

SWEET SIXTEEN!

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Preface

In the year 1978, I was to write a book for young girls. The deadline was fast approaching, but my brain was lazily yawning. I scratched my head and scribbled in papers. Still nothing came out and I gave up. Just a week before the deadline, as I was travelling in a State Transport bus, something happened which was like God putting on the switch in my brain. Names, phrases, sentences and expressions started dashing madly inside my skull. More words, more headlines – all in Tamil. I could not write in the bus. “How will I remember? Oh Lord, how? Please remind me when I get back home,” I pleaded with God. When I reached home, my husband asked, “Do you know you have just a week to give the manuscript?” I said, “Yes.” That day he was to leave for our mission station in Sitteri Hills for three days. When he left I sat glued to the table and chair, like one possessed. I wrote and I wrote... for three days leaving my little daughter to the care of my mother-in-law. Words came rolling by, faster than I could write. When my husband returned after three days, I gave him the manuscript – complete! Glory to God! The book was an instant hit.

Since then I started receiving letters, phone calls and even visits in response to the book. Many were the requests to get it out in English. So I sat down confidently, only to find the switch was off! I tried,

we tried, we all tried, but it was as if a spell was cast for over ten years. Then one day God sent Mrs. Elena Ranjan William, M.A.,M.Ed., to give it a ‘try’– and the spell was broken. I thank Elena for her great help in getting the book out in English. I don’t think anyone else could have done better.

As I write this book I very much remember my daughter who suffered loneliness because of my ministry and my mother-in-law who filled up the vacuum in her life. My daughter is now a Christian Psychologist and Counselor. My mother-in-law has gone home to be with the Lord, having finished her job.

I utilise this opportunity to thank my husband who edits all my writings, thus making me feel safe and comfortable. He has never hesitated to take his share of the blame in the few caustic letters that I receive.

Finally I glorify God who told women to be ‘quiet’ and gave a pen in their hand. I dedicate this book to teenage girls with the prayer that they will blossom for Christ.

January 1994

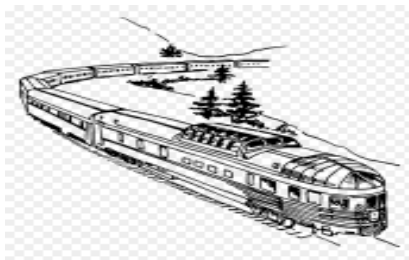
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1

The Speeding Train



Sweet sixteen! Not fair or beautiful, but a charming slender figure. Her T-shirt showed a young man standing upside down. Across was printed “NORMAL IS BORING.”

Her neatly groomed pony tail swayed to the swaying of the train. Her eyes moved across the novel in her hand as swiftly as the wheels beneath us. She was obviously lost in the world of fiction which lay between the pages of her book. I was quietly observing her looking for an opportunity to open a conversation, which did not present itself till four in the evening.

“Daddy, please give me the water bottle.”

The respectable looking gentleman who was in deep conversation with a copassenger dug out the bottle from his bag and shook it disappointedly.

“Sorry Mala, I should have filled it up. Wait. We’ll have soft drinks at the next station.”

Mala’s eyes floated across the compartment before returning to the book. I caught her eyes and stretched out my water bottle with a smile. She thanked me profusely for the unexpected gesture.

“What’s that you are reading, Mala? It seems to be very interesting!”

“Mills ’n Boon.”

“I have read some of them.”

“How do you like them?”

“I am sorry Mala, I have really forgotten. It was a long long time ago. Now I have no time for such books.”

“Are you working?”

“Yah. I am a doctor. And what are you doing?”

“Plus two.”

There seemed to be some respect in her eyes for me now. May be it was my enthusiastic imagination.

“Where?”

“St. Mary’s.”

Her well-manicured fingers played with the pendant of her chain. She closed the novel with a finger in between and showed interest in the conversation. She rattled about nail polish and jeans and Michael Jackson. Oh, she was obviously waiting for a friend. I didn’t expose my confusion about the world I didn’t know. I tried to keep up to her pace but my poor knowledge about these things let me down badly.

“Oh, you don’t go to movies? That’s very bad. But you couldn’t have missed it in TV last Sunday.”

On and on she went and bravo, I managed, though her teenage terminology baffled me at times.

“Your T-shirt is terrific. You may be interested in this booklet.”

I pulled out a red booklet from my purse titled *Normal is Boring* with the same picture.

“You don’t want to be like everybody. This book tells you how you can be a different person.”

She literally snatched the booklet from my hand with a giggle.

She flipped the pages quickly and looked up.

“Can I keep it?”

“Of course. It’s yours for the asking.”

She unzipped her bag and squeezed it in. It pained me to see the booklet twist as it went in. But I zipped up my mouth hoping it would untwist a person.

She shared her evening pakodas with me and didn’t forget to take down my address. Time just flew by.

“You are very interesting Mala. Your place is not too far from mine. You must visit me sometime.”

“Sure. I’ll try. Why don’t you plan to come too?”

“Shall we turn off the light?”

It was Mala’s father with a smile. Everyone in the compartment started to stretch themselves on their berths. Mala spread her dainty Bombay Dyeing bedsheet and lay down. It filled me with a complex for my worn-out checked bedsheet. I pushed it under my head for a pillow, laid myself down and muttered a prayer: “Lord, please save Mala. Please let us meet again.” I looked at her. In the dim blue light her face looked strangely innocent.

Her eyes were still open. What was she thinking? Would she care to read the booklet?

I felt a sudden surge of affection for this sweet, girl at the threshold of life.... Mala... Mala... The wheels were humming a lullaby.

chuk..... chuk.... chuk.... chuk....

Morning six, I could feel the wheels slowing down. I got up quickly and started to pack my paraphernalia. Mala was peacefully asleep and rolled around lazily as the sun's rays warmed her face.

The train screeched to a stand still and I ran to catch the bus.

“Aunty.”

I turned around.

“We’ll drop you.”

The cream Ambassador sailed smoothly.

“Thank you. Car for a cup of water!” We all laughed merrily. She looked like a morning lotus with that big grin on her face. She went away promising to visit me. Would she?



Mala was slowly slipping out of my mind as ten days fled past. I peeped through the upstairs window at the sound of a horn. Sure enough, it was the cream Ambassador!

“Hi”

“Hi”

“Come in Mala, come in. I’m so glad you are here.”

“Not, bad. You even remember my name.”

“Sit. Would you have coffee or some juice?”

“No aunty, no please. Daddy wanted me to be back in an hour. That book....”

“Oh, that book.”

It sounded so vague. What book did I promise to give her? I ransacked my brain. Oh, it must be that book I always used as a bait for teenagers. Where was it? I delved into the dusty bookshelf.

“Mala, I’m sorry. It’s not with me just now. But I’ll give it to you in a fortnight’s time.”

“No aunty, the booklet you gave me in the train, I read it.”

“Yah?” I beat my forehead with my hand and went to prepare her coffee.

“You liked it?”

“Nice.”

Mala sipped her coffee as if happy to spend the hour with me.

“Nice means what?”

I tried to sound casual as my heart was pounding almost audibly.

“I liked it.”

“Jesus changed my life Mala. Since then I have been a different person.”

I could see the look of a trapped rat in her eyes as if she was sorry for mentioning that book. But I was not prepared to leave it at that. But my guess was wrong.

“But you look so happy. You are not much different from me. You say you play shuttle cock. You are so colourfully dressed.”

“Why not?” I let out a hearty laughter. What do you think of Jesus? You think He will make you a recluse? Ha, ha... Mala...”

She joined in my laughter shyly.

“It is something that happens inside you Mala, in your heart, a right-about turn, from sin to the Saviour!”

“Am I a sinner?”

“Well, that’s what the Bible says. And we know it. I have sinned and so have you. Sin separated us from God. That will ultimately lead us to hell-fire.”

Mala placed the cup and saucer on the table. She crossed her legs and listened with her chin on the cup of her palm.

“Do you have a personal experience with Jesus?”

“What is that?”

“I’ll try to put it in terms you’ll understand. There is in every person a desire to commit sin. But when we commit a sin, we don’t feel good about it. Right?”

“Yah.”

“We don’t want to do bad things. But we do it. And we wonder why we do it.”

She nodded approvingly. “You decide not to do it again but you feel powerless to stop yourself. Then you think about God and wonder if He would punish you. Do you think about God?”

I wanted a feedback.

“Oh yah, I often wonder where God is and who He is. I don’t understand much from what they say in the church.”

“When I was a girl I would lie down under the starry sky and wonder where God was. There was a vacuum in my heart. I wondered about my death and where I would go after I die.”

“Yah, I have thought so, many times.”

“Of course, I knew about Jesus Christ and heaven and hell. But that didn’t make much sense to me. It was all so vague.”

She was intently, looking into my eyes for the next sentence.

“There is a God-shaped vacuum in every man’s heart. Man wants forgiveness and redemption. That’s why we see people going on pilgrimage. They are in search of salvation.”

She nodded.

“In his search for God man has invented many gods. He is still searching. You see, God created man. But man disobeyed God. Mankind has gone away from God like lost sheep. If a son walks out of the house, the father’s heart will always be aching for his son, isn’t it?”

“Yah.”

“So was God’s heart. He wanted all men back to Him. So He worked out a plan. You see Mala, without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. Have you seen people sacrificing birds or animals in temples?

“Mm, sometime back I saw that in a village.”

“That’s it. But, the blood of birds or animals cannot wash away man’s sin. Therefore God sent His own Son, Jesus Christ to this earth to die for us. Jesus was born of a virgin. He lived a sinless life. The devil tempted Him to sin. When you don’t want to do a bad thing do you feel a prompting in you to go ahead? Do you often hear a voice within you, calling you to sin?”

“I should say yes.”

I could see she was no more casual. Her face had turned serious.

“God is supernatural, so also satan. God is holy, satan is evil. Satan tempts us to commit sin and tries to draw us to him. Sometimes we say, ‘No’ to him; Sometimes we say, ‘Yes.’ But Jesus during His life never gave in. He said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” He was crucified on the cross by His enemies out of jealousy. But He came alive on the third day and appeared to His friends. Then He went to heaven promising to come back.”

“So then what happened to you?”

That gave me a jolt. “Oh, yah” I paused, using the time to figure out where I left my story.

“Ah, then.... I went to a Vacation Bible School where I was told to confess my sins to God and believe on Jesus as my Saviour. I was told that my sins would be forgiven and I would have peace and joy and I would enjoy heaven in eternity. Otherwise I would go to hell from where there would be no escape. So I knelt down and confessed my

sins and asked God to take charge of my life. That was the turning point of my life.”

She learned back and relaxed. The vague look in her eyes seemed to clear.

“What Mala? Feel free. Just tell me what you feel.”

She looked at her wristwatch. Did she want to go? I was wrong again. She felt relieved to have half an hour more.

“Will God forgive me just like that? In school we discuss the films we saw and cook up dirty stories. We share the novels we read. We pair each other with some fellow and tease one another. But because I am a rank student, I have a good reputation in school. If I’m late from school, I lie to my parents...”

“Mala, you don’t have to tell me all that. Tell it to God. The Bible says, if we cover our sins God cannot bless us. But if we confess them and leave them, then God forgives all our sins. Just tell God you are a sinner, and ask for His forgiveness. Believe Jesus died for your sins.”

Mala knelt down. Her thin lips quivered. A large drop of tear emerged from under her long lashes. She sniffed. The expected miracle had happened! My heart leapt for joy. A whole thirty minutes ticked past. I was getting worried about the time.

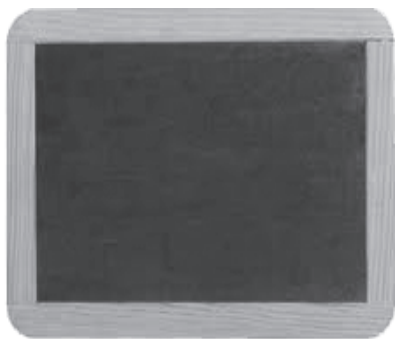
“Mala, right now the blood of Jesus is washing you and Christ has come into your heart. Now you are a child of God.”

She took in every word I spoke. Her face was radiant. The red streaks in her eyes looked beautiful.

“You are now a new person Mala. You are no more your old self. God will help you overcome the temptations. Read your Bible daily and pray. Do come whenever possible.”

As the sound of the car died away I pulled out my diary and wrote “Mala born again!”

Does she know that the golden rays of dawn have broken through her long night?



Sunday evening.

“Aunty, we had a special meeting in the church and the speaker spoke excellently on reconciliation. He gave some time for us to decide on our knees to settle matters with others. The first thing that came to my mind was my disobedience to parents and quarrels with my sister. I have decided to ask their forgiveness.

But another thing: It is three months since I have spoken to one of my classmates. She’s a bully. If she comes and talks to me, no problem. But how can I take the first step?”

“Relax girlie. If we remember that someone has something against us, WE must immediately go to that person and make peace. That’s what the Bible says. If it is your fault, ask for forgiveness politely. If someone has hurt you, forgive wholeheartedly. Remove all bitterness from your heart.”

“I’m not sure if God is prompting me to get right with people or if it is my mind that’s playing tricks on me.”

“God speaks in many ways. He speaks to you as you read your Bible. He can also speak through preachers, books, magazines, testimonies or your conscience.”

Mala leaned back on the sofa and stared at the ceiling, tapping a foot to the cadence of a song that wafted through the window from the neighbour’s house.

“Hey, are you talking to God?”

“I was just wondering how to go and say I am sorry. So humiliating even to think. I guess I’ve never done that in the past.”

“C’mon man. It’s going to be easy. God will give you the strength. You must start your new life with a clean slate. If you wallow in your past, you can never move forward.”

She got up and walked and I patted her on the shoulder. She walked ahead, turned round and gave me a flying kiss with a mischievous grin. I knew she would do it. I felt too shy to return the kiss. As I turned around I was laughing within myself with almost teenage delight.



A month rolled by, without another visit from Mala. I was kicking myself for my negligence to get her address.

Oh here she comes. Her lip-gloss was gleaming. She was in high spirits.

“Hello aunty, how are you?”

“Fine, come in.”

“My Birthday falls on the twentieth and we have arranged a small tea. You must come.”

“Sit for a minute. What’s the hurry?”

“No aunty. I must be going now. I have to invite a few others. Some patients are waiting for you too.” She gave clear directions to reach her home.

“Bye”

“Bye”

She waved merrily.

* * *

I entered the house with hesitation after removing my slippers. Mala's mother stepped out of the house and took my hands in hers.

"Please come in. Mala told me about you."

The fast flashes from the video gouged out my eyes and I wished I had brought ear plugs. The teenagers were talking at the top of their voices and bursting their lungs in laughter. Mala's friends were flying about the house like Hollywood stars, some in pants and some in midis and minis. Two young men were chatting with Mala's brother. Mala's beautiful dark eyes would flash on them and fleet away. One of them with a minor moustache followed Mala around the house with his eyes. This was teens' world and I felt out of place and awkward.

Mala's mother shouted, "Mala, stupid. Reduce the volume. Are you people deaf?"

Mala turned around and gave her a cold stare and walked off as if she never heard a word.

"These crazy teenagers. Freaks!"

She would have continued if I hadn't patted gently on her lap. I thought of my daughter. Well, teenagers are teenagers. Sometimes it is wiser to keep your mouth shut when they are around. I managed the evening in an absent-minded chat with Mala's mother. I invited Mala to come home and left.

The next day....

“Come in Mala. You looked enchanting in your birthday dress. It was lovely.”

“Thank you aunty. We had to shell out some eight hundred bucks for that.”

“My, my, things are so costly these days. Sit down madam. So how’s life?”

Mala pondered before she answered. I held my tongue. I wanted her to speak out.

“So, so.”

“You are not yourself Mala. Are you reading the Bible and praying regularly?”

“Uh... um... I don’t know why I feel so dull. I am all mixed up.”

She twisted her hands above her head to demonstrate her expression.

“Yes?”

“The day I accepted Jesus, I felt like an angel. Today, I feel like a devil.”

I let out a small laugh at her sharpness but her face showed she was serious about what she was saying and honest too.

“I am glad you said you ‘feel.’ You were neither an angel nor are you transformed into a devil. I don’t see a poker tail behind you. You are still the sweet old Mala, real Mala.”

I pretended to search for a tail, trying to sound jovial. But her face told me, it was no time to joke.

“Honest aunty. I was so high. I even shared my experience with my friends.”

“And what did they say?”

“They ragged me. She’s in love with Jesus ya, they said. Love O! Pooooosh. In ten days she’ll run out of steam and be back to normal, they laughed. I too feel so aunty.”

“You are overemphasising your feelings Mala. We don’t stand on our feelings. Feelings keep changing like the clouds. The fact that you are a child of God never changes. Your name is written in God’s Book of Life.”

“Who told you that wonderful news?”

She threw the question on my face.

“There you are. C’mon now. This is the first ditch any believer falls into. You commit a sin. You feel guilty and you start doubting your experience of rebirth.”

“Exactly.”

“And the devil keeps telling you that you were not at all born again in the first place. It was your own imagination. How could a child of God sin? and all that kind of stuff.”

“You are absolutely right.”

“So you start doubting your salvation.”

“Are you a mind-reader?”

“Tell me now. You celebrated your birthday and you were jumping gleefully yesterday. But today you are down in the dumps. The excitement is gone. But your birthday remains an absolute fact. Do you understand?”

“Yep.”

“Your new birth is a FACT. God’s Word says you are forgiven, and you believe it. That is FAITH. The joy you experienced on the day of your rebirth is a FEELING. Fact first, faith next, feelings last. Your sins have been forgiven and forgotten. They need not condemn you anymore. The Bible says that your name is written in the Book of Life. Our salvation does not stand on the shaky foundation of our feelings, but on the finished work of Christ on the cross. Don’t believe the lies of the devil. Believe the truth of God.”

“I understand now. The thing is, sometimes I give in when my friends put pressure on me, but then I feel so guilty. That’s really why I was scared to come here.”

“A sharp conscience is a blessing in disguise for God’s children. Worldly people live in sin and enjoy it. But a child of God is so troubled by her conscience that when she sins she immediately cries to God for forgiveness and finds a means of escape from the sin. She is like a lamb that has accidentally fallen into the gutter and struggles to come out. But a sinner is like a pig that chooses to wallow in the gutter. The desire to live a God-pleasing life is in itself an evidence of rebirth.”

“But then why is it that we sin after being born again? What’s the point in being saved then?”

“We don’t grow wings overnight and become angels. We continue to live on this earth in an atmosphere of sin. Though you have a bath everyday, still you get dirty everyday. Just like that we trip and fall in sin at times. But the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, keeps washing us. Wilful sinning is different. I am speaking of falling in sin against our wishes. Only in heaven we’ll live in an atmosphere free of temptation and sin.”

“Bapre.... that’s a struggle indeed.”

“Jesus is a gentle Master, Mala.”

“Sure, sure. But what bugs me is that daily I ask forgiveness to God and then commit the same sins again.”

“I had the same problem when I was like you. But now when I look back, it’s all clear to me. Keep looking at a plant everyday and you feel it is just the same. But you go somewhere for a year and return, it has grown tall and blooming. Daily growth is microscopic. Be regular in your Bible reading and prayer and you are sure to be growing.

“Rebirth is a crisis experience but growth is a lifelong process.”

“Hope to grow.”

“Before I forget, I want to talk to you about the videos you see.”

“Aunty, you have already told me once. But you are too old fashioned aunty. You don’t understand.”

“I know I am old fashioned. But sin is making its appearance everyday in a new fashion. So I don’t want you to be a fashionable sinner.”

“What’s wrong about watching songs and dances and movies anyway? Every story has a moral.”

She hit my arm with her hand as if demanding a pleasing answer.

“It’s not easy to answer that question Mala. A girl of your age should be able to decide what is good and what is bad. TV is good if used properly. Remember three things when you watch TV:

1. You should not watch TV disobeying your parents.
2. You should not waste your time or spoil your health by sitting before the TV too long.
3. You should not watch TV at the cost of your devotional time and studies.

“If you have these three things in mind, your conscience will tell you when to see and what to see.”

Mala jerked her shoulders and pouted her mouth. I didn’t know what that meant. But I knew from experience that teenagers don’t pat you on the back for the free advice you give them. I didn’t know how to restart the conversation and groped.

“You see Mala, You must get some good friends who share your new desires. Don’t stick to the old gang who will lead you into temptation.”

“True aunty. I am bombarded by a host of temptations.”

“The hunter never runs to pick up a dead bird. He chases the wounded one that tries to escape. Now that you are trying to escape the filth of this world, the devil is after you. But Jesus has overcome the world. He gives us power to resist temptations and overcome them. He will never allow temptations beyond our strength, rather provide us a way of escape. Cheer up.”

I pinched her cheek.

“Aunty, I feel so light; I feel like flying. Let’s pray.”

“We bowed our heads in prayer. The sparkle in Mala’s eyes seemed to have returned.

I kept gazing at the disappearing slender figure that brought to my mind, the words of Jesus –

“I appointed you that your fruit should remain...”



Mala was ecstatic as her parents had allowed her to go with me for her Christmas shopping. I reached her home on time. My ears were assailed by girlish chatter punctuated by giggles. She was chatting with the next door girl with the garden wall between them, blissfully unaware of my presence.

“Mala, hey Mala,” I screamed as their devilish dog came pouncing.

She was at my side in a jiffy. With a goodbye to her mum we walked towards the shopping complex. We got in and out of shops and my patience was wearing thin.

“Aunty, look at that dress. Terrific, isn’t it? We’ll have a look at it.” She pulled me by my hand. Sensing some resistance she turned and looked at me.

“Aunty what? You don’t like that dress ah?” Her face darkened to a scowl.

“No.” I answered point blank. That dress will be too tight and too short for you. Don’t dress to kill.”

“I never dress to ‘kill’ anybody.”

I knew if I let this opportunity slip by I may not get another one to talk about dress.

“Let’s finish the Christmas purchase and talk on our way back home.” That seemed to relax her.

After the hunt she came out hugging her purchase. The river beneath us was singing a serenade. I dreaded to open the topic as we walked along the bridge discussing her Christmas churidar. But she saved me the trouble.

“What did you say aunty, about dresses? We should not wear short dress ah?”

“You should not expose your body too much and kindle the lust of men, Mala. Don’t follow the immodest fashions of the world.”

Mala opened the gate and we entered in, still engrossed in conversation.

“So you want me to wear a six-yard sari.”

“I understand sari is inconvenient for active young girls. But you look like an angel in salwar kameez. It gives you the comfort, the freedom of movement and the feminine look. Why don’t you wear them? Go get your Bible.”

She fell for my flattery. She went in, not before throwing another question. “What will I do if I go to America?”

She returned with her Good News Bible and sat down beside me.

“Turn to first Timothy, chapter two and verse nine...What’s the matter? Where are you searching? Turn, turn... um... still..it is in the New Testament...after the Gospels... go to the end...bus, bus. You must become more familiar with your Bible. Try to finish the entire Bible in one year by reading four or five chapters a day.”

“I am in Psalms now.”

“Good. Read now.”

“I also want the women to be modest and sensible about their clothes and to dress properly.”

She was stumped.

“Dress regulations! I would expect to find that in a college prospectus, not in the Bible”

“Mala, you probably don’t know it, but in provocative dresses you are as deadly as a live wire.”

Mala yawned and eyed me with a bemused twinkle in her eyes.

“Alright, show me the chapter and verse in the Bible which gives accurate measurements for “modest” dress. I will take it to my tailor.”

“A woman’s clothes should be appropriate for her age and the society that she lives in. If by your dress, you invite a man, you could be digging your own grave.”

“At times you are a real bore, aunty, Don’t dress me up like a matron on my wedding day.”

Typical teenager. I liked the way she reacted—honest!

“Dress with decency, modesty and beauty. Be smart and presentable. On the whole you must look like a woman.”

Her face relaxed with a cherubic smile.

“What about jeans then?”

“I don’t want to condemn anyone, Mala, but it doesn’t look feminine to me.”

I felt the atmosphere tense and wished to lighten it.

“I saw a cartoon recently. A little boy opens a door and asks the waiting creature: Are you my sister’s boy friend or my brother’s girl friend?”

With that she doubled up in laughter and I felt light too.



The calling bell shrieked. A morose Mala was at the door. Her chicken work salwar kameez gave her a personable look.

She danced around the table humming a song as I prepared her ginger ale. I recognised the tune:

*I am sixteen going on seventeen,
Waiting for life to start;
Somebody kind who touches your mind will
Suddenly touch your heart.*

It was not too difficult for me to sense that she was woolgathering while we conversed. So I stopped talking and waited for her to speak. She picked up the newspaper and pretended to read it. She let it drop suddenly on her lap and looked up.

“I came to pray for my exams,” she said, sipping the drink.

“Oh, I see. I was wondering where on earth you were all these days. Now I see why you have suddenly become a lover of prayer.”

“Aunty, pray that I will somehow pass.”

“So you think you can pass by praying.”

“I am unable to study. My marks are going down. My teacher is angry and my parents are furious.”

She finished in one breath.

“Why Mala? Whatever happened to you? Why this sudden turn of events? You are a good student.”

“Aunty...er...nothing.”

“Nothing? How can nothing affect you? I am interested to know what this something called nothing is. Woolgathering instead of studying?”

“You said it.”

“Who’s this Romeo?”

“I won’t tell you.”

“Fine. Keep it safely to yourself.”

“Aunty, you won’t tell anyone, will you? I came to Christ no aunty? Then I tried to sever this relationship. But he’s stubborn. He says he cannot forget me and threatens to commit suicide if I stop meeting him. My friends know about it. We have exchanged a few letters. How can I go back on my word? What will my friends think of me? The very thought is frightening. And he’s not a bad boy at all. He’s such a nice guy. I am unable to get him out of my mind. I can’t even pray or read the Bible. I just can’t study.”

It was drizzling and the electricity had failed. The flickering flame of the candle threw dancing shadows on Mala’s face as she sobbed with abandon. My heart

turned within me, though I could not empathise with her. Why, O why didn't I warn her earlier? I sighed, tired of seeing the necessary evils of life. If I had known a little earlier, I would not have let her get caught in this whirlpool.

“Is he the one with a mousch, your brother's friend?”

“Mm. He comes home to see my brother. That's how the whole thing started. He was friendly to me. Then I noticed a tenderness and longing in his eyes. I couldn't resist it. Everytime I heard the sound of his mobike, my feet ran to open the door. One day when he came I was alone at home. He locked the door and...and...” She swallowed hard.

I held my breath.

“...embraced me...and...”

My heart missed a beat.

“And we heard our car horn.”

I heaved a sigh of relief. My prayers for Mala were not going waste.

She did not so much as lift her head, drawing meaningless figures on the floor with her toe nail.

“How long has this been going on?”

“Six months.”

“What did you write in your letters”

“Er..nothing.”

“Oh dear, the sky has not fallen down. You are not the first teenager to mistake infatuation for love. After all, it is natural for opposite poles to attract.”

She wiped the sweat off her forehead.

“God created sex and sex instinct is good if used properly. How old are you?”

Her eyelids hesitantly fluttered up. Sixteen.”

“Mala, you are just out of the nest eager to fly into the vast world. You do not know the world as yet. Youthful feelings are very strong. When a young man shows some affection for you, your feelings are aroused. That does not mean you have fallen in love. You may think so. But that’s only puppy love. It is blind passion. True love has four eyes. It sees, observes. waits and tries to find out more before committing itself to a person.

“In any case it is foolish to fall in love at your age. There’s a whole lifetime before you. You are not mature enough to choose your life partner. Wait till you are mature enough for love and marriage. God will send the right person at the right time. Now studies are your priorities. Put an end to this racket. This is an age to know young men, not to fall in love with anyone.”

She blew her nose.

“Don’t flunk in your exams. Forget Babu. Nothing terrible will happen as you fear. You think that fellow will commit suicide?”

“Don’t call him fellow.”

Mala shot back. I was stunned for a minute. Terrible teenagers.

“I’m sorry. I mean that gentleman Babu. Take a bold step. Flee youthful lusts. Remember, while we must resist all other temptations, we must FLEE youthful lusts.”

I took Mala’s right hand and formed a ‘V’ sign with her pointer and middle finger, indicating two.

“Second Timothy, second chapter, twenty second verse. Stop seeing that fel...sorry, gentleman and you are on your way to victory. You are not responsible for his life. Quit worrying about him.”



Alas, can oceans of fantasy be dismissed in a jiffy?



My dear Sister,

I trust you are well. I need your help. Mala failed her exams and had to face her father's fury. She has taken it very badly. She has shut herself in her room in sullen fearful silence. Perhaps you can talk to her. She may listen to you. I'll

be very grateful if you can come.

Thanking you,

Yours sincerely,

Mrs. Lal

I had never expected Mala to throw aside my advice. Had I taken too much for granted? Desperate, helpless and anxious thoughts chased each other in my mind as my feet raced up the stairs to Mala's room. I gently opened the door. Poor thing! She was in bed, her face buried in her pillow.

"Mala."

There was self-pity, anger, resentment, self-reproach and above all — questions in her face.

"I can't face anyone anymore! Why is God trying me like this?" She sobbed convulsively. "I've messed

up my life. Give me a shot and kill me or tell me what I should do to commit suicide.”

“Nonsense, Listen now. Suicide is not that simple. Forget it chick. Life is a gift from God. Suicide is a one way ticket to hell. There’s no hope at the other end. You can’t come back to this world either. Hope is life’s handle. If that is broken, life cannot be handled. Never lose hope. Failure in exam is not failure in life. Don’t give up. Get up Mala. Wash your face and come. Let’s then talk.”

I waited patiently till she had calmed herself and was ready to listen. “Don’t be a coward Mala. You must face life. Let’s try to solve your problem. How did you fail? You didn’t study. Right? Then why blame God. God has promised to bless us according to our works. How can you expect God to bless you when you have not put in enough effort?

“There is no use crying over spilt milk. What you badly need now is rest and relaxation. Sleep off.”

“My mind is tortured.”

“I can understand Mala. Come let’s then sing and pray.”

She chose the song and we started.

*When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged thinking all is lost...*

The song seemed to invade her every fibre. She was composed after the prayer and I promised to visit her the following week.

The next week...

A calm Mala received me and took me up to her room. My eyes roved around the room.

“Your room looks like a pig sty.”

“And I am a pig?”

“No, no, you are an angel living in a pig sty. A lazy angel. Get to work. An idle mind is the devil’s workshop. If you look around, you’ll find so much to do that there’ll be no time to dream or get bored.”

I didn’t really expect her to swirl around. But to my surprise she did.

“Make your bed. Look at the pillow cover—Bah! Stained with oil!” I removed it and put it to my nose and she jerked it out of my hand.

“Change it. Cleanliness is next to godliness. Don’t you daily sweep your room? Clean the table, put on a table cloth and arrange your books.”

Without a word we worked together and in a few minutes her room looked fit to live in!

“That’s much better. Now look at yourself! Didn’t you comb your hair? Didn’t you have a bath?”

“Oh....uh, I was about to go.”

“Don’t you bluff young lady. What a bad shape you are in at eight in the monrning! What time do you wake up?”

“Seven.” She shifted uncomfortably.

“No good. Haven’t you read what the Book of Proverbs has to say about laziness? Do not oversleep, lest you come to poverty. You must be up by five. Brush your teeth, have a wash, comb your hair, powder your face and sing a song. You’ll feel fresh. Then read the Bible and pray. I am not surprised about your results. God does not help the slothful. Go. Have a bath and come.”

“Aunty, I don’t want to keep you waiting.”

“Aha, how you care for me, go, go quick.”

Mala had a bath and combed her hair. I took the lice comb and started combing her hair as I talked.

“Mala, apply some lice medicine and get rid of lice. I think you should take up some household chores upon yourself. That will not lower your ‘respectability’ as some girls think. Knowing the art of running a home well will be a great and valuable asset to you in the future. Right now your mother will be grateful for your help. Studies is not everything in life. Can you cook?”

“A little...”

“Little what?”

“Mm... fry pappads.”

“Great. What else?”

“And..boil eggs.”

“Terrific ya, you ought to be given a Ph. D!

“Mala, I am looking into your future. A girl who cannot cook tastily cannot be too attractive to the husband. Girls should be girls.”

“Aunty, you must be a terrific cook.”

“Far from it. I suffer for it now. That’s why I am telling you to take it seriously.”

“I’ll do Aunty.” She tilted her head to a side and gave me a quizzical look, as if she was looking into my personal life.

“Please for goodness sake do that. There are a host of things you can do...cook, sew, wash, clean, read, write, tend the garden, draw, paint, according to the aptitudes God has given you... and keep your hair lice free.”

Mala was ready with answer. “In our house only mummy and the maid do the household chores. I will be teased if I start...”

“For sometime. Then they’ll mind their own business, And don’t sleep in the afternoons like a log.”

“Impossible,” she said, crushing lice under her thumb nail.”

“Yes, I know. But we who have to strive for the imperishable crown of life must overcome our lazy habits. One who is not willing to discipline his body, cannot be a good disciple of Christ.

“Exercises are good. Play some outdoor game in the evenings and sweat well. Then you’ll sleep well and not be fantasizing. I wonder how a lazy goose like you will ever run a family in the future. Okay now, have you

broken up with Babu?” I tried to sound as casual as possible.

“I can’t, I simply can’t.” Her nose turned red and a flood of tears overflowed on her cheeks and dripped on her housecoat. She collapsed on her bed and sobbed. I sat down beside her and gently rubbed her back, I felt sorry for her. She reminded me of a butterfly caught in the beaks of a crow. May be I shouldn’t have touched the sensitive subject.

“Do you wish to break off?”

“Yes I do, but I dunno how. But I only do what I don’t want to do.”

“That was Paul’s story too. He confessed that he did things that he didn’t desire to do. That is everybody’s struggle. Have you ever talked to God about this problem?”

“That didn’t strike me.” She wiped her face and sat up.

“Mala, learn to talk to God about everything — big or small. There is victory in prayer. C’mon let’s pray.”

Mala knelt down. Unbelief and hesitation written across her face, she mumbled something.

“Aunty, it is twelve, Have lunch and go.”

The pressure-cooker whistle invited me for a delicious meat curry.

“No Mala, my daughter will be home and I must get back in time.”

I had gone out and was returning home. The cream Ambassador at our doorstep announced that Mala had come. I thought of something funny to greet her. But the way her face reddened like a ripe tomato when she saw me, I swallowed it. I knew this was something serious. I put my arms around her shoulders and rushed her upstairs.

“Mala, what’s it, what? Why?” I whispered. Mala was a mystery.

She bit her trembling fingers to control her sobs. Tears cascaded down freely. Her nose also cried. What could have happened? Did Babu really commit suicide or what?

She fumbled in her purse and brought out a piece of crumpled paper, I hurriedly unfolded it.



That’s all. No signature. So that’s it. Clever fellow. She pressed her hanky to her mouth to muffle her high pitched uncontrollable voice. In a staccato speech the story came out bit by bit leaving me to piece them together.

Babu's father was taking up a new job in Delhi. Since Babu had completed his B.Sc., the whole family was moving. As usual he had walked into Mala's house and slipped a note between the pages of a book lying on the teapoy. Casually picking up the book she ran upstairs to the privacy of her room and opened the 'love letter' with bated breath. Already shattered by the news of the shift, she thought he would have given his Delhi address. In a frenzy she turned round only to see through the window Babu speeding away in his bike, not even looking back. The blow stunned her.

Mala wept with abandon. I tried to put myself in her place and feel for her. That only tickled me. Probably the generation gap was too wide. Hiding my feelings, I consoled her.

"Obviously Babu was not in love with you Mala. He was only amusing himself. If he had cared he would not have sneaked away like that. It is a game for some young men. Any girl who falls for his love gaze, is his toy. When the game is over he throws her away. I thought you were too sensible to fall in this trap. But you have become a victim. You have learnt a simple lesson the hard way. I am sure you won't make this mistake again."

"No aunty no, never. I am sick of life. Men are cheats, liars. I will never, never marry."

"Silly. Don't come to rash conclusions. You are too young to say 'never.' Live one day at a time. If Babu hadn't left for Delhi now, he would have left you on some other pretext. You should be grateful to be out of

his clutches before becoming too involved with him. Do you think it is worth crying over someone so fickle?

“This experience should not make you bitter against all boys. Don’t be unfriendly towards them. Be friendly with everyone, but do not get involved with anyone. Avoid unnecessary correspondence with boys. Do not make rash promises. Do not give your photo. You are sure to face another temptation. So be on the guard. Never be alone with a boy. Never allow a boy to touch you intimately. Be careful about married men too. Keep them at a distance.”

“Aunty, I am finished, I am in no mood to fall in love again. Don’t worry.”

“Learn to keep your thoughts under control. Keep a pocket New Testament with you. Read it when you find yourself held up unexpectedly at bus-stops or such places. I have found this a practical aid to control my eyes and thoughts, when I was your age. Ok. It’s getting late. Wash your face, go down and be talking to my daughter. I’ll come now.”



It took some time... but I saw the sparkle in her eyes return, her mouth smiled easily again. Her step was light. She was Mala again. Thank God! “What a fragile thing is a young heart.” I mused, “What a great responsibility for the parents of these young ones to see them through the pains of growing up!”

After the deluge came the rainbow of hope. Mala began to grow closer to the Lord. She thought, she questioned. She became more disciplined. One day, she showed me some comments and observations of her own on her daily Bible reading. Remarkable! My heart brimmed over with joy and pride. Above all, she was steadfast in prayer. She became a Sunday School teacher and an active member in her church. She was able to concentrate on her lessons and won her teacher’s approval. Mala was bursting with creativity and the Lord was using her talents.

But little storms in the tea cup were always brewing at home!

“Parents! They keep bugging me! For every little mistake I make, I have to listen to a lecture on my salvation. They can’t hear it when I scold my sister or tell them not to watch movies.”

“Well, why do you fight with your sister?”

“Her behaviour is unspeakable. She is....”

“On her way to doom...” I finished for her, with a laugh. “Go on, get your Bible here. Turn to First John...No, not the Gospel, the Epistle....at the end, before Revelation. Okay, now find 1 John 2:9; 3:15,18; 4:20,21. Let me read out these verses with your name in it. Listen.

“Mala who says she is in the light and hates her sister, is in darkness until now. Mala who hates her sister is a murderess and you know that no murderess has eternal life abiding in her...

“Mala, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth...

“If Mala says, I love God and hates her sister she is a liar; for she who does not love her sister whom she has seen, how can she love God whom she has not seen?

“And this commandment we have from Him that Mala who loves God must love her sister also.”

“Don’t! You’re scaring me to death!”

“Mala, the Bible is not an impersonal set of laws sent down from a God who lives far away in Heaven. You must think of it as a loving God’s personal letter to you. Only when you read it this way, does it make sense.

“Okay, let’s come to the point. Have you been wearing a holier-than-you look on your face? Has your tongue been quick and sharp to condemn your sister and parents? Have you been telling them in not so many words that you are saved and therefore belong to God, while they are the unholy children of the devil?”

“I have to speak the truth...” she began.

“Yes Mala, but speak the truth in love. You must remember Mala, you cannot change anyone by yourself. You must pray that God will touch their lives. But your prayer is not likely to be heard unless your attitude is right with God. Love them first, and accept them as they are. Only then can you really pray for them from your heart. Be one with them, help them every way you can. Love them, Mala. You will surely win them for the Lord. First Corinthians, Chapter thirteen is a lesson on love. Learn from it.”



Jesus said, “The thief does not come except to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly”(Jn 10:10).

How true! This thief does not come with a black mask. He may come in the form of a friend or a pastime and plunder our youth of its valuable treasures.

One of the treasures he “steals” is our time. Time waits for no man. Every second that he robs us of, is precious because it never returns. How carelessly we throw away this priceless jewel! How thoughtlessly do we let it slip through our fingers!

He “kills” our witness. The devil has won a great victory if he can undo the witness of a saved person. One who has lost her witness becomes fruitless and has no part in spreading the Kingdom of God. This is the most gruesome of satan’s murders.

He “destroys” chastity. Sad but true — many are the stories of young girls who have lost their chastity in the hot flush of youth and have spent the rest of their lives drowning in guilt and regret. Every unmarried girl must guard her chastity zealously. This certainly is not a matter to be flippant about. A girl should never allow petting. Petting leads to peril. Virginity once lost is lost forever.

Wear on your soul a neon sign flashing the warning, “Beware of Thief.” If you don’t keep vigil the house will be looted. On the other hand, Jesus came to give us life and to give it abundantly.

Therefore, we must first of all commit our time in His hands and wait upon Him to teach us how to use it fruitfully. Tomorrow never comes. So spend your time usefully today.

Secondly, we must commit our witness into His hands. He will cause its fragrance to spread far and wide. “Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” (2 Cor 2:14-16).

What is a flower without its perfume! It is its fragrance that draws butterflies, bees and innumerable other creatures to feast on its nectar, pollinate it and make it bear fruit. By our fragrant witness we must attract people and bring them to the Lord and feed them on the honey dew of God’s Word. They too will go forth and

bear fruit inspired by our example. And the Kingdom of God will grow.

Thirdly, the Lord alone can bless and increase the fruit of youth to a hundredfold. “There is difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world — how she may please her husband” (1 Cor 7:34).

A young woman is a flower in bloom. How right and good it is that a youth should give generously of her sweetness and fragrance to the Lord. The wise Solomon admonished us, “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.” God must get your undivided attention and devotion during your youth.

Mala did not turn up for the Saturday meeting. “Very unusual” I thought and walked to her house the next day to find the reason. I found her in bed, curled up like a worm.



“Ai, Mala, what gal?”

“O, ouch, my tummy.”

“What’s wrong with your tummy man?”

“Menses.”

“Just that? Good grief! Surely, you don’t mean to spend three days a month in bed? Lazy, up, up, If you stay in bed and keep thinking of your pain, you’ll feel worse. Come on, if you are feeling a lot of discomfort, keep a hot water bag over your tummy for the night.” I tickled her playfully and got her out of bed.

“Chi, why all problems for girls only?” She grumbled as she reluctantly moved away from her bed.

“You’re asking me why?! Didn’t your mother tell you all about it?”

“Where will my mother find the time? She is far too busy managing the affairs of her Ladies’ Club or entertaining guests all evening. In the morning, I am away at school. At night, she scolds me and advises me and spoils my mood.”

The rays of light scattered from Mala’s brimming eyes exposed the large drops about to fall out. She carefully winked them back.

I was touched by the sadness in her eyes. “No time...” How many young ones suffer like this... silently and bitterly because the grown-ups around them have no time...no time to talk, to sympathise, to share, untangle their confusion or may be just listen...

“I want to tell you a few important facts about your body Mala, or else you’ll learn the wrong things from the wrong persons.

“God has created our bodies in a wonderful way. There is nothing dirty about it. The organs of reproduction in a woman’s body are (1) Uterus (2) Ovaries (3) Vagina.

“The uterus is inside the lower abdomen. The ovaries are like walnuts on either side of the uterus. They are connected to the uterus by the fallopian tubes. The vagina is a passage that begins at the uterus and opens up between the urethra and the anus. The ovaries take turns to function every month. Every month an ovum or egg is formed in an ovary. The ovum is too small to be recognised by the naked eye. It travels through the

fallopian tube and settles on the inner wall of the uterus. After a few days it passes out of the uterus. At this time, the inner wall of the uterus also is passed out through the vagina. This is accompanied by bleeding for a period of 3-5 days and the cycle repeats every 28 days. We call it menstruation or periods. During this time, because of increased blood circulation there will be some heaviness or pain in the lower abdomen.

“If the ovum gets penetrated by a male sperm (seed) when it is in the uterus, it gets fertilised and grows in the uterus. Then the wall of the uterus will not disintegrate but provide the right environment for the embryo to grow. That is why a pregnant woman does not get her periods. The foetus grows in the uterus for 9 months after which the baby is delivered. A girl attains puberty or maturity at the age of 12 or 13 or even earlier. After that, she is capable of becoming pregnant.

“The male seed is in the semen. Semen is produced by the testicles and contains millions of sperms. Haven’t you seen a cock climbing on a hen? It is during such a physical union that the cock spills its semen into the hen’s vagina.”

“Chi.”

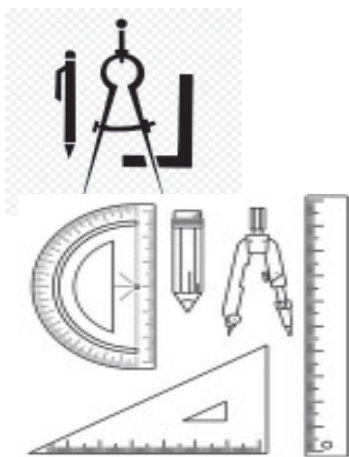
“What chi? This is not chi. It is the marvel of God’s creation and must not be spoken about lightly.”

“Sometimes I don’t get my periods for 2 or 3 months. My mother takes me to the doctor then.”

“It is good to see a doctor. But it is quite normal for a young girl to have delayed periods. This does not require any medical attention usually. In course of time, your body clock will mend by itself.”

“I used to try to find my own explanation to the way my body behaves. You know auntie, I have a wild imagination. But now, I have understood. You have made it all clear.”

Mala smiled her thanks.



Come September and the worry creases deepened on Mala's brow. The memory of her failure haunted and depressed her.

"I'm no good. I'm sure I'll fail again. I'll never make it... Auntie I..."

"Cut it out girl! Stop whining! You could make a hardened pessimist blush!"

"Listen to me... Cast your burden on the Lord. Victory is the Lord's. He shall bring it to pass."

"And don't keep your Bible aside, just because your exams are near. Continue your daily devotion and be regular in prayer."

"Put your heart and soul into your lessons. 'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going,' says the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 9:10. For the present, your studies are your main concern. So give of your best. Student days are the best part of life. They will never come again. Only one life, it will soon be past; Only what's done for Christ will last. Think of your student days as a time of preparation for the Lord's

work. So it is worth putting in a lot of effort into your studies.

“Your aim is to become truly ‘educated’ – not just to pass an examination. Learn, because you have the curiosity and the desire to know more. Don’t take short-cuts and mug up so-called important answers from cheap bazaar guides. They never help you to learn intelligently. What you don’t understand, your brain will never retain. Be faithful in little things and God will give greater responsibilities.

“Learn attentively, taking in every minute detail. Keep a notebook for jotting down important points. Make a study timetable and allot adequate time for every subject. You must also remember to look after your health. Eat well and take adequate rest. You must get atleast 7-8 hours sleep a day. Do your best and leave the rest.”

She did! And she passed with a first class.



“Jolly lo jimkana”

“Smashing job, Mala”

“Hoo, hoo, hoo, I don’t know what to dooo!”

“What further plans?”

“Why worry now? I am going to sleep for six months.”

“There is no exam there,

In my Father’s house,

In my Father’s house,

In my Father’s house...

There are no teachers there

In my Father’s house...

There is joy, joy everywhere!”

She was dancing to a disco tune as she sang. I laughed. Oh, the joys of youth! I longed for my bygone youth.

“You crack! That’s only in heaven! Why so long a sleep?”

“What else do you want me to do?”

“Won’t your church be conducting VBS?”

“Yes, there’s been some talk of that.”

“Why don’t you teach in the VBS?”

“Goodness me! No. I can’t. I’m scared.”

“What goodness? You are not a small girl anymore to put out your tongue and wring your hands. Stop all that. Why should you be scared to teach little children? You will learn a lot.

“Why Mala, you have another 6 months free, don’t you? Listen....”

“For heaven’s sake auntie, please...let me enjoy these good days...”

“You’ll sleep for 2 days. After that you’ll get bored.”

“I’m going to spend time in Bible reading and prayer.”

“Please do that. But why don’t you also go for computer classes? Go for computer classes in the morning. Learn Hindi in the evening. That’ll be very useful. I’ll give you the name of a good Study Bible. Buy a copy and study well. Read missionary biographies and Reader’s Digest. Read the newspaper. These will increase your general knowledge. Learn bicycling, swimming and whatever you can. Try your hand at cooking too.”

“That requires 26 hours a day and sounds worse than school.”

“Not all on a single day, Mala. Do go for picnics, sleep well and enjoy yourself. But use your spare time profitably.

“A master distributed talents to his servants and went away on a journey. When he returned, he praised the servants who used the talents to do business and thus multiplied them. The employer said to him: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You were faithful with little. I will give you authority over many things.” Those of us who have dedicated ourselves to serve God are involved in a business. We must earn the maximum possible. Besides, Mala, free days like these will not always be available. Make the best out of what life has to offer.”

“Much study is a weariness of the flesh.”

“Stop joking. No one guided me along these lines when I was like you. You have the privilege. But the choice is yours.”



Mala was busy with her hectic holiday activities. Her fingers constantly typed. “Kya hai?” reply to any question became a standing joke with her. I caught a fleeting moment with her somewhere between her computer and Hindi classes.

“Mala, are you going to the special meeting at Town Hall?” I enquired.

“Nahin. Appa won’t let me go. He thinks it is not safe for me to return alone at night. But I haven’t given up. I’ll try coaxing him again.”

“But he’s right Mala. I never thought of that. It is not safe. Your street is rather deserted at night.”

“But I’m not afraid.”

“I’m sure you’re not. But there is enough reason to be cautious. If you read the newspapers or watch the news, you will know that crime and violence are

escalating day by day. When a woman goes about unescorted to lonely places she is inviting trouble. She is exposing herself to all kinds of dangers ... murder... rape... I don't mean to frighten you, Mala. I don't want to give you the impression that all men are lustful, wicked, violent creatures. But we must be careful, cautious and discrete. Remember the story of Dinah, who lost her virginity by indiscretely going to places which she should have avoided. Even women or children or a youth accompanying you in lonely places is not enough. If you sense danger, run into a shop or a crowded place and get help or shout.

“Today, yours is a sheltered life under your parents’ protection. But who knows... if you have to live in a hostel, perhaps? I think it is better that you are aware of these things. Mala, it is true that we should be “not of this world” but we are living in it. Therefore, it is necessary to know what is happening around us. We should not live with our heads in the cloud. Read the newspaper, keep track of events, local and global. We must be practical, pragmatic Christians.”

“My parents worry over everything.”

A look of dismay smeared her face.

“Parents are older and wiser... perhaps, your parents are not in the Lord... but it is mandatory for you to obey them in these matters. They have lived in this world longer than you and you must learn from their valuable experience. The Bible admonishes us to honour and obey our parents. In fact, the only commandment which carries

a promise is, “Honour your father and mother that it may be well with you and you may live long.”

“The worldly-wise Solomon said, “Hear the instruction of your father and do not forsake the law of your mother. For they will be graceful ornaments on your head and chains about your neck. When you walk they will lead you; when you sleep they will keep you; And when you awake, they will speak to you... A wise son heeds his father’s instruction. A fool despises his father’s instruction.” (Prov 1:8,9; 6:22; 13:1; 15:5). It is worth reading the Book of Proverbs often. It is a treasure chest of wisdom. In the New Testament, Paul continues to give the same advice. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right” (Eph 6:1). We must obey our parents every way unless they ask us to go against our conscience to do something sinful. The wisdom of the hoary head is priceless. When we listen to elders, we inherit their wisdom and make it our own.

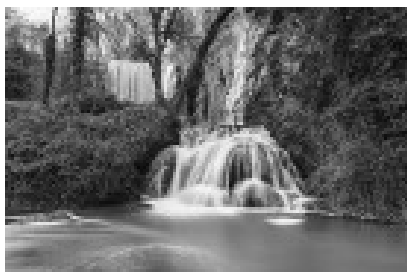
“If you are in trouble, go to your parents for help. Don’t trust strangers. Don’t give your name, address or whereabouts to an unknown person. Be careful in accepting anything from strangers. Don’t accept lifts just like that. Avoid travelling alone to isolated places in taxis or autorickshaws. It is safer to take a transport bus. Always be discrete. Breathe a prayer if you are confused. Don’t jump to conclusions hastily or take decisions or make promises rashly.”

Never allow men to touch you inappropriately. Maintain a distance with married men too. Don’t fall

for tricks like, “I am like your brother or I am like your father.”

“God will take care of me aunty,” Mala said stoutly.

“Very true Mala. Yes, under us are God’s arms. But He expects us to make use of His gifts of intelligence and rationality. He warns us to be wise as a snake, which means smartness.”



Mala bubbled with enthusiasm. “I’ve finished reading the Bible once through.”

“Terrific!”

“Yes, but I have often wondered, when I listen to inspired speakers where their eloquence comes from! God’s Word seems to gush from their lips like a fountain. How do they find Bible verse for every situation.... how do they memorise.... how do they remember?”

“Man reaps what he sows. If he sows sparingly, the harvest is meagre. If he sows generously, the harvest is bountiful. We reap the fruit of our labour. God will bless abundantly the labour of our hands.

“We must be familiar with the Bible both in our mother tongue and English. There are plenty of Bible study books, Bible dictionaries and concordances in English. The New International Version is excellent. When you read the Bible, keep yourself alert to hear God speaking to you. Read it prayerfully and you will hear the words of counsel, comfort, reproof or admonition that you need at that moment. Memorise verses whenever you can — atleast one verse a day. Start with your favourite passage. I began with the Sermon on the Mount.

“Don’t hesitate to underline or write notes on your Bible. The dirtier your Bible gets, the cleaner you become! You can always get another copy. Studying it earnestly is the most important thing.

“Come upstairs. I’ll show you uncle’s Bibles. Seeing is believing!”

Mala’s eyes widened with astonishment as she leafed through the pages, crowded with red lines, cross references, footnotes, comments, etc. etc. I passed the entire collection of my husband’s Bibles to her.

“I never dreamed of reading the Bible this way. But I do want to now. Thanks so much. I enjoy reading the Bible but when I get down on my knees my troubles begin...”

“Troubles?” I queried.

“My wandering mind... I seem to have no control over it.”

“Actually, prayer must be spontaneous — like a conversation. You must feel free to talk to God anytime anywhere. But it is helpful to follow a discipline and set apart a time for prayer. Choose a time that suits you. May be 5.30 to 6.30 in the morning and 10 to 10.30 in the evening. When the clock strikes the hour, get down on your knees. That will keep you from many pitfalls.

“Don’t bury your face in your pillow when you pray, you may go to sleep.”

“Are you talking from experience?” She quipped with a giggle.

“Don’t pray in your bed. When you wake up, brush your teeth, wash your face, comb your hair, and then sing a song. Then read your Bible and pray.”

“Uh?! God needs so much make-up ya?”

“It’s not for God, it’s for you, so that you’ll become really awake and feel fresh. Pray aloud! That should keep your wandering mind on a leash! Don’t be vague. When you pray, be very specific. You could even write down and number the specific topics for your prayer. If you suddenly recall some important chore that you had forgotten, just jot it down so that you can attend to it, immediately after prayer. That will set your mind at ease. Keep your Bible near you, in case God prompts you to look up a verse. To begin with, praise God — first for His greatness and glory; then count your blessings and give thanks; then examine yourself — acknowledge the sins that you committed, pray for pardon. Next, present your requests. Pray for the salvation of your family. Pray for important issues in your life. Pray for guidance in dealing with your daily matters. In the evening, remember to pray for lost souls, for revival and for missionary work.

“Sweet Hour of Prayer is not always our experience. The devil knows that failure in prayer means failure in life. So he would stop at nothing to destroy our prayer life. Therefore pray without ceasing. Pray fervently. Pray trusting that God hears you. If you fall asleep, pray as soon as you wake up. If you feel sleepy, walk while you pray. Never give in, whatever the reason.”

“One lifetime is not enough to know God,” she sighed.

I smiled and nodded in agreement.

“I’m broke most of the time. Dad is not very generous.... he drops a coin or two, grudgingly, when I hold out my begging bowl. But most of the time I know what to expect... that hateful word, No!”

“Agreed... that’s very frustrating. But we must learn to put up with these annoyances and frustrations. You grumbled about your Christmas clothes too. I was impulsive to speak to you right then. But I was afraid you might think I was nagging. Money, clothes, comforts... they are necessary but not worth fretting about. Godliness with contentment is great gain. Grumbling is sin against God. Be happy and satisfied with all that God has given you.”

But she was still calculating.... that little materialist! “Yoo, hoo I have a good idea. I’m going to keep a piggy bank and buy a Bible out of what I can save!”

“Good! Make sure atleast 10% is given to God.”

“You’re grabbing even my dream piggy bank!” She protested rolling her eyes in mock horror.



“Aunty, please pray that I’ll get a seat for Medicine.”

“I’ll pray for God’s will to be fulfilled in your life.”
Mala’s face fell.

“No aunty, somehow I must join medicine. My parents want me to. My friends are there and if I don’t join medicine, I can’t face them.”

“That’s not how you decide God’s will for your life, Mala. First, pray. Then proceed. Be ready to accept happily what the Lord gives you. It is good to have aspirations in life. But they are not to be decided by what your friends will think. Your mind must be clear about what the Lord wants you to do. Doing great things is not always God’s will. But doing the will of God is great.

“Please don’t think I am discouraging you Mala. Apply for Medicine and also for other courses. But I don’t want you to get disappointed if you don’t get in Medicine.”

“But aunty, don’t you think I can serve God better by becoming a doctor?”

“You are mistaken Mala. If God wants you to be a housewife, bring up children and care for your husband and if you do that, you get the same reward of a doctor who does God’s will. To be a housewife is not less than being a doctor. Not only that, even if you become a doctor, a woman’s first duty is family. You should never forget that.”

Mala left with a distant look in her eyes.

A month later Mala came in. “I am going to a college in Chennai,” she yelled jubilantly.

I studied her face for any concealed disappointment. Her next sentence proved there was none.

“Won’t it be fun to live in a city? But I sure, am going to miss you aunty.”

She threw her arms around my neck. She had never done that before.

“I am simply dying to be there. We’ll have parties and all.”

“Don’t flunk like last year. Study well.” I managed to mutter, trying hard to swallow the lump in my throat. I would miss her too...very much.

“I’m going to be away from home for the first time. *Liberty beckons! Freedom, here I come....*,” she sang!

“Hmm... you’ll be crying for your mother in a week.”

“You bet, I won’t!”

“Your piggy bank!” I teased her. “Come, Mala, I want to talk to you.”

She made a face. “Sermon on St. Thomas Mount?”

“That was a good one, Mala! But listen to me, please. Will you?”

“Yes aunty, you never let me go till I say yes.”

“Chennai is a sophisticated city. You are naive and not very wordly-wise. I am not asking you to resist all fashions. But use your discretion. If the ‘in’ thing is to wear an attitude of disrespect to elders and teachers and to be disobedient and rebellious, choose to be out of fashion. Be true to yourself and the values that you cherish. Who knows, if you act with courage and conviction, the crowd may follow you! You will become a fashion-maker! Be a true Christian and let it show. Punctuality is another Christian virtue, which is unfortunately, quite out of fashion these days.

“You will have more freedom and opportunity to move with the opposite sex. I don’t want you shut yourself up, out of sight of all men. You must socialise. But don’t flirt with boys and then ditch them. Boys have feelings too. Coquettish behaviour backfires.”

“Hmm...carry on preach, I guess I’m not so bad.”

“You and your silly jokes. Okay, I got the hint! I’ll leave you now. Do come and visit us before you leave, Mala. We want to pray with you before you go.”

“Hi, what’s this? A new mobile?”

“Nope, Papa’s old one. Only 25,000. My friend has a 65,000 one. Padu super!”



“Enough, enough, this is enough for you.”

“What aunty...mm...mm...mm..” Mala pretended to cry.

“Cell phone is like a knife, Malu kutty. You can use it for good or bad. Keep your mobile very safe. Don’t lose it. Switch it off and leave it in your room before you go to the class or keep it switched off in the class.”

“Aunty, but other students will bring to the class, no?”

“We don’t need to be like others. Listen. Don’t be chatting with boys and waste your time and corrupt your mind. Use your mobile only when necessary. Don’t play online games. It is neither good nor safe. Don’t talk to strangers and get trapped into dangerous nets. Don’t divulge personal information to strangers. There are many dirty areas in the mobile. They are off limits for you. Make a strong decision not to indulge in them.

“Don’t be sending unnecessary messages in sms or whatsapp. Don’t reply such messages. Be transparent so that anybody can read your mobile. Don’t feel compelled to see all whatsapp messages. It is a waste of time. When you are talking to someone, don’t pick up a mobile call. It is an insult to the one you are talking to directly.

“Don’t keep your mobile on your bed. Keep it away. Switch off the net in the night, so you won’t be tempted to see every ping. Sleep soundly in the night. Don’t take photos alone with boys. Group photo is o.k. Don’t send your fashion photos to every Tom, Dick and Harry.

“Talk to your parents daily. It is another new experience for you. Contact your parents immediately in case of danger. Don’t waste time weeping and wringing your hands.”

“Aunty thank you. Who will care for me so much.”

O.K. Mala, take care.

8 July 1988

Dear Aunty,

The piggy bank is yours. I've lost the bet. I'm utterly miserable here. I'm dying to get home. I can't stand the grub. I hardly eat anything. I'm sure I have lost weight. The seniors are such beasts. They grab every opportunity to rag us. Last night I slept at 2. I cried myself to sleep.

I can't study here. My room-mate Aarthi is quite friendly. But her guy makes a nuisance of himself. They go out together. Sometimes they seem to be lost in conversation under the tree outside my window. I think I'll shift to another room.

To make things worse, I don't get any privacy when I want to pray. Classes are okay. No personal attention, though. I feel so lost.. as if I am alone and drifting in the uncharted sea...I need your prayers. Please write to me immediately.

Melancholy Mala.



3 August 1988

Dear Mala,

Greetings in the sweet Name of Jesus.

We returned home last night after a Students' Camp. I read your letter. Yes, you will feel homesick at first. But you'll be alright soon. We are praying fervently for you. You will soon learn to stand on your own feet. "As an eagle stirs up its nest, hovers over its young, spreading out its wings, taking them up, carrying them on its wings, so the Lord alone led him." (Deut 32:11,12) God won't keep you in the nest forever. Like the eaglet, you must learn to fly but the Lord will always keep you under the shadow of His wings.

Of course, you will crave for home-cooked food. And your finicky palate will detest the unsavoury hostel cooking. But that's all part of the game. Get used to it and don't skip any meal. That will ruin your health. If I remember right, you are a fastidious eater—you love non-veg, don't you? But dhals, lentils, vegetables, fruits and milk are also rich in protein and vitamins. Take curd or buttermilk. Don't live on snacks and chocolates. Try to have a balanced diet. Your body is the temple of the living God. Take good care of it.

They rag you, do they? I wonder if you will resist the temptation to rag your juniors next year! Be tolerant. Grin and bear it. If you can take it with a good sense of humour, you will endear yourself to your seniors. Besides, when they find that you don't over-react, they will leave you alone.

I don't advise you to shift to another room. Perhaps you could win your room-mate for Jesus by your thoughtful ways. Wait! Don't be impulsive. A perfect room-mate will be impossible to find. Remember we have to live in this world, even though we are not of this world.

You need the company of other Christian girls. Join a prayer group. If there isn't one, why not take the initiative and start one? May the Lord bless all your efforts.

Take your lessons seriously. Make up your mind to study systematically right from the start. Don't let your lessons pile up. Don't burn the midnight oil on the day before the exam.

Physical activity will keep you trim and in good health. I would advise you to take part in NCC, games, sports and such extra-curricular activities.

Your friend Valli, has accepted Jesus. Her orthodox Hindu parents are furious with her. Remember to pray for her. Write to me often. Write the latest news! Which fan club are you in currently?

Love and prayers

Your Aunty

10 Sept 1988

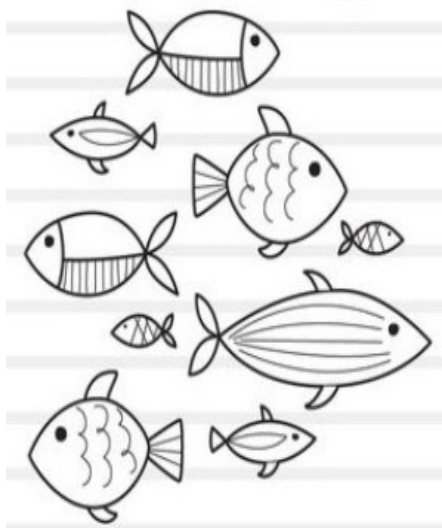
Dear Aunty,

I feel a lot better after reading your letter. Thanks. I nicknamed you a ‘preacher’ once! I’m ready to eat my words now. I do miss my friend, philosopher and guide. Sorry for not sending you a prompt reply. My evenings are fully

engaged with choir practices. I had no time to write. I’m sure you’ll understand.

By the way, I’m still in the Jesus Fan Club! And intend to stay there always!

You know what? I picked up courage and spoke to Aarthi. She didn’t snub me for interfering... I hope, she listened... She didn’t make any comment. But some of my classmates are quite suspicious of my fanatical ways. I walked up to one and asked her, “Are you saved?” She was so catty about it. “Is that the fashion?” she demanded (Her back arched and her claws ready to scratch), “You walk up to Christians and ask them if they are saved? Get lost! Your goods won’t sell here!”



Ugh! She cut me down to the size of a peanut... and ... before all the other girls. How they must have laughed! Perhaps, I'm not cut out to be a 'fisher' of men, after all. I dread to try again! I long for my school days. I wonder how I am going to stand this crowd for 3 years.

College Day was celebrated here. I would rather not say anything about it. Their behaviour was atrocious. I have decided to keep out of their revelry and merrymaking. I would rather be in hell.

A moody Mala.

* * *

22 Sept 1988

Dear Mala,

It's good to hear that the "preacher" has been promoted to the rank of "friend, philosopher and guide!"

I hope you're not kidding about your 'fan' club! I have heard so many stories about college 'beauties' and their mesmerised 'fans'. I'll be very relieved if you have kept out of this giddy-headed business.

Are the champion soulwinner's muscles flagging already? It looks like you are ready to give up even before the race has begun. Look Mala! Spiritual gifts don't drop down from heaven in gift-wrapped parcels everytime you pray. We must keep going.

School is virgin soil. It is easy to lead the early teens to the Lord. But winning college students for Christ is a great challenge. Pray every morning that the Lord will

use you that day. Then keep alert for opportunities where you may serve Him. Pray for discernment and wisdom not to let these opportunities slip through your fingers.

You never know. Girls who seem to be buoyant and light-hearted to all appearances may be wearing a flippant attitude to cover up the emptiness of their meaningless lives, steeped in fear and disillusionment. I pray that God leads you to be sensitive to the needs of others.

Do you remember Sangita whom you met at my place? She is now in Sholapur. Her letters also seem to echo your feelings. She too wants to cut herself off from all the social activities going on in her college. I have the same advice for both of you. Your success in soulwinning depends on how you move with other students. They mustn't think of you as eccentrics. But at the same time, they must see in you a difference and purity. If you cannot learn to accept and tolerate them, you will never be able to win them for Jesus. But never compromise on your convictions. Be friendly to all. In time, the Lord will make you sensitive enough to become aware of the specific needs of people around you. He will provide the opportunity and the words that you should speak. Pray for them. The Lord who hears your secret prayer will give you a glorious harvest of souls openly.

Have you watched a crane catch fish? Though spotlessly white, it doesn't scare off the fish. It stands perfectly still and catches the fish only when they come

close trustingly and within reach. The moral of the story is quite clear I think. The world may be compared to the pond. Like the crane though we may stand out in purity, we mustn't conduct ourselves in such a way that people run away from us. God's love should transform us into warm, caring people who reach out to others. Then they will respond by trusting in us and we can lead them to the Lord.

We are indeed "blessed" if we don't walk in the counsel of the ungodly, or stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of the scornful (Psa 1:1); but we must also be a "friend of sinners" (Mt 9:10-13). I hope I am making myself clear — we should not have fellowship with sinners but we can be their friends. The world is an ocean and we are fisher-folk. So, always remember that the Lord has a purpose in taking you to this institution. Take care that you fulfill that purpose.

(everywhere + wisdom) + (ever + smile) + (everyone + love) - (hesitation + fear + shyness) = soul x soul x soul

Bloom where you are planted. You are a witness in this world; a missionary in your own place.

Do you still write to your schoolmates? Keep in touch with them. Write home regularly. I met your mother at the market. She complained that you are slack in writing letters. When are you coming home?

Your Aunty

* * *

30 Sept 1988

Dear Aunty,

Two days ago I saw something that shocked and disgusted me. When the lights went out, I went into my neighbour's room with my torchlight to borrow matches. I saw two girls there on the bed, lying in a passionate embrace. I fled for my life. Is this what you meant by fan?

Thank you so much for your letter. I read it over and over again. Your words have brought a new purpose and vigour into my life. Yes, I have made friends... now they come to my room atleast to share my grub. There are six in charge of the mess. I spoke to them. They were interested in listening to what I said. One of them wept. She wants to come to my room and talk to me privately. Do pray for her in our prayer cell.

Aarthi was very upset one day. She told me that she had missed her periods. I told her that it is quite normal for young girls to have irregular periods (you told me that... I remembered). She seems to be okay now.

I went to ELS and bought a copy of the Open Bible. It's beautiful. I had to empty my piggy bank and put in part of my monthly allowance. But it is worth it. It is quite difficult to understand but I am keeping at it.

I want to ask a favour of you...Would you please meet my sister and talk to her? I am concerned about her and the way her life is drifting....Thanks a lot. Please send me some tracts in English and Hindi. I plan to give to

some of my friends and also to distribute to others when I go out.

Yours MJM

((Mad-for-Jesus-Mala)

6 Oct 1988

Dear Mala,

Your friend Preethi has stopped coming to the Saturday prayer meeting. I tried to confront her but she managed to slip away. Why don't you write to her and find out the cause for her backsliding? Try and meet her when you come down, for holidays.

The sin you stumbled on is called lesbianism or perverted sexual relations between two women. Be very careful. Keep a safe distance from girls who commit this act. It is very difficult to escape from the clutches of this sin, if you get involved. Romans 1:26 speaks of this sin: "For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature." You can give these girls some advice.

1. They must acknowledge their sin and pray for deliverance.

2. They must stop living together

3. They must keep themselves active and not be idle.

4. They must give up self-reproach and put their trust in Jesus Christ who alone has the power to deliver them.

I think, your friend Aarthi should have a medical check-up. God forbid! But she may be pregnant. These days it seems quite common for young girls to become unwed mothers. This is the reason why you have been warned to avoid being alone with boys. I have discussed the topic “Why not Wait?” in detail in a pamphlet. Read it carefully Mala. Perhaps, you may share it with your friends in college.

I want to warn you about drugs also. Don’t experiment with intoxicating drugs (tablets, injections, alcohol or cigarettes). It is possible for you to get hooked even with a small experimental dose. And once you are hooked, it is next to impossible to kick the habit. The drug literally finishes you off.

Drug addicts, lesbians, perverts...seem to be a despicable lot, aren’t they? But do we really have the right to cast stones at them? Many of these youngsters never had a sheltered, protected life like we had. Perhaps, it was lack of parental guidance, love, affection and security. They devise their own means of satisfying their basic need for love, recognition and belonging. Therefore it is our responsibility to pray for them and win them. May the Lord bless your efforts.

When you come home please buy me a copy of Ann Judson’s biography. Someone borrowed my copy and never bothered to return it.

I’m writing in haste. We are about to leave on a long tour. So write only after two months.

Your loving Aunt

7 Dec 1988

Dear Aunty,

It's been 2 months since we were in touch. I'm saturated with "news" to give you and nearly bursting with curiosity to hear what's been happening at your end.



The last letter you wrote to me was an eye-opener. To tell you the truth, I used to despise these 'sinful' girls. I wanted to run away and hide. But the Lord spoke to me through your letter. I went down on my knees and wept. Since then I have been trying to reach out to them.

You'll be happy to know that I have gathered my first fruit! It's kitchen Kala! She came to my room and committed herself to the Lord. We pray together every Saturday. Three girls have accepted Jesus. I discovered two other believers. We have now formed a small prayer group in our hostel.

Subhashini is a 3rd year B.A. Student. She's a believer, about to marry her cousin. She is praying for his conversion. She claims that he's of course a nice fellow. How can I tell her that this is wrong?

Our pastor requested someone from our college to speak at a youth meeting in our church. My name was proposed. I felt very jittery but I didn't refuse.

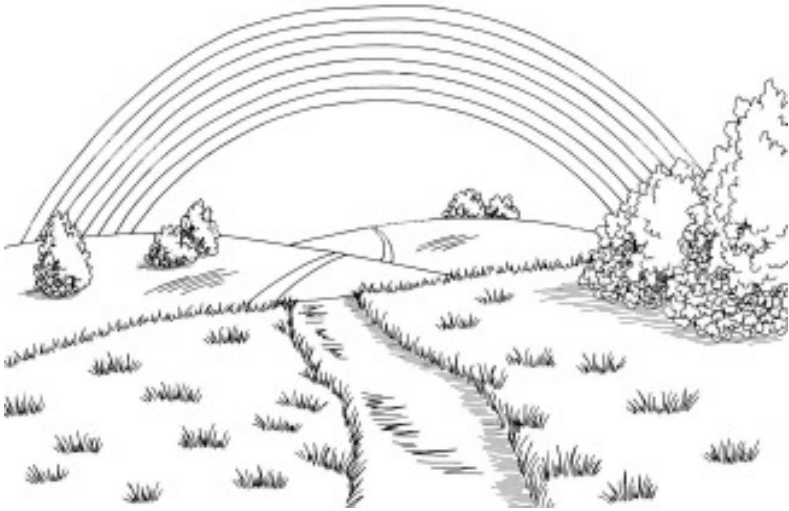
I went prepared to speak on Ecclesiastes 12:1. There were about 20 young people at the meeting. I started with Ecclesiastes 12:1 but ended up sharing my testimony with them. My fear and nervousness melted away. Later on I realised that I had spoken for an hour. The Lord moved in a wonderful way that day. Our pastor has requested me to speak again at another youth rally to be held at the end of December. I am bubbling.

I'll give you the rest of the news when I come home for Christmas holidays. Three of my friends have promised to contribute regularly to our missionary activities. Marina has decided to give Rs.125/-. She was a cine addict and this is the amount that she will save by giving up films and magazines. I'm sending you a moneyorder for Rs. 242/- this month. This includes my own offering of Rs. 50/-.

Please send me Sangita's address. Expecting atleast one more letter before I return.

Yours Lovingly,

Mala the Great!



On the day she arrived, she was at my doorstep!

“Hi aunty...”

“Oh Mala, how are you?”

She shook my hand so long and hard that is ached, and planted a kiss on my cheek—so unusual of her.

“Why didn’t you write aunty?”

“Oh, I knew you’d be coming soon. So I thought we could share everything in person.”

She bubbled over with enthusiasm as the words poured out in a high-pitched excited hyperbole. I listened, amazed at the incredible speed and volume of her chatter.

“Malu! Cut down the volume. I’m not deaf. Talk softly. You are taxing my system.”

It was no use. So I just listened until we reached the story of Subhashini and her incomparable fiancé.

“Aunty, it’s wrong, isn’t it? It seems he doesn’t smoke, doesn’t go to movies, has no bad habits, never misses church services, minds his own business... Subhashini says that he’s much better than many other “believers.” It doesn’t make sense to me but I don’t know how to convince her.”

“Need I tell you Mala? Good men and bad men cannot be compared to believers and unbelievers. Our goodness is all compared to filthy rags. A believer is one who robes himself in God’s righteousness (Isa 64:6) Subhashini is a believer, but he is an unbeliever, though a good man. What do they have in common? Nothing that can bond their union firmly. Look at 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. The Word of God takes a very clear stand on this issue. A donkey and an ox cannot be yoked together! It never works. Moreover, it is not good to marry close relatives.”

“But how can I help Subhashini to know the will of God in her life?”

There are three ways of finding out the will of God.

1. The teaching of the Bible.

On the basis of the Bible one can say “No” to a proposal for alliance with an unbeliever. There is no need to consent out of fear even to the so called “prophets”

who thrive in the marriage market. The Word of God should be your guide, not only in the matter of marriage but in all other issues in your life.

2. The leading of the Spirit.

When we wait on the Lord, His Spirit will speak to us in our hearts and guide us and fill us with His peace and serenity. He is not a God of confusion.

3. The evidence of Circumstances.

Psalms 37:4,5 says, “Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desire of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him and He shall bring it to pass.” God arranges the circumstances and we are to obey His Word and the Holy Spirit’s leading. He will normally make circumstances favourable for us.

“Take Rebekah and Isaac for an example. Was it not God who turned circumstances in their favour? Rebekah lived among unbelievers and her parents didn’t go looking for a suitable partner. Abraham, Isaac and Eliezer had never ever heard of her. If Isaac and Rebekah, separated by miles and miles of desert could be brought together, what wonders can we not expect from God when it comes to marriage?”

“I want to ask you something aunty, promise not to bluff...”

“I think I know what’s coming! Fire away!”

“How did you marry uncle?”

“That was another miracle. My parents were looking for a doctor. But God had other plans for me. And His ways are far higher and greater than what can be conceived by our finite minds. My sister’s husband was employed in a harbour. He’s an engineer. Uncle went there for a training. My brother-in-law was impressed by the way uncle preached in a house group. He told my parents that he had found the ideal companion for me....Soon, the marriage was arranged.

“Looking back, I am convinced that those years of waiting and trustful expectation were worth it! There were storms and thunders. But the outcome was a rainbow. Today, I thank God from the bottom of my heart for my husband.”

Mala grinned impishly, “Really?! I thought you were a love-match.”

“Of course, you would, you little crook!”

I eyed Mala who sat collapsed like a rag-doll on the sofa.

“I hate to offend you Mala. But before you leave for college I want to point out some city styles that you have to unlearn—that is if you don’t mind.”

“You are a bore aunty. Even on interesting days you spoil my mood.”

“You should not allow your mood to sour so easily. Some bad habits may be difficult to kick later on.”

“What bad habit did you notice in this short while?”

“First of all you must sit like a lady.”

“How do ladies sit?”

“Knees together. Sit straight. Don’t slouch. Even while standing, don’t stand feet apart with hands on your hip. That’s a manly posture. The modern world may not accept this view. But a woman should be a woman.”

Mala slowly corrected her posture.

“Thank you for saying that aunty. Anytime please feel free to correct me.”

I could see the maturity in her face and without a hitch we chatted on, till the time of her departure.



7 Jan 1989

Dear Aunty,

Christmas holidays were great fun. It was lovely getting in touch with friends and relatives. On New Year's Day I gleaned thro' my diary. There was so much to thank God for! My friend Esther is in Rajasthan. She wrote asking for good Christian magazines and books as she has plenty of time to read.

I want to mention some of the problems we have in our prayer group.

1. Remember Lyla? I introduced her to you when you had come. She is confessing her sins for the past two weeks. She says she is unable to weep and confess as some do. She longs to be saved.

2. Meera, my classmate has stopped attending prayer meetings. I met her. She wept bitterly and said she has committed an awful sin and has lost her salvation. I am not able to reassure her.

3. Saraswathi will be going home for holidays. You know her parents are not Christians. How can I guide her?

I had come to your place to bid goodbye but you weren't there. Do write soon.

Mala

21 Feb. 1989

Dear Mala,

Received your letter,

1. God has created people of different personality types. Some are naturally reticent and conceal their emotions while others demonstrate their emotions openly. To one the experience of salvation may be an outburst of ecstasy. To another, it may be a deeply moving and tearful experience of confessing sins. To yet another, it may be a moment of quiet tranquility in the presence of God. That depends on our emotional make-up. The value of one's salvation does not depend upon his emotional reaction. Do you understand what I'm trying to say? Just because someone weeps or dances with joy doesn't mean she has a deeper experience than the one who confesses quietly. "The just shall live by faith." Read I John 1:7-9; Romans 10:10,17 to Lyla. That will set her mind at ease.

2. Please tell Meera that her fears are irrational. God will never disown us when we sin and our salvation will not be snatched away from us everytime we sin. But we

must remember that when we sin we grieve God. We lose the joy of our salvation. This is why David says, “Restore me the joy of Your salvation.” Read Psalm 51 and explain to her how David sinned, repented and confessed his sin and how God forgave and accepted him back. She must understand the difference between deliberately giving oneself up to sin and committing sin accidentally. “If anyone sins we have Jesus the righteous Mediator to plead with the Father on our behalf,” writes John. And why does he write so? “My children, I write these things so that we may not sin,” he says.

3. I agree that it is a daunting challenge for a non-Christian to take a stand for Christ. Advise Saraswathi to be loving, gentle, cheerful, obedient and helpful at home. But in matters pertaining to God she must keep her witness in all gentleness and humility.

I have bought a smart handbag for you from Bombay. Hope you will like it.

Your loving Aunty.

My work had brought me to Chennai. I managed to squeeze an hour out of my schedule to pay a visit to Mala. She was on her way to the canteen.



“Wow! It’s going to rain today!”

I was pleased to hear the welcome in her voice.

“Great! We need rain,” I grinned.

She took me to the canteen. We talked through a couple of masala dosas.



“Come, let’s go to my room.” she invited.

“What’s that music I hear?”

“Some prayer meeting going on.”

“Why didn’t you go?”

“I don’t think I can get along there.”

“Mala, how can you say that when you are a Christian? Aren’t you a part of the Body of Christ? Jesus teaches about togetherness that we are all members of one body. As it is we Christians are a minority in India.

We are only 3%. If we stand divided it is not going to profit us or bless the nation. What we need is harmony. What a cacophony of noise it would be if every instrument in an orchestra played its own tune? God wants a perfect harmony. Every instrument plays its part but the whole must blend and synchronise into a perfect harmony. You must learn to be broad-minded.”

“Talk of peace and harmony! They themselves are like cats and dogs...biting, scratching and clawing.”

“Mala don’t be so quick to criticise. After all, they are believers. You must fellowship with all the children of God. There will be differences of opinion, I grant. But unity is strength. God is not finished with them yet.”

There were so many things to talk about. We ran out of time. I got into a crowded 109A and finally got home by Mangalore Express... dusty, sweating and very very tired.

24 Prince Charming is Late!

Three years flew by. Mala graduated with good grades. But there was no Prince Charming to chaperone her into the dreamland!



“At home they are always scolding me. My parents protest that I am making too many demands.

They think I am going to end up a cranky old maid. I am getting many proposals. It’s very embarrassing when people land up without warning to ‘see’ you,” she complained.

“So what?”

“I am getting older you know. I have your guidelines in my diary. I am waiting prayerfully. But under pressure my will power seems to break down. Yesterday there was a letter—a proposal from my cousin in Canada. His father has written. His letter is full of Bible verses. They don’t demand any dowry. As far as I know, he is not far from salvation.”

“Oh O, I see. He lives in the periphery of God’s Kingdom eh? Just on the border yah? In which

theological college did you learn this far-and-near salvation? You talk of salvation as though an “associate-membership” is admissible! You know pretty well that in the matter of salvation, you are either IN or OUT, there is no IN-BETWEEN. In any case why should you marry a close relative? It is not healthy.”

“I didn’t give my word. I don’t know. May be he was saved after going there. May be, you have some revelation? Pray and tell me please.”

She tossed the ball as usual in my court.

“Yah, yah, I have lot of revelations! Revelation! Is this what you learnt from me all these years? Come on, sit near me and listen to this story.

“There was a woman called Jeve. God gave her the liberty to be married to whom she wished, (but) only in the Lord (I Cor 7:39; Num 36:9). So, He gave her the liberty with a condition. The tricky snake started teasing the pining woman. “Has God told you not to marry anyone in the whole world?” She knew the Lord’s Word very well, but quite unnecessarily began answering the snake.

“We can marry anyone we want in all the world. But regarding the unbeliever who lives in the centre of the world, God has said: Do not be unequally yoked together with an unbeliever (2 Cor 6:14,17), don’t touch him, nor marry him, lest you die (Gen 3:3). Then the snake said to Jeve: You will not surely die. By your fervent prayer you will surely save him. For God knows

that the day you marry him, your eyes will be opened, and you will fly like the gods to Canada.

“So when Jeve saw that the man was good for life, pleasing to the eyes, and wise and highly qualified, she gave her consent. So he married her. Then the eyes of both were opened. When their eyes were opened, tears flowed freely. Understand? Why are you keeping mum?”

“Then what?”

“Then what. They understood each other. They realised their big mistake. Her dream of saving her husband was shattered into a thousand fragments. She banged her head for repeating the 4000 year old mistake. She lamented, “I married in haste. I shall worry at leisure!” And they lived sorrowfully everafter.

“Look here. Marriages like this cannot have a happily-ever-after ending. The fruits of such a life are curse (Num 25:6-9,31:16), and sin (Neh 13:26) and ungodly children (Lev 24:10,11). Look up the references.

“You’ve waited so long. Now don’t collapse when you’re almost at the end of the tunnel. Don’t make a big hubbub at home. They may stone me for putting ideas into your head. Explain patiently and lovingly. But stand firm. Beware of fake conversions for the sake of marriage. Go and rest quietly like Adam. And be minding your business like Rebekah. God will send you, I mean, bring you the right person at the right time.”

“Ah ha! Mala, is that your wedding invitation?”

Mala was all smiles, as she got out of the car in a beautiful silk saree, clutching a bundle of cards.

“Sorry, I couldn’t let you know earlier. It all happened so suddenly.”

“Who’s the poor fellow who fell in your trap Malu? Let’s have a look at his photograph.”

She opened her handbag and took out his photograph carefully out of a polythene cover.

“Dear, he looks so familiar. Didn’t he play the guitar at the Revival Crusade?”

“Um”

“Did he share his testimony one day?”

“Yap, I shared mine on the second day, he on the third.”

“Um... the secret is trickling out. Hurray! He has dedicated himself to be a missionary. Am I right?”

“Right, right.”

“Isn’t he an M.A?”

“Um, yes.”

“A big catch indeed Mal. How d’you throw the line?”

“I didn’t throw the line. In fact I was hooked.”

“Unbelievable!”

“You unbeliever! His father was there at the meeting. He happened to be a classmate of my dad. He came home to see my dad.”

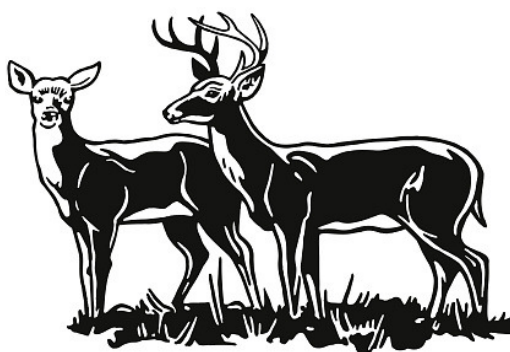
“Then?”

“Then what?... That’s all.”

“Super ya! We mustn’t fall in love. Love must fall on us. God bless you.”

“This is not falling in love.”

“Well, call it by any name you like.”



The bridal couple walked down the aisle hand-in-hand. I was sitting close to the aisle, so I could have a good look. Mala was walking with downcast eyes, but when she came near me, her eyelids fluttered up for a wee moment and our eyes met. A thousand tales lay hidden in that brief gaze.

“So she had her own way,” lamented Mala’s mother, pacing the platform, up and down.

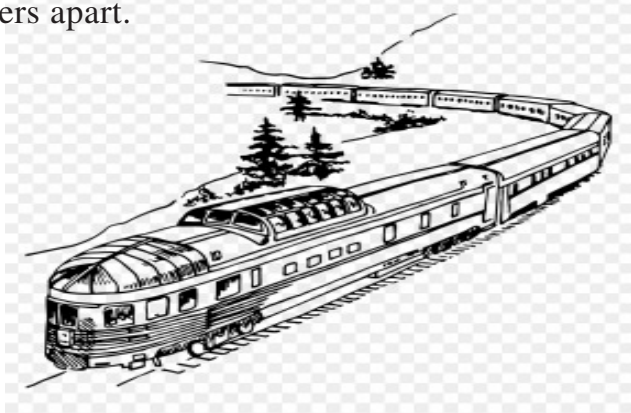
The Coramandel Express blew its whistle, and started off proudly bearing the young missionaries to their field. Mala put out her arm and held on to my hand tightly.

“This train seems to run through all the important routes in my life. Only the direction is changed.”

Her eyes filled. A lump rose to my throat. I opened my mouth, but words failed. They sank deep into my heart.

“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.”

As if to say, “I can’t wait for you. The lost are calling,” the train, like a cruel giant blew its whistle again, and chugged out of the station, forcefully pulling our fingers apart.



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