

5 The hermit invariably shuddered when he looked out of his window. The house
across the street was occupied by a shameless woman. Late in the evening, men kept
coming and knocking on her door—afternoons, too, if there was a festival or holiday.
Sometimes they lounged on the porch of her house, smoking, chewing tobacco, and
spitting into the gutter—committing all the sins of the world, according to the hermit
10 who was striving to pursue a life of austerity, forswearing family, possessions, and all
the comforts of life. He found this single-room tenement with a couple of coconut
trees and a well at the backyard adequate, and the narrow street swarmed with
children: sometimes he called in the children, seated them around, and taught them
simple moral lessons and sacred verse. On the walls he had nailed a few pictures of
15 gods cut out of old calendars, and made the children prostrate themselves in front of
them before sending them away with a piece of sugar candy each.

His daily life followed an unvarying pattern. Birdlike, he retired at dusk, lying on the
bare floor with a wooden block under his head for a pillow. He woke up at four, ahead
of the rooster at the street corner, bathed at the well, and sat down on a piece of
20 deerskin to meditate. Later he lit the charcoal stove and baked a few chapathis for
breakfast and lunch and cooked certain restricted vegetables and greens, avoiding
potato, onion, okra, and such as might stimulate the baser impulses.

Even in the deepest state of meditation, he could not help hearing the creaking of the
door across the street when a client left after a night of debauchery. He rigorously
suppressed all cravings of the palate, and punished his body in a dozen ways. If you
25 asked him why, he would have been at a loss to explain.

He was the antithesis of the athlete who flexed his muscles and watched his
expanding chest before a mirror. Our hermit, on the contrary, kept a minute check of
his emaciation and felt a peculiar thrill out of such an achievement. He was only
following without questioning his ancient guru's instructions, and hoped thus to
30 attain spiritual liberation.

One afternoon, opening the window to sweep the dust on the sill, he noticed her
standing on her doorstep, watching the street.

His temples throbbed with the rush of blood. He studied her person—chiseled
features, but sunk in fatty folds. She possessed, however, a seductive outline; her
35 forearms were cushion-like and perhaps the feel of those encircling arms attracted

men. His gaze, once it had begun to hover about her body, would not return to its anchor—which should normally be the tip of one’s nose, as enjoined by his guru and the yoga shastras.

5 Her hips were large, thighs stout like banana stalks, on the whole a mattress-like creature on which a patron could loll all night without a scrap of covering—“Awful monster! Personification of evil.” He felt suddenly angry. Why on earth should that creature stand there and ruin his tapas: all the merit he had so laboriously acquired was draining away like water through a sieve. Difficult to say whether it was those monstrous arms and breasts or thighs which tempted and ruined men . . . He hissed
10 under his breath, “Get in, you devil, don’t stand there!” She abruptly turned round and went in, shutting the door behind her. He felt triumphant, although his command and her compliance were coincidental. He bolted the window tight and retreated to the farthest corner of the room, settled down on the deerskin, and kept repeating, “Om, Om, Rama, Jayarama”: the sound “Rama” had a potency all its
15 own—and was reputed to check wandering thoughts and distractions. He had a profound knowledge of mantras and their efficacy. “Sri Rama . . . ,” he repeated, but it was like a dilute and weak medicine for high fever. It didn’t work. “Sri Rama, Jayarama . . . ,” he repeated with a desperate fervor, but the effect lasted not even a second. Unnoticed, his thoughts strayed, questioning: Who was that fellow in a check
20 shirt and silk upper cloth over his shoulder descending the steps last evening when I went out to the market? Seen him somewhere . . . where? when? ... ah, he was the big tailor on Market Road . . . with fashionable men and women clustering round him! Master-cutter who was a member of two or three clubs . . . Hobnobbed with officers and businessmen—and this was how he spent his evening, lounging on the human
25 mattress! And yet fashionable persons allowed him to touch them with his measuring tape! Contamination, nothing but contamination; sinful life. He cried out in the lonely room, “Rama! Rama!” as if hailing someone hard of hearing. Presently he realized it was a futile exercise. Rama was a perfect incarnation, of course, but he was mild and gentle until provoked beyond limit, when he would storm and annihilate the
30 evildoer without a trace, even if he was a monster like Ravana. Normally, however, he had forbearance, hence the repetition of his name only resulted in calmness and peace, but the present occasion demanded stern measures. God Siva’s mantra should help. Did he not open his Third Eye and reduce the God of Love to ashes, when the latter slyly aimed his arrow at him while he was meditating? Our hermit pictured the
35 god of matted locks and fiery eyes and recited aloud: “Om Namasivaya,” that lonely hall resounding with his hoarse voice. His rambling, unwholesome thoughts were halted for a while, but presently regained their vigor and raced after the woman. She opened her door at least six times on an evening. Did she sleep with them all together at the same time? He paused to laugh at this notion, and also realized that his
40 meditation on the austere god was gone. He banged his fist on his temples, which pained but improved his concentration. “Om Namasivaya . . .” Part of his mind noted

the creaking of the door of the opposite house. She was a serpent in whose coils everyone was caught and destroyed—old and young and the middle-aged, tailors and students (he had noticed a couple of days ago a young B.Sc. student from Albert Mission Hostel at her door), lawyers and magistrates (why not?). . . . No wonder the world was getting overpopulated—with such pressure of the elemental urge within every individual! O God Siva, this woman must be eliminated. He would confront her some day and tell her to get out. He would tell her, “Oh, sinful wretch, who is spreading disease and filth like an open sewer: think of the contamination you have spread around—from middle-aged tailor to B.Sc. student. You are out to destroy mankind. Repent your sins, shave your head, cover your ample loins with sackcloth, sit at the temple gate and beg or drown yourself in Sarayu after praying for a cleaner life at least in the next birth ...” Thus went his dialogue, the thought of the woman never leaving his mind, during all the wretched, ill-spent night; he lay tossing on the bare floor. He rose before dawn, his mind made up. He would clear out immediately, cross Nallappa’s Grove, and reach the other side of the river. He did not need a permanent roof; he would drift and rest in any temple or mantap or in the shade of a banyan tree: he recollected an ancient tale he had heard from his guru long ago ... A harlot was sent to heaven when she died, while her detractor, a self-righteous reformer, found himself in hell. It was explained that while the harlot sinned only with her body, her detractor was corrupt mentally, as he was obsessed with the harlot and her activities, and could meditate on nothing else.

Our hermit packed his wicker box with his sparse possessions—a god’s image in copper, a rosary, the deerskin, and a little brass bowl. Carrying his box in one hand, he stepped out of the house, closing the door gently behind him. In the dim hour of the dusk, shadowy figures were moving—a milkman driving his cow ahead, laborers bearing crowbars and spades, women with baskets on their way to the market. While he paused to take a final look at the shelter he was abandoning, he heard a plaintive cry, “Swamiji,” from the opposite house, and saw the woman approach him with a tray, heaped with fruits and flowers. She placed it at his feet and said in a low reverential whisper: “Please accept my offering. This is a day of remembrance of my mother. On this day I pray and seek a saint’s blessing. Forgive me ...” All the lines he had rehearsed for a confrontation deserted him at this moment; looking at her flabby figure, the dark rings under her eyes, he felt pity. As she bent down to prostrate, he noticed that her hair was indifferently dyed and that the parting in the middle widened into a bald patch over which a string of jasmine dangled loosely. He touched her tray with the tip of his finger as a token of acceptance, and went down the street without a word.