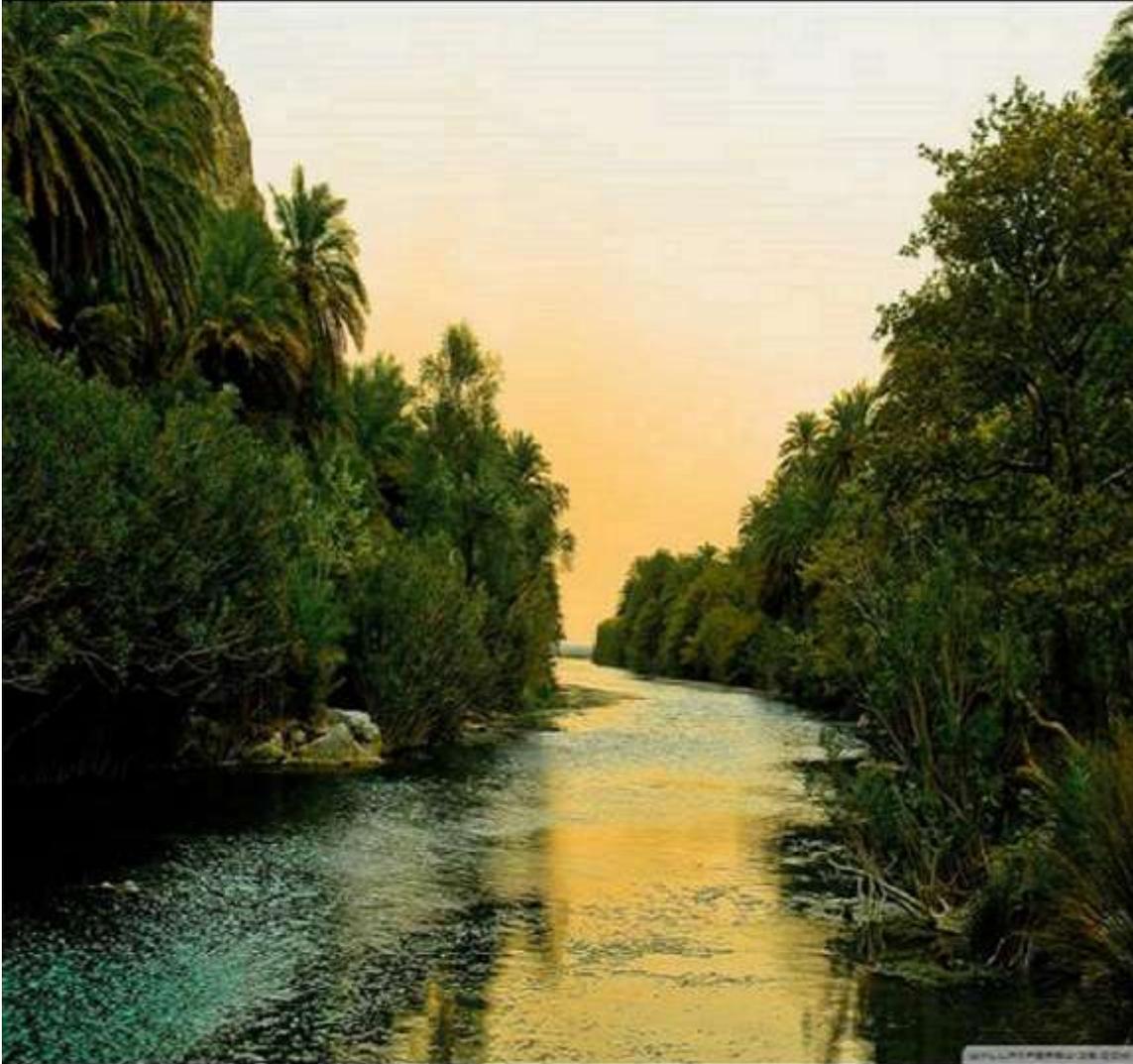


Soul of Music
and other music stories from
South India



Anant Acharya

Soul of Music and
other music stories from South India

By Anant Acharya

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About the Collection

Conservative Chennai, South India's cultural capital is a crucible for prosperity, and tradition at crossroads. An image of Madras conjures up mathematicians and musicians, curd-rice eaters and coconut-oil users, mustachioed men and Mylapore maamis.

Set amidst its exclusive Carnatic community known for its fondness for cricket, classical/Carnatic music and determinedly staid ways, Soul of Music comprises modern music stories that meander through friction between generations and perceived hierarchy of professions. Written in the literary fiction genre, the motley group of stories are a fictitious collection of music tales. Soul of Music is a debut collection of ten short stories set in the relaxed South Indian atmosphere. Here.....

an improvised life—mirroring elements of music and writing—exposes the secret of a music connoisseur (Skewed Fantasia);

an editor with a multi-disciplinary background manipulates a junior colleague (The Music Book);

a retired stock broker falls prey to a musician father's terrible doing (Broken Melody);

musicians abandon a concert hall due to a terrible secret underlying its prosperity (Far from the maddening Imedaka);

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a music professor makes a mistake after successful scheming (The Song, Sang);

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Anant Acharya

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Skewed Fantasia

The red countdown timer started at the traffic junction when Venkat mocked the driver for mixing up the roads leading to his favorite betel-nut shop. By the time the green light flashed, he had yielded to the driver who pointed out recent changes on roads: blocks (especially at peak hours) and modifications to one-ways and back—all with clockwork precision by the city traffic police that displayed exceptional clarity and efficient execution when it came to creating chaos. As he clicked open the front door, Chitra noticed Venkat's nervous face in the side view mirror. In an instant, he popped out of the slender white Ford and banged the door shut. The driver steered it slowly across the road to the dusty side and waited.

Venkat, Priya and their daughter Maya, had set out to attend a Carnatic music concert at the Music Academy—their first one. In the cool, misty Friday evening in December that was much consolation to many Tamil hearts scorched down by the ten-month heat, strong jasmine fragrance filled the Chennai roads—a rich and heady aroma that wafted upwards from the garlands: flower girls sold, women wore, and roadside deities donned. Getting fainter as it spread through the vegetarian eateries, mingling with the smells of hot *Idlis* and *Sambar*, the smells spread down the road, blending with the stink rising from the dirty Buckingham canal (sole supplier of mosquitoes to all parts of Chennai). Normally Chitra didn't attend music concerts, but Chandru had promised his friend Venkat earlier that week that his wife would accompany them.

When Chitra saw the Venkat family entering her house, it seemed funny to see the Venkat couple complementing each other on their skin color; Venkat's dark brown skin would nearly be invisible in the pitch night; Priya's fair skin was peachy with a tint of pink porcelain. They had south Indian looks: round faces with no hint of cheekbones, full lips and swollen cheeks. When Priya greeted her in heavily accented English and held out her hand, Chitra grabbed it and shook vigorously. Being unfamiliar with foreigners or Non-Resident Indians (NRI), or even those snobbish Indians who flaunted their faltering English, she associated Priya with the only English-speaking girl she knew—a sweet Anglo-Indian hostel mate who taught her how to remove a bra without having to remove her blouse/top, among other things.

For his part, Venkat stretched his lips and shrugged, saying, “The concert is Priya’s idea; she has lately taken into ‘instilling-culture-into-kid’ kind of stuff.” Chitra understood but simply nodded her head.

At the noisy roadside where they were waiting, Priya suddenly heard gurgling sounds and looked in the direction of a rusted loudspeaker blare into a rhythmic song. She stepped out into the hardened mud and closed the door. A tall woman with graying hair, she looked, in Chitra’s view, more like a grandmother to Maya—but, a smooth-skinned, nimble and active grandmother. She dressed in a plain, cream-colored Salwar Kameez with no designs or embroidery and wore leather trekking sandals. A sleek MP3 recorder hung around her neck; which was the only gadget jostling for space with other accoutrements: a platinum chain with a decorative “V” symbol locket and gold *Thaali*, the wedding chain that showed itself out in parts and complemented her sandal-colored shawl. Maya stepped out and stood beside her mother, watching her tilt the recorder, check the sound levels and press the record button.

“Mom, do you want to record this ear-shattering noise for your home studio?” she asked with a scowling face.

“Don’t judge any sound as good or bad. They are just waves: short, long, narrow and wide frequencies,” she replied, turning to straighten Maya’s hair. Farther away, Venkat blew smoke rings into the air; Priya’s face fell into a frown.

As they stood there, Maya watched a bunch of giggling girls in school uniforms cross the road; they waved at her. Chitra emerged from the car waving at the girls.

“Cute girls,” Priya remarked.

“My music students...these girls.” Chitra said, smiling and waving continued in her broken, halting English, laden with heavy Tamil accent, “Very intelligent.” A sudden glow rose on Chitra’s face.

“How many years you are there in America?” Chitra asked when Priya stepped back into the car after settling Maya into the seat.

“Well, Venkat and I went to the US for studies and stayed put in New York for the last eighteen years,” Priya said.

In her mid-thirties, Chitra still wore her long hair as braids with a middle parting, not knotted into a traditional bun (as her mother-in-law would have preferred), or a ponytail (daughter's preference). Its reddish brown tint and the henna-dyed strands of hair stood in stark contrast to her oily dark brown face. She dressed in an old violet-colored silk saree that had crimson red borders with gold embroidered designs. When Chitra waved at the giggling girls, Priya heard the clunking of her thick gold bangles. It reminded her of her childhood times when her mother used to dress up like Chitra.

“Which is your native?” Chitra asked, in the way Chennaites asked, feeling elated about using the complicated word, 'native'.

“Venkat was from Mumbai. But his parents shifted to their native village near Tirunelveli after retirement, and I belong to Chennai. We come to India once every two years to visit our parents.”

Chitra turned to see Venkat exchanging a few words with a grinning, dark-skinned woman holding a coconut stick broom. Through the back glass, she observed him. Dressed in NYC tee shirt and jeans, Venkat carried a leather waist pouch. Though the dark purple-colored tee shirt merged with his complexion, the Wranglers Jeans highlighted his tall and athletic body. His handsome features struck out in spite of a dark skin. A pair of sleek glasses that made him look like an intellect also hid his thick, bushy eyebrows. His fingers were pointed and smooth and looked artistic. Like Priya, he too had many grey hairs that he did not care to dye.

Venkat threw the left-over butt down, stubbed it out with his foot and reached the car. “Do you charge for waiting also?” He asked, settling into the front seat. As he closed the door, a few dirty hands thrust into the rear window.

“Hey, what is all this? Roll up the windows.” Venkat barked, “Go.” He rushed the driver. The car sped.

“These beggars!” Chitra responded, twisting her face with a sudden unease, as if they were a blotch on the culture she was trying to show off.

“But, you never told me about the waiting charges,” Venkat demanded when the car waited at the next junction. The driver frowned but did not reply.

When Venkat persisted, he said, annoyed, “But, sir, when you booked, we offered the cheap Indica, as well. After going through the rate card meticulously for two days, you booked the

higher priced Ford.” Venkat did not retort. In the side view mirror, Chitra noticed his face looking stern and dour.

“Dad, can I come and sit in the front seat with you?” Maya asked.

In the next instant, Venkat beamed, “Come here, my baby doll.”

He turned back, stretched his arms and looked adoringly at her. Chitra wondered whether her daughter would call Chandru, a casual “Dad”. There was no similar word in Tamil. The generic word, “Appa” in Tamil would translate as “Father”, and not a casual “Daddy”, or “Dad”. Venkat hugged Maya, held her close to his face and kissed her. It was a quick retaliation, “Dad, you smell of cigarettes!” As quickly as he grabbed her, Venkat hurled her down into the place between Priya and Chitra—Priya’s face twisted into an ugly grimace. She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of drones she had recorded last week. *Wait till Chitra leaves.*

Moving on newly-laid smooth roads, the car twisted, turned and wound its way through crammed roads, halting briefly at traffic signals and racing with hyperactive two-wheeler riders who’d accelerate before the green signal flashed. When she took out a bar of chocolate to console Maya, Chitra noted that she had her father’s handsome features and mother’s fair complexion.

“When will we reach?” Venkat asked the driver.

“In an hour’s time.”

“You never told us that you were working.” Priya turned to Chitra with a smile to distract and lighten up the atmosphere.

“Not job. Just voluntary work. Teaching music at orphan school. Once a week.”

“Sounds interesting.” Venkat’s eyes lit up. “What do you teach?”

“Basic melody and rhythm. Seven notes: *Sa Ri Ga Ma Pa Da Ni*. Different Talams, rhythm patterns, etc.” Venkat felt puzzled and shrugged off.

“I heard that the aspect that sets Carnatic music apart from other music is the concept of improvisation. Is that true?” Priya asked, turning again to Chitra.

“What is improvisation?” Maya interrupted.

“It means to do something spontaneously like creating or reacting to an environment or inner feelings; it is an art.” Priya replied.

“So, nobody tells you to do things – you are free to do what you want?” Maya asked.

Priya was silent. Reacting to Priya’s earlier question, Chitra said, “Yes, yes; three types: Alapana, Niraval and Swaras. Alapana – fully free; Niraval – improvise under rhythm, so strict; Swaras – free and strict.”

“Interesting. Completely free, fully constrained and in-between.” Priya summed up looking at Maya.

Venkat turned with sudden interest. “What is this ‘fully free’ improvisation?”

“Oh, Alapana? Yes, freely improvise. But has ascending structure. Starts with a catchy raga phrase, improvise based on important notes, build parallel and contrasting phrases, move to upper registers, climax with fast phrases. Important points: weave phrases tight, smooth flow and quality start and end. Test is audience should not be bored.”

“That doesn’t sound like complete freedom.” Venkat spoke in a sarcastic tone followed by a penetrating look.

Chitra looked into his eyes for the first time; it shone with an angry brilliance. She replied, “Freedom doesn’t mean doing things anyway you like. However freely you do things, natural laws bring you back to the center. When you are improvising to audience, they should relate and find some meaning.”

There was a stunning silence. “Sensible and... profound.” Venkat spoke with a rich tone that seemed to spring from the depth of his heart.

After a pause, “It is like writing a story,” he reflected in a quieter tone. “A catchy start; weaving incidents, thoughts and emotions; developing characters through actions and dialogue; building to a crisis and finishing with a resolution.”

Chitra asked, “You are a writer?”

“I have just started attending writing classes and would want to be a writer someday after I am done with managing mutual funds for my investment banker.” Venkat replied with a sudden air of confidence. He turned and looked into her eyes: large, beautiful but lively and insecure.

Nobody had praised her for her sensibility. All of a sudden she felt all those feelings she’d felt as an infatuated teenager.

They reached the Music Academy. “Wow!” Maya shrieked, fascinated by men and women in glittering silks moving everywhere like a scattered army of ants: car park, corridors and mini-

halls; a few spilled outside the gate too. Inside the corridor, Maya's wide eyes darted over the framed black and white photos of famous musicians lined over the long walls. Counter boys handed out tickets and colorful stalls sold music CDs. Her eyes finally rested on yellow colored *Masala Bondas*, fried gram flour batter with potato fillings, sold along with other mouth-watering snacks at the canteen. But, by then, her parents had already entered the hall, Chitra in tow. She rushed to their side and found her seat.

Music stalwarts, scholars and sponsoring corporate honchos filled up the first few rows. There was stiff competition among musicians and music lovers to be seen in the first row. For corporate patrons, it was a matter of prestige, and for musicians, it was an evidence of their fame. Priya was amused to find a few men wearing bright colored LA/NYC tee shirts paired with white Dhotis. In the adjacent row, were a few people seated with notebooks and pencils speculating over what songs the musician would sing that day. Chitra heard her name being called from behind her. She waved at the group of giggling girls on the balcony who shrieked and waved excitedly. Chitra beamed with pride. Sitting next to the exit, she saw the door getting closed.

Curtains rose. Flanked by two drones, Lalitha Swaminathan, a top vocalist sat in a bedazzling peacock-blue-colored silk saree. She was forty-something. Her blouse sleeves like the ones young and unmarried women wore were short revealing bulging arms underneath. She looked over to the drummer who was tapping the head of his drum, *Mridangam*, with a smooth stone; leaning over to listen sharply and tap again till its sound aligned with the basic tone strummed on the drone. Satisfied with the tuning, he nodded his head; the lady musician sat upright and started with a harmonious hum.

“The first song is an invocation to Lord Ganesha, a prayer to remove any obstacle that may prevail in the performance. It is set to the raga, melodic mode, called Nattai.” Chitra whispered to Priya, speaking with a mix of Tamil and English words. Priya translated to Maya, who in turn repeated it to Venkat who in turn gave a nod.

“You must be attending an awful lot of concerts living here in Chennai, wouldn't you?” Priya asked, clicking off her recording device. An old lady turned back, noticed Chitra and waved at her. Chitra pressed her hands together in greeting.

“How do you know her?” asked Venkat looking at Chitra.

“She knows my father, a violin player. She asked me if I would like to teach at that orphan school.”

Ruminating on her work, Chitra found her thoughts wandering on the similarities in music and writing and life, in general. After all, stories reflected life in so many ways. She pondered at her own life where she was slated to be the next M.S. (short for M. S. Subbalakshmi whose claim to fame was singing at the United Nations concert) and how she had ended up teaching and that too, voluntary work that was dull and non-motivating.

Chitra had to come to terms with her incapability at networking. She hardly had any friends. From her childhood, the only aim in her life was to be a globe-trotting Carnatic singer. Her father had devoted many precious morning hours to teaching her, the nuances of ragas and rhythmic patterns. Every time she won music competitions, she dreamt of performing to an expert audience in reputed concert halls. She would accompany her father to concerts and gradually got to move with many famous musicians. Now, she was hardly able to identify ragas and most raga names skipped her mind.

She took up teaching at the orphanage after her daughter was born. It was not marriage or her daughter that stopped her from actively pursuing her musical career; it was her father's death. Their house that brimmed with musicians wore a desolate look. A part of her began to fade away, and that part was her music. The musicians, who greeted and appreciated her music when her father was alive, did not bother to support her after he died. On her mother's insistence, she gave up pursuing concert opportunities and got married. At that time, the only consolation was that she got married into a music family. It renewed her belief in life to think that she got a whole music family in return for her father. She looked forward to many days of musical interactions and possible concert opportunities. Her husband worked with a stock broking firm. It suited her well that he was a salaried professional and musically oriented. He tried to support her in the initial days. A friend of his asked him if his wife would be willing to sing in a festival series. He came home that evening and announced it with joy to his family. But, before she could fix the

concert date, her in-laws managed to replace her concert with their daughter's. By the time, she discovered, she had also become pregnant and so, could not complain.

Instead of musical interactions, her in-laws were more interested in comparisons. They would pit her against their daughter. When her music took a backseat, they reveled in making critical comments about her cooking abilities. "My son has become so thin now. How healthy and fat he was," would be their favorite punch line. In the end, she dished out more recipes than ragas.

Chandru showed some romantic interest in her till their daughter was born. After that, if he ever spoke to her, it would only be about market volatility, margin short-falls and impending recession. For her part, she was between smelly napkins and feeding bottles. Knowing fully well that she could not afford music, she kept her daughter out of it. Her in-laws found it convenient not to intervene in this decision. After a decade, just when her music memory began fading away, the old lady musician called up and offered this opportunity. Until now it had remained just an opportunity. She could not use it as a stepping stone to further her musical career.

Chandru gave up trying to support her in music.

As the sound of clapping rose, Chitra felt mildly curious about the word, 'Profound'. Venkat's sudden interest in music evoked a silent infatuation. The next two hours passed with Chitra explaining the meaning of the songs, the Ragas they were set to, the composers who wrote them, and improvisation, the musician chose to embellish the songs with. Priya listened with awe. At the end of every song, Venkat would exclaim, "Awesome!" the way Americans appreciated everything. She felt the infatuation grow whenever he looked into her eyes.

"Chitra, would you be interested in teaching Maya? Do you have a Skype id?" Venkat asked.

Priya looked on.

"Yes, yes."

"Can you please write it down?" Priya was searching for a piece of paper in her tiny hand bag, while Venkat handed it to her. It was an old paper with an address written on one side of it.

Chitra wrote her id making clear that she spelt all the alphabets properly in the lowercase and added the numbers right. She drew a line in the middle of the slant in the number 7 so that it would not be misconstrued as 1. She inserted the paper into a heavy, old and worn-out book

titled, “Beginners’ Exercises in Carnatic Music,” and handed it to Maya. “I started my music with this book; let it bring you all the luck in the world,” she said with a broad smile.

After the magnum opus, the musician sang a slow composition called *Padam*. The *Padam* dealt with the theme of separation from God and subsequent yearning. As the slow-moving song rambled on, Chitra felt the audience sway to the melody. She too felt a mild and pleasant change. The musician sang, “It has been a long time since we met. Do you ever think of me?” Chitra’s mind raced. By that time when she started her online music session with Maya in January, she would have read a few English stories. Amidst her teaching sessions, she could compare the ragas and stories theoretically. Maya would pass it on to Venkat who may take part in further sessions where she would narrate the structure of other improvisational types in music. For her part, she could take up a library membership, read English books and speak and compare better. At some point, she would slowly reveal that her musical career was not taking wings despite being married into a music family. He may recommend her name to some concert organizer in US.

She adjusted her sagging blouse and tightened the top end of her saree. When the climax line of the *Padam*, “Do you love me?” came on, her imagination soared. Maybe this was the start of glowing years ahead. She would go on an American concert tour, meet him there, share her music knowledge... and maybe her bed.

Priya and Maya went to the canteen. Venkat refused to go. Chitra did not eat outside. The next song began. “Which raga is this?” Chitra was surprised to hear a male voice. She turned to see Venkat bending forward in his seat to catch her eye.

“Behag.” Chitra raised her voice to let it travel through the two empty seats beside her.

“Sounds dreamy and tender.” He murmured.

Venkat looked at her and said, “Great.” Chitra turned to the other side with a blush. It seemed a vague but favorable response. She felt a sudden urge to rush towards Venkat and allow herself to be embraced by his strong arms. But, when she turned, Venkat was already waving at Priya.

The musician climaxed a roaring finale to the last song in *Madhyamavathi* raga, and the audience thundered with claps that lasted more than ten minutes. Venkat checked his watch - it was half past nine. "Shall we go backstage and congratulate the musicians?" Priya asked.

"Trust me, Priya; you don't really want to go backstage. That place will be swarming with a huge crowd. You would find it difficult to wade your way through." Venkat dissuaded.

"Let me go." Priya retorted and dragged Maya with her. Chitra stood up and gestured to the girls on the balcony, asking how the concert was. They gestured back with a thumbs-up.

"I will go with Priya." Chitra looked at Venkat tentatively.

"No. Please wait here." Venkat said. He got up and slipped in beside Chitra. They watched Priya and Maya disappear on to the steps leading to the backstage.

"Can I relate a story I wrote?" Venkat asked.

"Yes, yes."

"It is about an Indian couple living in the US. They fall in love while doing masters with the same university. They marry with the consent of both sides of parents. It is a happy marriage. The couple spends a lot of time traveling to Europe on backpacks and trekking. They don't plan on having kids for a long time. But, then when they decide to have, the lady is not able to get pregnant. She feels so guilty that she even gets ready to rent a womb.

Once it so happens that the protagonist comes to India alone on a family emergency and stays at his parents' bungalow in a village. He offers foreign chocolates to an old and loyal maid who had been with them all their lives. Her daughter has just attained puberty, and she touches his feet for blessings. He feels an instant shock that he has not felt for a long time. One morning when he sees the girl mopping the house, he is not able to contain his lusty feelings. Perhaps, his wife's repeated words of womb-renting hinting a silent permission acted on his mind. His parents had gone to the nearby town to attend a wedding. He brings her into his room, and they have it. The girl enjoys it. It gives him a deep sense of relief and exhilaration. A year later, his mother casually mentions that the maid's daughter has given birth to a girl child, in one of her emails. He feels excited and rushes to the college where his wife is teaching. She is not there. A research assistant tells him that she had suddenly swooned that morning, and they took her to a nearby hospital. When he arrives there, the lady doctor tells him that his wife is pregnant and that he is

going to be a father. Suddenly all the happiness he had reserved for that day vanishes. His wife leaves her job to care of the kid.”

“When he wanted a baby, he never had it. Now, when he gives up, he gets two babies and a conflict. He does not know what to do.”

Whenever they visit India, Venkat continued, he never goes to his village. Instead, he arranges to meet his parents in Chennai. In a recent turn of events, he learns that the baby girl’s mother has died.

“Are you shocked?” Venkat asked.

“I don’t know.” Chitra was bemused.

“So now, music-lady, can you tell me how to resolve the climax?” He asked.

“I am not good at stories.” She sounded tentative and looked sheepish.

“I am asking you because you understand how to create; how to imagine; and how to improvise within natural laws. You may have an idea of the center of the conflict and provide a solution.”

Chitra felt a mild disgust. She groaned wondering how one could dissect a misdeed with dry intellect. “He should not keep secrets from his wife. He should tell about that daughter and should take her to America with him.” She spat out her words.

Venkat took a deep breath and said, “*Maya has a half-sister.*”

After a stunning silence, like the pregnant pause in a symphony that is followed by a more provocative finale, she felt like running away. The air was suffocating. How she longed for some water! She made a desperate search but spotting Venkat’s water bottle gave up, closed her eyes and kept mum.

“Do you want some water?” Venkat asked, lifting the water bottle he had kept on the side of his chair. “No, no.” She gestured violently with both her hands as if he were offering poison.

He continued, “My other daughter is at an orphanage in Chennai. Last week, I went there, met her for the first time and told her that I was her father. She is as pretty as her mother was.” He fell into a reverie. Then, suddenly finding that Chitra was quiet, he asked her, “Do you think I am wrong? You didn’t tell me your opinion.”

Chitra felt lost. “No, no. I don’t know.” Venkat gave a piercing stare, but her head was bowed down.

In an instant, he sprang up with the air of a person who had made up his mind. The group of giggling girls came rushing to greet Chitra. A little girl, who had distinct thick eyebrows and looked Maya’s age, elbowed herself to the front and asked Chitra in Tamil, “Madam, why don’t you come every day and teach? We miss you.”

Priya and Maya appeared dejected near the door. “Venkat, you are right. I wish I had listened to you.”

When the little girl looked at the direction of Priya and noticed the tall guy in a tee-shirt, she was amazed and yelled, “*Appa!*”

A puzzled Priya asked, “What is this?”

Venkat cowered down. “Let me explain.” He said, trying hard to put on a masked calmness. He took Priya to the corridor. Maya placed the book containing the paper with Chitra’s id on an empty seat. Priya kept turning and looking at the little girl.

Chitra decided to leave; it was best for the family that she left them alone. When Chitra walked towards the gate, a smiling Chandru greeted her at the car park. She smiled at him wholeheartedly. Both of them sat in the car, and Chandru turned on the ignition.

“Has Venkat left?” Chandru inquired.

“No.”

“Let me say hello to him.”

“No, no.”

“Why?”

“I will tell you later. Let us leave now. It is raining.”

He turned the steering and from her seat, Chitra watched the faraway corridor where Venkat was gesturing madly in front of a sobbing Priya. Maya stood near Priya; her hands did not hold the book. It suddenly began to drizzle, and within minutes, heavy droplets fell. Chitra inhaled the

fresh air as the rare December rain began to lash heavily and blotted out the Venkat couple. She snuggled towards Chandru and lay on his firm arms cozily.



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