

Arasu Thambinayagam approached the breakfast table with the morning newspapers in hand. He was surprised to see the lavish food on the table. A closer look at the food revealed that his wife, Kannambal, has carefully selected the food their son, Sundaram, was fond of. Through the open door leading to the kitchen, he could see her buzzing around with the dishes. As for Kannambal, the eyes she wanted to avoid were Arasu's for she feared if he got to know her plans, he'd let the cat out of the bag.

"Kannu, what is special today? There's plenty of rich food here. Are we having any guests today?"

"Oh no! Have you forgotten it is Saturday today?"

"We don't have milk hoppers, *kollukattai*, *vadai* and *laddu* all at one time. Come on, Kannu, you cannot fool me. What is it?"

"*Incharunko*, look here, as it is not a working day, Sundar will be quite relaxed at home after a good meal, I thought it'd be a good time to talk of marriage. We have waited long enough for him to choose a partner. Yet, his answer is the same. That he hasn't come across the right girl. He is past thirty two years of age. You got married when you were twenty-five and *moothannai*, elder brother, got married in his twenty-sixth year. What do you say?"

"Now, now, this is not something new that you are going to tell your son. We have mentioned this to Sundar several times. It was only last week that you broached the same subject and it all ended up in a big argument. Didn't he tell us clearly that he would think of marriage only after two

## The Diamond Earrings

○ Sakuntala Kadiragamar

"Well, we as parents have a right to give our opinion. Next year, he is getting ready to go abroad. What will be our plight if he decided to marry a girl speaking a different language and from another culture? He is our only son. Will you accept a daughter-in-law who wears a short dress a foot above her knees? *Incharunko*, look here, you are not worried about his future, are you? You are only interested in his job and his salary. I want you to exert some pressure on him."

"Kannu, what can I do?" he said pathetically, "Sundar thinks we belong to the bullock-cart age. He does not take us seriously."

While they were talking Sundaram walked in wearing his sarong, lackadaisically taking things easy on his day off. Overjoyed to see the treats on the table, he hugged his mother, not knowing what else was in store for him. All the food he craved for was on the table. *Amma*, with a victorious smile, began to serve the food to the two men. Sundaram was in a happy mood. While enjoying the

food his mother had prepared, he talked about his scholarship. Arasu could not help smiling to himself at the direction in which the conversation was drifting. Praising his mother's culinary skills, he complimented her, "*Amma*, I am going to miss all this delicious food when I am in America next year."

Immediately Kannu's face lit up. She turned round with a meaningful look, "My dear son, surely you don't have to miss all this if you have a wife. Young people nowadays are good at preparing all kinds of delicacies." Then she prodded Arasu to say something. Arasu knew he shouldn't keep quiet any longer, and he cleared his throat to draw Sundaram's attention.

"Son, there is some truth in what your mother says. 'There is a time for everything.' A time to dance, and a time for merry-making. I would say, this is the time for you to get married and have children."

"Have you joined forces with *Amma*? I was counting on you, *Appa*."

"We have to consider what is good for you. Since you are thinking of leaving the country, it is better for you to get married before you depart. Sundar, don't you think if you're married, you and your spouse will look after each other in times of illness and you could continue to eat Sri Lankan food?"

"*Appa*, I can eat any food." he protested.



“Actually, we feel it’s better for you to tie the *thali* (South Indian and Sri Lankan equivalent of *mangalsutra*) as soon as you choose someone. Of course, you can bide your time in choosing a partner if you continue to work here.”

“Tie the *thali*! What kind of expression is that? Does it mean that a woman is shackled to the man? How do people accept arranged marriages?”

“Sundar, call it what you may. You have witnessed our marriage, and do you honestly think that your mother is in shackles? Our marriage was an arranged marriage.”

“*Appa*, I didn’t know your marriage was arranged.”

“When I went to view the bride to be, Kannu, for the first time, I knew she was the right woman for me. As she descended the staircase leading to the sitting room, with her head held high, her eyes sparkling and an air of freedom, I was mesmerized. Without any pretense of modesty, she looked straight in my eyes as if questioning me, ‘So you have come all the way to look at me and give your opinion?’ I knew immediately she would be a strong and determined woman. For me, it was love at first sight. So Sundar, when you meet the right person, you should seize the opportunity. Don’t you think that your mother is a wonderful woman?”

“Of course, I know she is a great mother.”

“You have to grant that she is forthright, practical and down to earth. Today, you wouldn’t be a doctor if it hadn’t been for your mother. Listen to me son, we are not forcing you to marry someone you dislike. We will suggest girls who are likely to suit you and you are free to choose.”

“*Appa*, I happened to see Dr. Ramani, the girl, *Amma* and you recommended. She looks alright but I need time to decide.”

At that moment, Kannu appeared with the coffeepot from the kitchen. “Forget Dr. Ramani and listen to this.” She produced a letter that her brother had sent the previous day. He had written.

“My daughter, Poornima, has graduated as a lawyer and we would like her to get married before she starts hunting for a job. We are looking for a well-mannered young man who is not in the habit of smoking or drinking. Both Nalamma and I think no one could be better suited to Poornima than Sundaram. I haven’t seen him since he became a doctor, but his quiet and gentle ways have always endeared him to me. Moreover, I have been in and out of the hospital recently and I would like to see my daughter married before I die. We would be happy if Sundaram could pay us a visit. It is important that our children should develop a liking for each other. The next weekend happens to be a long weekend with Monday and Tuesday being public holidays. If it’s convenient for Sundaram, it’ll suit us very well. Poornima is at home now, attending cookery classes, for which she never had time before. We haven’t uttered a word about this letter to her so that when Sundaram is here they can get to know each other as cousins.”

He closed the letter with love to all. This letter was a surprise to Arasu. Kannambal seemed to like the idea very much but Arasu felt he must say what had to be said. Voicing his opposition to marriage among relatives, he explained, “This usually leads to interference by the parents. As you all know, ‘Familiarity breeds contempt.’ I want Sundar to lead an independent life without being subject to any kind of control from well meaning relatives.”

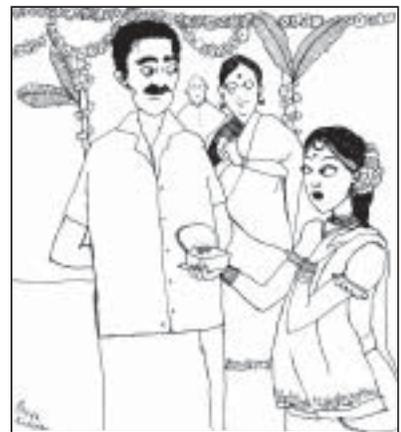
Then Kannambal interjected, “This problem will not arise as the couple will live outside the Island, far away from interfering relatives.”

Sundaram was a silent listener and did not commit himself. But Kannambal appeared rather moved by the letter. She hadn’t expected Arasu to react the way he did. In fact, she was expecting Arasu’s cooperation. She was upset at his response, and added that she wouldn’t have been so in favour if the request had come from any one of her other brothers. But *moothannai*, her eldest brother, had saved her and her parents from misery. She could never forget what he did for them.

Sundaram, who was busy eating all this while, now got interested in the conversation. He was shocked to see his mother in tears and went near her and coaxed her to tell him what had happened.

She began:

“Although it occurred thirty-three years ago, still, I remember it vividly as though it took place yesterday. It was a week before my wedding. All the wedding arrangements were in progress. Our friends and relatives had gathered in our home, making cakes and *pallaharam* for the wedding reception. The workmen had come to erect the wedding *pandal* to seat the wedding guests. The tailor was at home with the clothes all made for the bride, the bridesmaids and flower girls. On that day, one of our neighbours, who had been a go-between in arranging the marriage,



quietly whispered into my mother's ears: 'Are all the jewels and the diamond earrings that were promised ready?' This came as a shock to my mother."

"The jewellery, most of which belonged to my mother, had been handed down to me. Since during the negotiations a pair of diamond earrings had only been mentioned once, our family had conveniently forgotten to buy them. In desperation, my mother ran to my father, but he shook his head saying, "I have borrowed from every quarter I could think of and there is nothing more I can do." Since mine was the last wedding in the family, everybody wanted it to be a grand one and all the expenditure fell on my poor father's shoulders. Mother was in a quandary. When I entered my mother's room, I saw her in great distress. I have never seen my mother in that state. She was a woman who remained calm in every storm, but that day she went to pieces. I tried to pacify her but to no avail. Finally, I said, "If the bridegroom's parents insist on the diamond earrings, we'll call off the wedding. As I am a working woman, I can stand on my own feet." My mother wouldn't even consider it.

"As a last resort, she decided to give a call to her *moothamahan*, her eldest son, who was planning to come in two days for the wedding. Mother explained that we were unable to fulfill the promise regarding the diamond earrings, and that my father was helpless, as he had bitten off more than he could chew. As usual, *moothanna* said not to worry and promised he'd take responsibility for it. Promptly, as he entered the house, I was asked to come see him; he gave me a silver box with the precious diamond earrings in it. It was only then my mother looked relieved and peaceful. She was very happy and proud of her son. She thanked him profusely over and over again in these very words:

"Son, your timely action has avoided grave embarrassment and

disgrace to me and our family. All my life I'll never forget your generosity."

When *Amma* finished her story, Sundaram looked at *Appa* to see whether he had anything to say. But he was not listening. He had withdrawn and seemed to be in a contemplative mood.

Sundaram knew that in the next few days he had to decide whether to accept *maama's*, [uncle's] invitation. Both *Appa* and *Amma* felt that Sundaram should go. They thought that, when an old *maama* was sick and liked to see his nephew, it'd be perceived as arrogance on his part to refuse the invitation. The decision to marry or not marry his daughter was a totally different question. Sundaram knew he couldn't wriggle out of the situation. In order to please his parents, he left for Jaffna by train that Friday. It was *Appa* who drove him to the station and just before he dropped him off he said, "Son, at no time should you feel you have to give your consent to marry your cousin. If you like her, well and good. If not, you have to tell us, and we'll let them know." Then they parted.

Kannambal was on tenterhooks after her son left, waiting for word from him every day. On the day he was supposed to return they received a letter saying that he had decided to extend his stay for another week, as *maama* and *maami* had kindly asked him to stay on for longer. As for Poornima, he wrote, "I met her before I saw the others. My train was late and I was trying to find my way home when by chance I met her on the way. I am enjoying my stay here. In the mornings, Poornima and I go for walks in the paddy fields and occasionally, with a picnic



lunch in our bags, we ride on bicycles to far away places like the Casuarina beach. Sometimes, Poornima reminds me of *Amma*. I'll make the decision when I come home. I don't know what is in her mind. I think you were right in advising me to settle down. The rest in person."

Kannambal heaved a sigh of relief saying, "I can hardly wait. One week seems a long time." Arasu laughed at her and said, "You don't have to wait for the answer, the rascal has fallen head over heels in love with her. Now you can start making preparations for the wedding."

They both looked happy and elated that their son had at last expressed a liking for a possible bride.

That afternoon, Arasu was waiting for Kannu to have lunch with him, but she didn't turn up for a long time. When she arrived, she looked pale and went straight to her room without a word to Arasu. He followed her, thinking she must be sick. But she wouldn't speak to him. She sat on the bed staring into space as though she had lost everything in the world. She looked lost and forlorn. At first, he thought she was in some kind of pain. He was worried sick. He had never seen her like this before. Finally, he threatened to take her to the doctor by force. She finally opened up and whispered, "We must call Sundar home immediately." Amidst sobs, she took Arasu's hands in hers and said, "We have deceived



dreamt he would do such a despicable thing.”

“I am disappointed in you, Kannambal. Why should you ask for forgiveness from me? Do you think I care a damn about your earrings? First of all, my family had no right to make demands of jewelry you got from your parents. By

you. Please forgive me.” Arasu didn’t know what she was talking about. She took a silver box from her handbag and said, “I took the diamond earrings to the goldsmith to get them polished and I learnt they were not real diamonds. They are fake stones. All these years I loved my brother more than the rest of my family, I never

the way, you’ll be surprised to know that I have been aware the diamonds in the earrings were not genuine for a very long time. Do you remember, when we returned from our honeymoon, one of the stones in your earrings had fallen out and you wanted it to be mounted? I took it to the goldsmith in our village, and he

examined it and pronounced it as fake.”

Kannambal, in great haste, asked, “Aren’t we calling Sundar back? He doesn’t know what happened. What do we do if he gives his consent to marry her?”

“Kannu, forgive and forget and don’t be too harsh on your brother. Why should Sundar be called back? He seems to have taken a liking for the girl. Let them decide their future. Don’t tell him anything about the earrings. He has the money to buy not one, but several.”

Kannambal gazed awestruck at this man, as though she was seeing him for the first time after living with him for thirty-three years! She had always admired her *moothannai* above all others, had placed him on a pedestal. Now, within a few hours, her beloved husband had replaced him. □

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