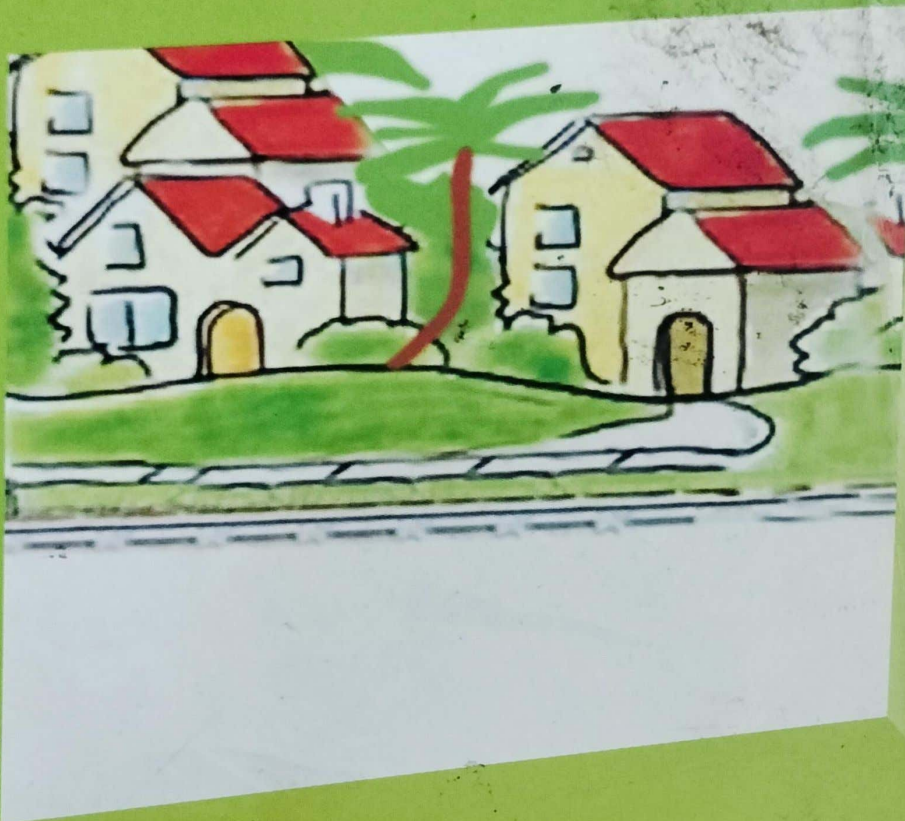
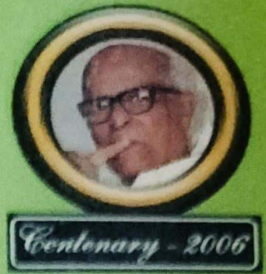
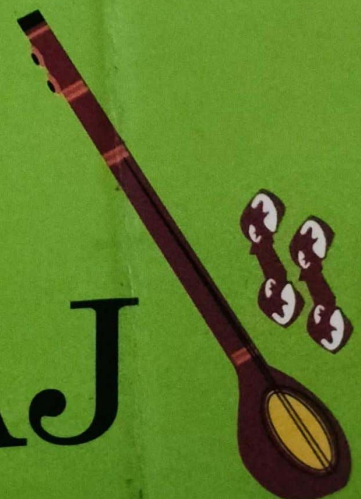


# R.K. NARAYAN



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## The World of NAGARAJ





He knew what she was going to say and tried to divert her thoughts with, 'I heard today tamarind is going to be scarce' – remember to buy our year's supply if it is coming in basket headloads from villages.'

'Available in plenty. Why do you worry about it now?'

'Because they are exporting lorry loads to Iraq . . .'

She laughed at the notion, 'Iraq? Where is it? Do they also eat rasam and sambhar? Their food would be different.'

'I only told you what I have heard.'

She burst into a laugh. 'In your Sari Centre you seem to hear strange reports.'

Further talk was not possible as the scooter was heard coming at the market end of the lane. Nagaraj wished he could find more time for a discussion with his nephew and demand an explanation, but it seemed impossible. From the minute he got up from bed the young man moved up and down the house and then constantly went out on his bicycle or the neighbour's scooter, and returned home late. Sita did not share her husband's blind leniency towards the boy. She felt at times that he would benefit by a sound thrashing. She found it impossible to depend on his words. He was full of charm but never meant what he said, and proved slippery. He would promise to be on time for food but could never be found when others were ready and waiting. He would pick up his college books and bicycle, open the front door and just vanish while she and her husband were before their plates in the dining room. Why he behaved thus could not be understood. Till he was expected in the kitchen, he would be hanging about his aunt uttering pleasantries and sometimes also detailing his preference in food matters, and then suddenly disappear. Nagaraj, though puzzled by his behaviour, would explain it away. 'He'll be back – must have thought of something suddenly about his college and will come back . . .'

When he was in, it was impossible to get angry with him. He displayed such friendliness and dogged his aunt's footsteps in the vast house, talking and explaining to her scientific wonders, world events and all kinds of things. He



would ask, 'What is the menu today?' and express his joy at whatever he heard, only to disappear when they were getting ready to serve him. But not every time. Sometimes he stayed on and expressed appreciation of his aunt's culinary genius. That pleased her greatly, but only for the time being. She had misgivings about him sometimes, rather bewildered by his manner. On some evenings he would appear unexpectedly at an odd hour and say plaintively, 'I'm dying of hunger. Give me anything.' The lady would feel so pleased that she would bustle about and feed him. Soon after eating he would take his bicycle or the neighbour's scooter and disappear, much to the bewilderment of Nagaraj while he was planning a quiet chat with him on the pyol.

Today, when the boy passed in, Nagaraj sniffed. He detected a faint alcohol flavour in the air. That disturbed his mind for a moment. He wondered if the young fellow was out somewhere sitting up in evil company. The Talkative Man had mentioned some time ago that he had noticed his nephew in a group of young men at Kismet in New Extension. Nagaraj felt disturbed but covered it up quickly. He wanted to ask if Kismet was such a horrible place that one should not be seen there, but the Talkative Man, as ever in a hurry, did not stop to explain. Nagaraj asked him later, 'What is Kismet?'

'A sort of club and restaurant and bar – started by a North Indian – very popular and fashionable.'

'What do they have there?'

'Anything from ice cream to whisky and soda, and dinner if ordered –'

'Oh, whisky!' Horrible word, not for Kabir Street families, in spite of the engineer in the last house who tottered about muttering imprecations and challenges every evening, abandoned by his family who had left him and moved out of town.

'Do you go there every day?' Nagaraj asked, his curiosity increasing every moment.