

SHE tightened her grip on the glass of fruit juice as she looked at the man sitting before her —Kalyanaraman, her husband of 30 years, the boulder that had hung on that chain round her neck for all of 30 years.

Her gorge rising, she contemplated his puffy cheeks and bulging neck. What if she threw the glass at that face? And strangled that neck with her hands? What then?

But Kalyanaraman was, as usual, insensitive to the fuming volcanoes that his dull presence kindled in her. He confronted her with the indignant look that he thought suitable to the occasion, and burst out: "But what do you need a job for? Here we are, just the two of us, with this pension of 1,000 dollars. Isn't that enough for you?"

Seeing that she was about to say something, he shouted: "Don't interrupt me!" She began to drink the juice in large gulps. He continued: "Look at the gadgets you have in the house—for every little job. And then you have a TV, a VCR, a car...Have you ever been so comfortable in India? So where's the need for you to go out and work? Maybe you want some more money for clothes and make up! You seem to imagine you are still young! You are 50 years old, my dear! You know that, don't you? You are 50, dammit!"

That cruel reminder upset her for a moment. Then, pulling herself together, she retorted: "Yes, I know I am going to be 50. But my mind is still young. It's not dull and dreary, like yours!"

"Damn you!"

"Don't interrupt me", she said. "I can't watch those eternal soap operas with you, giving you a little something to eat every hour. You can stay at home if you can't go out. But that doesn't mean I have to be cooped up with you."

Kalyanaraman's face was now distorted with anger. "So you are cooped up in this house, are you? What about your long drives round the town, on the pretext of shopping and banking and what not?"

SHORT STORY VASANTHI

Prison

"There isn't anyone else to do all that, is there?"

"And then your tennis in the mornings..."

"Yes, I do play tennis. So what? You get up at 10 in the morning. But I am up at 5. What am I to do all that while? If I don't stay active, it'll be my turn next to come down with an imaginary heart attack."

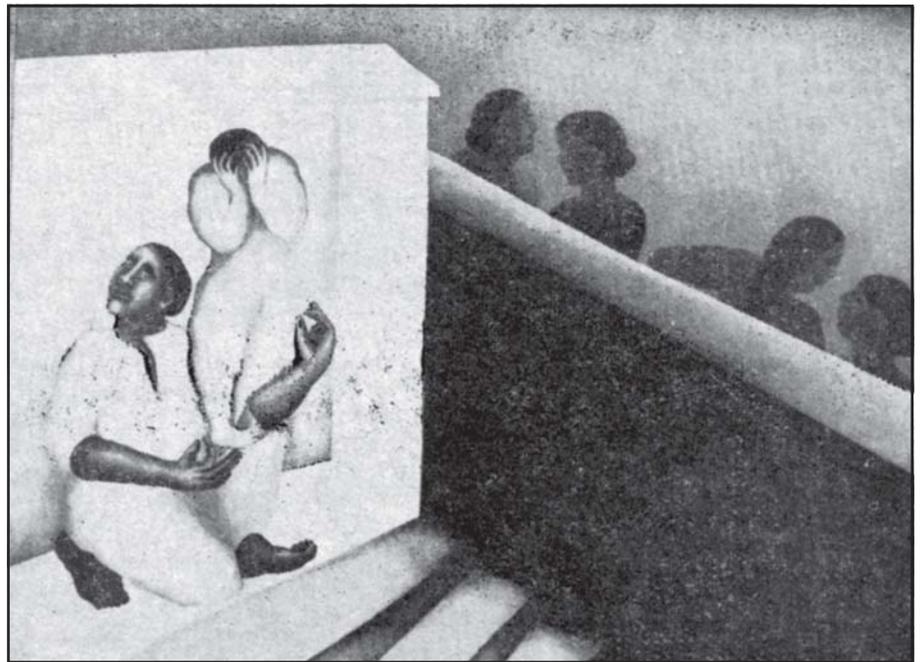
Livid with rage, Kalyanaraman yelled at her: "So you think I faked that heart attack, do you? Go where you like! I may

get another heart attack. And die without a soul to give me a sip of water. But what do you care?"

As she went in and washed the glasses in warm water, he continued: "I'm sure that's how I'm going to die."

The words that rose to her lips were: "Do as you please." But she managed not to utter the words. He had cried wolf too often. Her anger was evident in the way she wiped the glasses.

He knew this was her weak point and



-The Juggler by Arpana Caur

he exploited it: "What if I get this chest pain while you're away? What if I die then?" This had been his weapon and her shackles.

Nothing like that would happen to him. No, he was quite healthy. After all, he had been using the same threat for 15 years, and he was still alive and kicking. But *she* might become a mental wreck, quite soon...

As she began to wash a few more dishes, she thought of what might happen if she did go mad: "Will he send me to an asylum? But then, who will be left to look after him?"

"I know you are tired of me", Kalyanaraman's voice drawled on. "Not that you ever really liked me! You always used to mock at my English and make fun of my job. Why do you think I came to America? Just to mock you back! This rotten heart attack stopped me midway. Otherwise, by now, I would be good for 50,000 dollars a year! Just convert that into rupees!"

She did not make any effort to reply. As she went about watering her indoor plants, his voice followed her: "Bless these Americans! I don't work any more, but they give me a comfortable pension. You don't have to work either... Well, why don't you say something? Here I am, explaining everything to you, but you seem to think it's all gibberish."

"It is", she snapped. "It's never been a question of money and you know that, I feel the need to go out and work, because I'm suffocated here, listening to your groans day in and day out. I want something that will take my mind off the state of your health and the fact of my barrenness. To forget my loneliness in this foreign country. Not an inch of its land can ever really be my own. Not a patch of shade anywhere for me to sit and cry my heart out. Deny me the chance to talk and laugh with others, I'll soon begin to talk and laugh to myself. I may lose my mind."

"Not likely!" said Kalyanaraman, contemptuously. "Read something. Spend some time in prayer and in repeating *japas*. You are old enough for that. Look at me..."

"Your *puja* and you! You sit there, a whole hour in prayer but really watching me, figuring out what I'm doing, guessing whom I'm talking to on the phone. And then of course one can eat, sleep and watch TV! What a lifeless life! I can't stand it. I never could. And I don't think I can change myself at this age..."

"I know, you are tired of me." Not just tired. Disgusted. Fed up. That was how she would have liked to put it, Kalyanaraman went on: "You ought to have felt it yourself—that this ailing man in a foreign country, all alone, with no one else within call—this man is your husband, and you are the only person he has for company. If you had any love left for me, you'd have thought of all this. But all you want is to chat with other men. That's why you want to get out, I know!"

With pounding heart and flushed face, she came and stood, facing him. She would have loved to smash that stupid face of his with the watering can. She compelled her hands to plonk it down on the floor. "Yes. That's what I am going out for. And supposing I tell you it's not just for a chat, what will you do?"

After a moment's shock, he replied: "I know what a bitch you are. And I have been watching you ever since I got this heart condition."

His obscene imagination would stop at nothing. The charge was ridiculous, but he deserved to stew in his own anger. What had made her stick to him for 30 years, listening to the same accusations again and again? And what had made her live like a nun for the last 15 years? The tradition of Indian womanhood? Of the *Bharatiya Nari*? She felt inclined to laugh.

Why did she weaken every time this hypochondriac brought up the question of his fatal illness? Was that too part of the same tradition? He was at it again now: "I won't last long. Who knows, it may even be a matter of hours. And then you'll be free to live as you please..."

She exploded. "Stop it! How many years have you been repeating this? There's absolutely nothing wrong with

you. It's just that you need a doctor's certificate to get your pension, so you keep on inventing something every month. Plenty of people suffer mild heart attacks, and continue to lead an active life, don't they?"

She picked up the watering can, left it on its rack, took the keys of the car and announced: "I am going out!"

"Where?"

"To get milk and yoghurt."

"But you brought some the other day."

"That was four days ago."

"How long will it take?"

"15 minutes." To herself, she added: "Nothing will happen to you in 15 minutes!"

She started the car, negotiated a curve beautifully, and came out on to a long stretch of road. But her heart continued to pound hard. She felt her temples throb. Her palms were drenched with sweat. She reduced the heat inside the car.

The trees stood beautiful, in their red and gold autumn foliage, unmindful of the approaching fall, proud in their brief glory. The outside world appeared so complacent in its unconcern. American children, fair and plump, were roaming about in the park. She felt a brief, wild impulse to stop the car, get out, and play with them, forgetting her house and her husband. Tears of weakness welled up in her eyes.

Making an effort to control her thoughts, she parked the car before the store. Parcel laden American wives were hurrying to their cars. Would any of these women carry a 30 years' burden tied around their necks, she wondered.

This was no ordinary burden. It could not be shaken off. This incubus had become fused with her body, her senses, her consciousness. There was no prospect of release from those vicious words and fierce looks, because there was no one else to turn to. It had always been she for him and he for her through these 30 years of bondage.

"What if I die?"

Those words of his had always had the power to terrorise her, touching subconscious depths in her.

She bought cartons of milk and yoghurt, took them back to the car, and drove off. But, a few yards from the store, the car came to a halt, with a loud crunch. After a few futile attempts to start it, she got out and ran, cursing her luck, to the nearest garage and came back with a gum chewing mechanic, in his car. The axle had broken, he said. He gave her car the once over and, evidently disapproving of it, asked why she hadn't yet thrown it on the garbage dump. That made her laugh. "Actually, it's my husband and I who should be in the bin by now!"

He warned her it was going to take him quite a while to set the car right. He got to work and she stood by, gazing at the street scene before her. Suddenly, she remembered that she had been away from home for nearly 45 minutes. Kalyanaraman must be getting furious! She went to the telephone booth nearby and dialled her home number. The phone went on ringing. He must be in the bathroom, she thought, and put the receiver down.

After 15 minutes, she dialled the number again. Again, there was no answer. Now, she went on dialling again and again, in a frenzy of apprehension. Yet, no one lifted the phone.

She felt as if a sudden rush of blood was heating up the inside of her skull. God! Something had happened to him! The wolf had come at last.

"What if I get this chest pain while you're away? What if I die?"

Those words kept ringing in her ears, pursuing her. But the man from the garage was still at his job. She decided that she could not wait any longer, and said: "Please, let me go home in your car. I can't leave my husband alone much longer. He's not well. Could you please bring my car round to my place?"

"Oh, sure", he said and handed her the keys. She jumped into his car and drove off at a furious speed.

"Oh, what have I done to that sick

man? How mean of me to have fought with him like that. The fight must have brought on this attack. God, let him be all right! I won't ever wish for anything else. Just let him be all right! Lord Venkatchalapati! I'll go to your temple at Pittsburgh!"

At last, she was home. As she got out of the car and started climbing the steps in a hurry, she had a curious feeling that she had never found climbing those steps so difficult as today. When she opened the front door and stormed in, exhausted and panicky, she found Kalyanaraman watching TV, complacent as ever.

A roaring avalanche burst within her. Again, she felt that flood rushing to her head.

"The phone did ring, then, didn't it?" she managed to ask.

"Yes. Not just once. Ten times, at least."

She marched up to him, took hold of his shoulders and shook him wildly.

"Then why didn't you answer?"

You knew it was me! Who else ever cares to ring us up?"

"Of course, I knew it was you. And I didn't answer, on purpose."

"To give me a fright? Was that the idea? Oh, the cruelty of it, the meanness of it!" she cried.

The words would burst out, breaking the bars of 30 years. There was more to say, a lot more. But she felt choked, suffocated, as if that burden hanging round her neck was now pressing her heart down, down, down...she felt her hands go limp on his shoulders. Her eyes opened wide with shock, amazement, as she realised she was collapsing, leaning on him, sliding down.

The mechanic burst in, with a "Hey, what's happened to her?"

"I don't know", said Kalyanaraman, fixing him with a vacant, glassy stare.

The American took hold of her, laid her on the floor and felt her pulse. "Funny", he said. "The poor woman was so panicky because someone had fallen sick, she said. Who's sick here?" Kalyanaraman gaped at him again, glassy eyed.

*(Translated from Tamil by
Gomathi Narayanan)*

A Cow And Bull Story

ONCE upon a time, a horned bull married a hornless cow. He thought he would be in no danger from her. He would have his own way in everything.

He constantly frightened and threatened her by showing her his horns. But he had made a mistake. The cow was not in fact a hornless cow but a calf.

The poor calf was very submissive. But how she wished that she too had horns to show to the bull. She did not know that she too could grow horns. She had never looked at herself with sufficient attention.

One day, when she looked at her reflection in the water, she jumped with amazement and with joy. Two small horns were sprouting on her head. Now, she began to wait for them to grow.

So far, she had been helpless, tied to a

peg. She did not have the courage to break the peg and run away. Nor did she want to leave behind her two small calves, also tied to the peg.

As her horns grew, her courage too expanded. Now she understood her identity. She realised that she too had become a cow with two horns.

The bull was upset to see her growing horns and began to repent of his error. He realised that there is no such creature as a hornless cow. And when the cow began to show him her horns, what could the poor fellow do? He arrived at a compromise with her.

The cow was very happy and began to explain this to other cows. Yes, I was that cow!

—Leena, Bombay
(Translated from Hindi)