I have no words uncle.

VIMALA: I've enough words of praise.

PRATAP: Vimala, know I owe it your inspiration.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: Oh, you too live in Hyderabad. What are your parents?

DR. RAGHU: My father owns a couple of bulk-drug units in Hyderabad. My mother is a full time housewife and part-time accountant at my father's office.

SEKHAR: With such a pedigree, you can't deny your eligibility.

DR. RAGHU: Why are you after my bachelorhood sir?

PRATAP: Caught in the shackles of marriage, he's jealous of your freedom

VIMALA: Is it that you want to be shackle-free.

PRATAP: The saying, do as I say but don't do as I do, goes with me too. To tell you the truth, I'll be happy being a netted fish.

VIMALA: Empty words, what do you say Sekhar.

SEKHAR: He's deemed right till you prove him wrong.

VIMALA: It's stupid of women to expect justice in an all male court.

DR. RAGHU: Don't feel let down aunty. I'll assert you are right till Pratap uncle proves you wrong.

VIMALA: (OFF) *Buddhu*, you've played his card. It's good you're not a lawyer.

PRATAP: Vimala, you know I'm a game.

(PAUSE)

SEKHAR: Looks like we've some trouble on hand. Why the traffic came to a halt. Don't you see the police are all over?

DR. RAGHU: Oh, we've almost reached my hospital

SFX – the sound of the door opening and closure.

PRATAP: Could be a traffic jam.

SEKHAR: You don't know, police are hardly seen in such times. It could be a major road mishap or worse.

SFX – the sound of the door opening and closure.

DR. RAGHU: It's a Naxalite attack on a police convoy near my hospital. It seems, landmines blew away a couple of vehicles. No way forward now for me too.

VIMALA: I think we should go back.

SEKHAR: What do you say Pratap?

PRATAP: I'll go with Vimala.

VIMALA: What if I say, I'll go with you.

SEKHAR: It will be a case of *pehle app* and missing the bus.

SFX – Car being reversed amidst the chaos.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: Sekhar, what about train tickets?

SEKHAR: It's slipped from my mind.

VIMALA: So, forgetfulness helps.

PRATAP: And remembrances too.

SEKHAR: Now it helps to go back.

SFX - Sound of picking up speed.

SCENE - 8

EXT – continuation of the journey in the hustle and bustle of the vehicular traffic

SEKHAR: The Naxal trouble is back for worse. Didn't our government claim they fled to Chattisgarh with broken backs?

DR. RAGHU: If they're weakened in one area, they strengthen themselves in another. West Bengal first, Andhra Pradesh next and now it's Chattisgarh with Orissa being the only constant menace.

SEKHAR: I don't see how anyone in his right mind can believe that a band of brigands can capture Delhi by hiding in the jungles.

DR. RAGHU: You know too much disparity in society leads to revolution with topsy-turvy as ideology. Gaining political power has always been the goal of revolution to bring about the change and the revolutionaries see bloodshed as the means to serve that end. The only drawback is the danger of death, but then, it's the narcotic of martyrdom. What to say, sensitive minds with utopian dreams resort to senseless killings.

SEKHAR: Maybe, it was the case before; we were not even born then. Now assorted characters fill the Naxal ranks. Oh, the way they arm-twist businessmen, Naxalism is nothing but extortionism. That's not all. It could've been a hard grind earlier in their jungle hideouts. And now, with women cadres around the Naxals don't miss out much of life. Can't you imagine the *jangal me mangal*. I say, the social fringes are better off in deep jungles.

R. RAGHU: It's true but it's not the incentive. I think it's the moral kick they get as gun-wielding Naxalites.

SEKHAR: But why should they kill the police? After all, it's the poor who join the police force.

DR. RAGHU: I don't think they have an answer. It's a dichotomy of their ideology.

SEKHAR: Don't tell me there ever was an ideology of social parity. What about communism?

Banish the czars to make the proletariat the czars. What do you say?

DR. RAGHU: I say the bourgeoisie got it right.

SEKHAR: I think Naxals should realize democracy is the best bargain for the poor in our bad world. But then, if they get into our democratic circus they too would become corrupt buffoons.

DR. RAGHU: My father says, earlier, people were better off with *karmic* theory. The poor believed the rich were rich because of their good deeds in previous births. That way, without envy, people tried to be good for a better rebirth.

SEKHAR: But was it not anti- progress.

DR. RAGHU: No, theory is about progress in order and not chaos in progress as we have now. In a way, we had thrown out the baby with the bathwater. .

SEKHAR: But do you subscribe to your father's old values?

DR. RAGHU: Well, we were brought up on that diet; I've a younger sister, Swarna.

SEKHAR: What's your sister doing?

DR. RAGHU: She's in the final year engineering.

PRATAP: Why, the biggest 'graduate engineer' factory in the world is in India

He could've called you up. Located in South India. (PAUSE) I don't see my car here. Hopefully Raju could've moved it to a repair shop.

SEKHAR: Oh these guys are bloody stupid. Why didn't he call you?

DR. RAGHU: He's a sensible fellow. Of all the days he forgot to carry his cell today. And you know there are hardly any public telephone booths these days.

SEKHAR: That is all about giving with one hand and taking with the other. Well, for good or bad, Dhirubhai's dream of seeing a cell in every Indian hand is on hand. (PAUSE) Pratap, what're you dreaming about?

(PAUSE)

SEKHAR: Vimala.

(PAUSE)

SEKHAR: What's this conspiracy of silence?

VIMALA: What's the matter?

SEKHAR: Raghu, excuse me doctor for dropping the prefix, I find it ...

DR. RAGHU: You're welcome sir.

SEKHAR: Vimala, he belongs to your school of thought.

VIMALA: Nice. I hope he has a lesson or two for you.

SEKHAR: Were in your dreamland or what, that's what he has been doing. (PAUSE) What about you Pratrapp?

PRATAP: It's good you dropped his prefix; why not help me drop my suffix.

VIMALA: Why make it Greek and Latin?

SEKHAR: He's desperate to turn an Indian from an Indian American.

VIMALA: Let him apply for the visa and then I'll see.

PRATAP: Vimala, is there a standard format?

VIMALA: Boy, be a little imaginative.

SFX- Thudding sound of a head-on collision. (PAUSE)

SCENE - 9

EXT – Accident site, Sekhar, Vimala and Pratap shout for help.

PASSERS BY: Catch him, the lorry driver is on the run. (PAUSE) The fellow next to driver would've surely died. (PAUSE) Miracle he's still alive, pull him out fast.

SFX- soundtrack of the hustle and bustle of rescue activity.

VIMALA: Are you okay Pratap (PAUSE) why don't you talk? (PAUSE)

Raghu see what's wrong with him.

(PAUSE)

DR. RAGHU: Nothing to worry, he's in a sort of trauma, that's all.

VIMALA: Thank God.

SEKHAR: He bore the brunt, it's a miracle really.

DR. RAGHU: I see a little concussion here but it's minor.

VIMALA: Raghu, what about shifting him to hospital.

DR. RAGHU: No need auntie, he can rest at home.

SEKHAR: Wait, I'll find some vehicle.

VIMALA: Be quick Sekhar.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: Raghu, are you sure there's no danger?

DR. RAGHU: Relax auntie.

SFX – An approaching car and its coming to a halt.

DR. RAGHU: How lucky, it's my car.

VIMALA: Oh, really! (In high pitch) Sekhar come back quick.

(PAUSE)

DR. RAGHU: Slowly ...

VIMALA: Are you okay Pratap.

PRATAP: (Feeble tone). It's paining here.

DR. RAGHU: Is it severe?

PRATAP: It's some pain.

DR. RAGHU: Bear it for a while. (OFF) Raju stop at the Raja Medicals.

SFX – bang of the car doors.

SEKHAR: I'll join you soon.

VIMALA: Why, what's the matter.

SEKHAR: I've to report to the police.

VIMALA: But how can we leave you alone.

SEKHAR: Don't bother about me, take care of him.

VIMALA: Know he's in safe hands.

DR. RAGHU: Raju be with uncle and handle the police for him.

RAJU: Ji.

SEKHAR: Thank you Raghu, hope to catch up with you soon.

SFX – opening and closure of the car door (PAUSE) Starting of the car engine and speeding of the car.

DR. RAGHU: Auntie, you make him lie down. I see, more than medicines, he needs a reassuring touch. If you don't mind..

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: Thank you Vimala, but..

VIMALA: Be quiet or suffer a parody of Saigal's lullaby, *soja raja kumara soja*.

PRATAP: As you tap me to sleep.

VIMALA: One more word, I'll bang your head.

(PAUSE)

SFX – Stoppage of the car.

DR. RAGHU: I'll get some medicines for him.

VIMALA: And a bottle of mineral water, all to be billed later.

DR. RAGHU: Hopefully to uncle's hospital.

VIMALA: I tell you, he means what he says and does what he means.

DR. RAGHU: I think you are no different.

SFX – Opening and closing of the car door.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: (FEEBLE TONE). Vimala, I've kept my love on hold and lived without hope. I can feel my love unbinding in your lap. What a living feeling, I don't mind dying now.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: No, I don't want to see you in tears.

PRATAP: I'm dying to be on my knees with flowers.

SFX – Opening and closing of the car door.

DR. RAGHU: Auntie, help him have these tablets.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: Wish I had a son like you.

DR. RAGHU: Auntie, why not treat me as one. (PAUSE) You can ease him out of your lap and feel easy yourself. He will sleep in no time.

VIMALA: It's son-like, Raghu, you're a godsend really.

DR. RAGHU: You may use the backrest as the headrest.

VIMALA: No, I don't want to disturb his sleep.

DR. RAGHU: Auntie, nice you're concerned. (PAUSE) I'm glad he's not harmed. You know how he has raised my hopes. Frankly, I feared fate had duped me.

PRATAP: (drowsy). Don't worry Raghu, I've made a will in her name. Even if I die, I know she'll stand by my word.

VIMALA: Who's going to let you die?

PRATAP: (drawling) Vimala, I don't want to live without you

(PAUSE)

DR. RAGHU: He has slept off. Now you can relax in the front seat.

VIMALA: Didn't you hear what he has said? If he wakes up and won't find me, he may get it all wrong.

(PAUSE)

DR. RAGHU: Auntie didn't you say, I'm like your son?

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: You want me to confide to you, don't you?

DR. RAGHU: I believe it helps you in your situation.

VIMALA: Maybe, there may not be a better soul than you.

DR. RAGHU: Thanks for the nice feeling. I swear I won't reveal.

VIMALA: You might've heard the story of Devadas and Parvathi.

DR. RAGHU: Why, I've read the Sarat classic in Telugu translation.

VIMALA: We were like Devadas and Parvathi, we fond of each other from our childhood. My father rejected Pratap because our sub-sects are different. He left for the States in dejection and I took Bhadru's hand in helplessness. We remained lost to each other ever since and we met only this morning. After that fate's tragedy now it's life's surprise. I had a sense of my love gushing out from every recess of my heart.

DR. RAGHU: It's promising, but what about him, I mean his wife and children.

VIMALA: Well, he's without encumbrances and it's clear he kept his love on hold. As you've observed he wants to unbind it now. To let him or not is my dilemma.

DR. RAGHU: I think life made amends for love to run its course.

VIMALA: I know love is beckoning us. But I'm afraid of our fate, what if it plays spoilsport the second time. If my father was prejudiced against him then my daughter is possessive about me now. Also she's over obsessed about her father's memory. I've to choose between them and you know it's no choice.

DR. RAGHU: I see you've a Gordian knot to cut to tie the nuptial knot. (PAUSE) I think you take the Telugu cinema lane for evasion.

VIMALA: What's that by the way? I am no movie buff anyway.

DR. RAGHU: We may trick Prati into believing that you've cancer and won't live long. Pratap uncle offers to play the Good Samaritan to be your companion for the short reminder. And for better affect you can play the sentimental card of wanting to die a *sumangali*. Well, it won't work; being a doctor she would call our bluff.

VIMALA: Doctor or not, my daughter is no fool.

DR. RAGHU: Let's take it as a trial balloon to get started. If only Prati has a boyfriend, we can try to get her around through him.

VIMALA: I've to wait till she finds one. I welcome if you are the one.

DR. RAGHU: Who knows when air is so thick with love?

VIMALA: Like to see her picture in my cell phone.

(PAUSE)

DR. RAGHU: Picture perfect.

SFX- ring tone of Vimala's cell phone.

SEKHAR: (OFF). How is Pratap?

VIMALA: No worry, he's in deep sleep. What about you?

SEKHAR: (OFF). I've just finished with the police. Raju is quite handy. Thank Raghu for me. Where are you now?

VIMALA: We've crossed Koti.

SEKHAR: (OFF). Where will you put him up?

VIMALA: In my place, where else.

SEKHAR: (OFF). Nice, that helps. I'll catch up.

VIMALA: Bye then.

(PAUSE) Sekhar wants me to thank you for sending Raju.

DR. RAGHU: Raju is one in all. Where do you stay in the city?

VIMALA: Road No. 3, Himayatnagar.

DR. RAGHU: Shall I get some food parceled at Minerva.

VIMALA: I've *sambar* and *vankai kooru*. I've only to cook some rice for us. It must be ages since the poor chap had a proper food.

DR. RAGHU: I am afraid I've to skip this time

VIMALA: (OFF) Maybe, he wants to leave us alone.

VIMALA: Stop near that gate. (PAUSE) wake up Pratap, we've reached home.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: Now I'm okay; take me to the hotel.

VIMALA: Why not if you book a suite for us.

(PAUSE)

SFX – Creaking of the compound gate.

VIMALA: Pratap, mind your step, wait.

PRATAP: Misstep now, no way.

SFX - Opening of the house door.

SCENE - 10

INT – Vimala, Pratap and Dr. Raghu in Vimala's three bed-room house.

VIMALA: Pratap, lie down now. (PAUSE) Raghu, just see...

PRATAP: Why make fuss, I'm a little weak, that's all.

VIMALA: Let it come from the horse's mouth.

DR. RAGHU: I say it's an unusual recovery.

PRATAP: Satisfied Vimala.

DR. RAGHU: Uncle, I think you're remarkably strong.

VIMALA: Agreed, but know he's irritably obstinate.

PRATAP: Wait, you'll see how mellowed I am.

VIMALA: It helps, but what a fool I'm ...

PRATAP: A sentimental fool.

VIMALA: Don't think that life didn't teach me. I'm not the timid Vimala you knew. But you too were never a candidate for a bravery award.

PRATAP: Bet, I'll win it hands down now.

VIMALA: Okay *baba*, but not on an empty stomach.

PRATAP: Raghu, it's slightly paining here.

VIMALA: For all I know its pangs of hunger. Let me cook some rice.

(PAUSE)

SFX – Indicative of a running tap, rice being washed, stove being lit and such kitchen activity.

DR. RAGHU: Auntie, he's okay, let me go.

VIMALA: If you come in the evening.

DR. RAGHU: I'll for a cup of filter coffee.

VIMALA: Prati prepared.

(PAUSE)

DR. RAGHU: Auntie, I've seen the photograph in the newspapers.

VIMALA: Yes, that's the last one, taken by Prati. She's so fond of photography; you only have to stand still for a second.

DR. RAGHU: Lot was said about his integrity and incorruptibility, that he was a workaholic, used to drive his staff crazy and such.

VIMALA: That's true; all his life, he was honest to the core.

DR. RAGHU: It was said he was as brave as Caesar.

VIMALA: You know how the media exaggerates. I tell you, nothing scared him more than his death. It's sad and silly; he was so obsessed about playing with his great grand children. Maybe, what we crave, life denies us.

DR. RAGHU: Or gives without warning.

VIMALA: But with strings attached.

DR. RAGHU: It pays to break loose at times.

VIMALA: Thank you for trying to strengthen my hands. I'll tell you a secret I won't like to share even with Pratap. You can imagine me as a reluctant bride but try visualizing my marital life.

DR. RAGHU: How can I?

VIMALA: I'll give you a clue. Bhadru was uprightness in motion and discipline in relaxation.

DR. RAGHU: Now I can, machine like. Would Prati ever understand that?

VIMALA: I don't wish my fate for her, if I can help. If only Bhadru was an average man, I tell you, Prasad would've been like any other man in my life, even early in my married life. But thanks to that upright soul, he remains my only love. Now, I don't want to miss the first honeymoon of my life. I know it would put me at odds with my daughter. So be it. (PAUSE)

DR. RAGHU: I would love to be uncle's best man at your wedding.

VIMALA: Can he find a better man? (PAUSE) But is there something didn't strike you.

DR. RAGHU: What's that auntie?

VIMALA: The phonetic likeness of Pratap and Prati.

DR. RAGHU: Believe me; I've got it in the car itself.

VIMALA: You're smart. But what you see of my love is a fraction of what's hidden in my heart.

DR. RAGHU: How I envy uncle.

SFX – opening of the door.

VIMALA: Ragu don't give a miss to the miss.

VIMALA: Oh, you're smarter than I thought

SFX- Closing of the door.

VIMALA: (OFF) Why not I give him food in bed, as a prelude.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: Why spoil me Vimala ...

VIMALA: Wanting reciprocity.

PRATAP: Oh, you're always one step ahead.

VIMALA: Why not follow me in my footsteps.

PRATAP: I need energy for that.

VIMALA: I'll feed you with my hand for that.

PRATAP: Be warned, I'm really hungry.

VIMALA: You can have my share by right. Open your mouth (PAUSE) that's a good boy.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: I told you, I've willed my whole to you.

VIMALA: But keeping yourself to you.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: When you were a half-self.

VIMALA: What's now, now that I'm myself?

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: Now I'm yours, what more do you want?

VIMALA: Pratap, Junior.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: Vimala, oh, what we've missed.

VIMALA: What's that?

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: Sumptuous times.

VIMALA: I want hard evidence.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: You'll have it in ample measure.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: Well, I'll join you soon.

(PAUSE)

SFX- Cleaning of vessels in the kitchen.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: I thought you would be in siesta.

PRATAP: I was waiting to tell you something.

VIMALA: Why wait, you should've called me.

PRATAP: Do you know why I married a white?

VIMALA: Why, you men crave white skin, don't you?

PRATAP: Oh, my wheatie, no other *desi*.

VIMALA: And no fun with *pardesis*.

PRATAP: Eyes glued on my Liz Hurley

VIMALA: Habits die hard, I give up.

PRATAP: Give up on me or my habits.

SFX - Door buzzer sounds (PAUSE)

VIMALA: It could be Sekhar.

(PAUSE)

SCENE - 11

INT - Vimala in the drawing room.

VIMALA: Who's that?

PRATI: It's me mom.

SFX- Soundtrack of a door opening.

VIMALA: What Keerti, both of you bunked classes or what.

KEERTI: Auntie, you know it's not possible with Prati.

PRATI: What happened to your trip mummy?

VIMALA: Well, it's a long story of only a few miles journey.

PRATI: What mummy, you talk so strangely.

PRATAP: Hi, Prati.

PRATI: Pratap uncle, you, here.

KEERTI: Prati, maybe we've come at a wrong time. I better leave.

VIMALA: No Keerti, you couldn't have come at a better time. I'm happy to tell you, my friend Pratap has proposed and I've accepted.

PRATI: How could you...

VIMALA: Why not...

PRATI: In your situation...*chee chee*.

SFX – banging of the door.

KEERTI: Pardon me aunty. (PAUSE) You know I never misbehave; surely some devil entered my head. (PAUSE) I've made it worse for Prati, I'm ashamed really.

VIMALA: I don't blame you Keerti.

KEERTI: But I'm worried about Prati.

VIMALA: Don't worry, she would get over.

KEERTI: It won't be easy auntie; you're an angel for her.

VIMALA: Am I a devil now?

KEERTI: You know how she cherishes her father's memory.

VIMALA: I'm sure she's concerned about her mother's life.

KEERTI: Why doubt, sorry once again.

VIMALA: Bye.

KEERTI: Bye uncle.

PRATAP: Good luck.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: Be on hand if I need.

PRATAP: Handle with care.

VIMALA: Don't I know.

(PAUSE)

SFX – A crying Prati in her room.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: You hate your mummy, don't you?

PRATI: (Sobbing) I love you mummy, sorry for hurting you but..

VIMALA: You don't want me to remarry.

PRATI: I never thought you would.

VIMALA: Why so?

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: You took it for granted.

PRATI: Maybe.

VIMALA: You want me to live and die as your father's widow.

PRATI: I don't want to be rude but ...

VIMALA: Remarriage is amoral for a forty year old woman with a teenaged daughter.

PRATI: Why do you put words into my mouth? I just can't think of any man in your life.

VIMALA: But why? Have you thought about it?

PRATI: You know what father's memory means to me.

VIMALA: Are you not bothered about your mother's life?

PRATI: I'll give up my life for you.

VIMALA: But you don't want me to improve mine.

PRATI: Like it or not, your life is behind you.

VIMALA: What about the rest of it. Won't it count?

PRATI: It's different if you were a young widow.

VIMALA: How it's different being an older widow?

PRATI: Don't you've a teenaged daughter?

VIMALA: What if I were childless.

PRATI: Why, you would be shaming none.

VIMALA: So you're not against widow marriage. But she should be a young mother or a childless oldie. You make me envy young widows with or without children.

PRATI: And pity middle-aged ones with teenage dudes like me. You may curse your luck but at your age there's sanctity to widowhood.

(PAUSE)

PRATI: I know you're guilty. Why marry on impulse and live in guilt.

VIMALA: You got it wrong. I don't wish to talk about my married life with you because it involves your sentiments of your father.

PRATI: It's no excuse; there is nothing I don't know about you and father.

VIMALA: I never knew you were an eavesdropper and a voyeur combined into one.

PRATI: Oh, I don't mean it that way.

VIMALA: Leave it at that, and get to the realities of your life.

PRATI: What realities?

VIMALA: I won't mean much to you once you marry...

PRATI: If you drop your idea, I won't get married at all.

VIMALA: These are no Mahabharata days my dear. But still if you keep your vow, it will make it worse for me. Well, Bhishma didn't marry to let his father have the woman he fancied. And you want to remain unmarried to prevent your mother from marrying the man who loves her.

PRATI: But don't love him, do you?

VIMALA: What for you if I love him or not?

PRATI: Won't it reflect on your marriage?

VIMALA: You're just a girl not even a newly wed.

PRATI: Maybe, I'm old enough to understand.

VIMALA: If only life is as simple to comprehend...

PRATI: I know it's the stock stuff to gag the young mouths.

VIMALA: Okay, I'll tell you about a stark reality. If ever you were in my position, you would feel as much need for a male company as I do now.

PRATI: Don't think I don't care for your needs. But I can't bear your shaming dad's memory by marrying. If you still go ahead, I know I can't prevent it. But I'm not sure whether I want to live to see you as someone else's woman.

VIMALA: I think doctors save lives and not take lives.

PRATI: Why do you forget I'm no less a devoted daughter.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: Prati dear, know my love is as precious as your life.

PRATI: What, you love him!

VIMALA: Had my father cared for my feelings, Pratap would have been your father. (PAUSE)

SCENE - 12

INT – Vimala goes to Pratap.

VIMALA: The sentimental fool has put her life on line.

PRATAP: Didn't you foresee that?

VIMALA: No, I thought I could put some sense into her stupid head.

PRATAP: Now would you put my love on line or what?

VIMALA: No way come what may.

PRATAP: What if she acts stupid; it'll cast a shadow on our love life.

VIMALA: So be it, no missing you even at the cost of my life.

PRATAP: That's the love I crave, but still we've to save her life

VIMALA: I'm glad it's father like.

PRATAP: If the *koya dora* gets it right, won't I become a proper father.

VIMALA: The day I deliver, would be the day of my life.

PRATAP: Never mind, the daughterly rebuff.

VIMALA: Mind you, only a woman would know that.

PRATAP: Wish I were one to be able to feel like you.

VIMALA: You would know as I open my heart and soul to you. Now see how we can save Prati's life without wasting ours.

PRATAP: Maybe, Sekhar could help us out. Why no word from him.

VIMALA: I don't think so, yet Raghu may make some difference. But self-help is the best help, isn't it? You apply your mind and I'll find out what she is up to.

(PAUSE)

VIMALA: The she devil is sleeping. (PAUSE) I know you've an idea, it's written on your face.

PRATAP: It's husbanding trouble ahead.

VIMALA: What do you mean?

PRATAP: What else, wife being a face reader.

VIMALA: Oh, how I've been missing life.

PRATAP: And I, for the lack of inspiration.

VIMALA: That's behind us any way; tell me what next.

PRATAP: As your logic failed to cut her sentimental ice, we shall melt it with her emotional heat.

VIMALA: But how?

PRATAP: By feigning our suicide.

VIMALA: What an idea really, but how to go about it?

PRATAP: We bleed a little by slashing our wrists and Sekhar will alert Prati to our suicide pact. Then we all should be smiling for our wedding album.

VIMALA: But what if the timing goes wrong?

PRATAP: I see your drawing hall wall is wide enough to accommodate our photographs. Why doubt, Prati's sentiment would ensure that.

VIMALA: It's no time to joke any way.

PRATAP: It's all nuts and bolts my dear. Don't you have a razor blade at home?

VIMALA: I think it's there somewhere.

PRATAP: You get hold of it as I get Sekhar on line.

(PAUSE)

SEKHAR: (OFF) How do you feel now?

PRATAP: Quite fit to think and act.

SEKHAR: (OFF) I'll be reaching there shortly.

PRATAP: It's the climax scene here. I've a role for you too.

SEKHAR: (OFF) I know it's hard to handle Prati.

PRATAP: Listen carefully so that you won't mess it up. Prati has threatened to commit suicide. I thought of *vajram vajrena bhedyate*. You'll find Vimala and me in blood with our wrists slashed. You alert Prati and work on her emotion for the turnaround. Call me back to give us five minutes and we'll keep the main door ajar.

SEKHAR: (OFF) What an idea *sirji*. I'm sure it makes Ajitab Bachan proud.

PRATAP: Wait, Vimala has something to say.

VIMALA: Sekhar ask Raghu to follow you with his medical kit, just in case. You call him on 9246209733, okay.

SEKHAR: (OFF) Done, I'm glad you've got your man Vimala.

VIMALA: We'll wait for your call.

SEKHAR: (OFF) Be ready, I won't take long.

(PAUSE)

PRATAP: Nice you found it. (PAUSE) It looks new.

VIMALA: How to go about it, I mean...

PRATAP: Hand in hand in the bed for better affect. Go and open the front door and keep it ajar. Don't make noise.

(PAUSE)

SFX – Two rings of cell phone.

SEKHAR: (OFF) I'll be there in five minutes. Raghu is on the way, he said he'll bring some bandage along with him. Better be careful.

PRATAP: Don't goof up, okay.

(PAUSE)

SCENE - 13

INT – Sekhar enters Vimala's house and finds Vimala and Pratap in a pool of bed.

SEKHAR: Oh my god, (loud tone) Come Prati, be quick.

PRATI: (OFF) Sekhar uncle, what's wrong with you?

SEKHAR: (loud tone) Your mother

(PAUSE)

PRATI: Oh, God.

(PAUSE)

PRATI: Mummy, are you okay?

VIMALA: Please leave us?

(PAUSE) How can you do this to me? Uncle, get something to stop the flow.

SEKHAR: Okay, let me see.

(PAUSE)

PRATI: Are you okay uncle?

(PAUSE)

SEKHAR: Here's is a saree. (PAUSE) Why he's not responding?

PRATI: He'll be okay. Please get some glucose from the medical shop.

SEKHAR: I'm back in a minute.

SFX – Soundtrack of cloth being torn.

VIMALA: Doesn't save us.

PRATI: I'm sorry mummy.

(PAUSE)

PRATI: I'm ashamed uncle.

PRATAP: I don't blame you Prati.

PRATI: Don't you forgive me mummy.

(PAUSE)

PRATI: Sekhar uncle, with water.

SEKHAR: Why this madness Vimala. I thought he would give you new life and not abet you to suicide.

VIMALA: Don't blame him.

PRATI: Uncle, have some glucose please.

PRATAP: Give your mummy.

PRATI: Mummy, please.

(PAUSE)

PRATI: If you have, uncle also will have.

(PAUSE)

PRATI: That's a good girl. (PAUSE) Uncle, be a good boy.

(PAUSE)

SFX- sound of the door buzzer.

SEKHAR: Prati, find out who it is.

DR. RAGHU: (OFF) I'm Dr. Raghu, I came to check up Pratap uncle.

PRATI: (OFF) Who has called you?

DR. RAGHU: (OFF) Don't you know about the car crash?

PRATI: (OFF) What's that?

DR. RAGHU: (OFF) It's Sekhar uncle's car. Pratap uncle was a little traumatized?

PRATI: (OFF) It's news to me. But how do you know?

DR. RAGHU: (OFF) I was in the car myself.

PRATI: (OFF) Please come in.

(PAUSE)

SEKHAR: How timely. Prati is taking care but surly you can help.

DR. RAGHU: Oh god, but why their wounds are not dressed up?

PRATI: Oh, I haven't thought about it.

DR. RAGHU: It happens when doctors treat their own people.

PRATI: I'll go and get some bandage.

DR. RAGHU: No need, I've it with me. Let's move them out from here.

(PAUSE)

PRATI: Mummy, steady, (PAUSE) Sekhar uncle, help Pratap uncle (PAUSE) This way, to mummy's room.

(PAUSE)

DR. RAGHU: Pratap uncle, how lucky, you've escaped death twice today.

PRATAP: What luck it is when I couldn't live life one day in twenty years.

PRATI: Uncle, with mummy with you can't you let bygones be bygones

VIMALA: I know you love me dear. That's why I don't want to embarrass you any more. I would go to the States with Pratap. I hope you understand.

DR. RAGHU: I think you should lead by example.

PRATI: Mummy he's right.

SEKHAR: Its no to Vimala's visa.

PRATI: On one condition.

SEKHAR: What's that?

PRATI: Pratap uncle should surrender his passport.

DR. RAGHU: And make me his best man.

PRATAP: Can I have a better man for that.

VIMALA: It's just not you..

DR. RAGHU: Auntie, I get you, but one step at a time.

PRATI: Why leave me out of the loop.

VIMALA: You may know Pratap is going to fund Raghu's pro-poor hospital project.

PRATI: Oh, I'm glad I've a job already..

DR. RAGHU: Of a managing partner if you please.

PRATI: One step at a time.

DR. RAGHU: Takes to the right destination.

SEKHAR: All's well that ends well.

SFX – Marriage tunes

The End

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