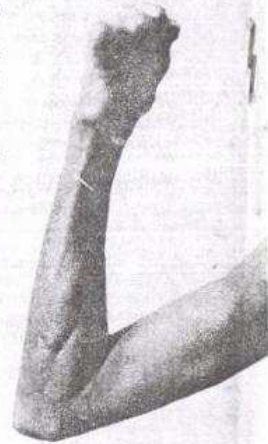




Au Revoir, Anne Marie

This is the story of Anne Marie and Radhakrishna Iyer—or more precisely of Radha and Krishna. She ditched her French lover Francis when she met leper Krishna. Anne Marie died. Radha was born. Leprous sores didn't make her frigid. In a dark and dingy room in Rameswaram she lived to love him, sharing his bed and food. They had vowed to be together till the ridge of eternity. But it was only 42 months to eternity.



Cupid's ways are curious. She came from the city of wine and perfumes to fall in love with a poor Indian leper. Anne Marie.

V AIGAI river giggled at the sight. A French lass, a peach of a girl, making love to an Indian leper. They had been there all evening whispering sweet nothings to each other, joking, laughing. And as the sun went down, two shadows melted into one.

But the night had eyes. Soon they came, the guardians of morality. "We can't let this happen in our place," said a social worker. The public agreed. Realising that discretion is the better part of love, the couple decided to regularise the proceedings. So, at a public meeting of sort, the leper tied a piece of turmeric on a yellow thread worn by Anne Marie Dompieri round her neck. Thus, Radhakrishna Iyer, a Saurashtra Brahmin weaver settled at Paramakudi in Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu, and Anne Marie became man and wife.

Now it won't be a sin, the girl, a Roman Catholic born in Montpellier, the French city of wine and perfumes, was told. The sparse crowd cheered as the social workers spoke on the importance of the occasion. To Anne Marie all that was immaterial—the noisy group, the sermons. What mattered was the piece of turmeric. She was a wife now.

For seven years she had shared bed with Francis, her French lover. All the time she wanted him to make her his lawfully wedded

wife. He satisfied her as a woman all right. But everytime she broached the question of marriage, the answer was: Why do you want a piece of paper to bind us together? We are happy now, isn't it enough?

She had no answer to that and to many other questions she asked herself. Slowly she was getting disenchanted with France and all that it meant. Occasionally she took Francis out for a long journey across the border. It helped, but not much. They would be returning to the same vacuum. She was 24 and life's scoreboard remained a rimless zero.

In 1979 the couple came to India. To Anne Marie it was like a pilgrimage. She was in love with India from her teenage days. The search for *Shanti* had led her to the libraries of southern France and she read—the Gita, Upanishads, Ramayana. She did believe in Jesus. She prayed to Him: Jesus, find me a guru in India, a Jesus in saffron.

She found one, on a Saturday night in March 1979. He was not saffron-clad. There were white patches of leprosy on his dark skin. And sores on his withered fingers.

Anne Marie was with Francis and two others sipping tea and smoking pot in one of those tiny stalls in Rameswaram when the man went up to them and rattled off in his pidgin English: Me Krishna, know English.

Guide here. Know Gita, Upanishad. Teach you yoga. Want meditate foreigners? Want smoke?

While Francis and others looked askance at him, Anne's eyes caressed him. A well-built fellow. Through the veil of ganja the leprosy sores did not look repulsive. What did he say? Meditation, yoga, Gita? Yes, that was what she had come for, all the way. She could not resist the offer. As if under a hypnotic spell, she dragged others along. Let's go.

And in one of those dark corners of the Rameswaram temple the weaver from Paramakudi initiated the foreigners into a mystic world of "medicine god" and meditation. As ganja smoke filled the air and their lungs, Anne had visions. It wasn't the leper but Krishna who stood before her—Lord Krishna uttering words of wisdom. She felt like a child trying to catch the meaning of every word.

Lepre Krishna as he is locally called, re-christened her as Radha. He taught her to

Hero of the love story of the century. Krishna of Paramakudi, Tamil Nadu.

meditate, answered the questions that were nagging her all these years.

Francis was dead so far as she was concerned. She had ditched him, buried him fathoms deep in memory. Even after she had fallen under the spell of this bizarre romance, Francis had stayed on in India for a few more days and tried to get back his lost love. No, it was all over. She had given him seven years of her life. That was enough.

Vedic discourses and yoga classes went on. One thing led to the other. In the yoga lessons the guru had to teach her the right posture, the right placement of legs. Sometimes she needed his help. The magic touch dissolved all the barriers.

It was total surrender. Francis had won her body. Krishna conquered her body and soul. She wrote about him in her diary: 'You are my god. You speak like Lord Krishna.'

They set up a love nest at Rameswaram. Just a room, a part of someone's house. The rent was Rs. 20 a month. It was a dark and dingy place. Still, she loved it. She cooked food for him, washed his clothes, fanned the flies away from his sores, shared his bed, ate the left-over from his plate like a devout Hindu wife of old.

All the money she had brought from home, over Rs. 4000, she spent on him. When it was over, she wrote to her parents and sister and got more. Though he did not believe in modern medicine, she got drugs from France to treat him.

She did the domestic chores when he was out, preaching and guiding tourists. She went to the common tap on the roadside to collect water. Once a week her fair hands would get dirtied with cowdung. The room had to be purified with cowdung water.

There was also the binding factor of ganja between them.

Life went on like a song till the bank balance touched the bottom. Then it struck a sour note. There were tiffs over money and

the kind of medicine she wanted for herself. He believed in nature cure.

Though she did not like to trouble her people in France too often, she wrote to them again for money. She also did something which she had never done before—pushing pot. But she soon got fed up with the business and gave it up.

Back to poverty. Anne was sick. She had fever. For three months she was in that condition. After an interminable debate on nature cure, a local doctor was called. She was treated for malaria. It was not malaria. She became weak, pale and skinny. She was no longer the peach of a girl who came to India.

More than the starvation and sickness,

How could you fall in love with a leper? How could you marry him, sleep with him, she was asked. "God made me do this. God wanted it this way. My husband is my god on earth. He knows everything... Please don't call me Anne Marie, call me Radha" she said, as if under a hypnotic spell.

what hurt her was a sense of guilt, of being a burden on her god on earth. Instead of being a ministering angel to him, she needed his care now. She did not know what to do.

One of the French tourists who halted at Rameswaram, Elizabeth, came to her rescue. She got her in touch with the French consulate in Pondicherry.

The inevitable parting came. Anne was convinced that she had to go. She told him. She would die if she did not go now. She would find some work in France, send him money and come back after two years with more money. Then they could build an ashram. Krishna always dreamt of an ashram of his own.

The French consul in Pondicherry got her admitted in a nursing home. She was suffering from typhoid, the doctors said. To the man's tearful letters from Paramakudi she wrote back: Don't make me sad.

And September last, after 42 months of this strange love life, Anne Marie took Air France's midnight flight 177 to Paris.

She is now at Grasse, the city of flowers, with her sister. From Grasse Anne Marie writes to THE WEEK: I haven't got a job yet. I might move over to Paris. It is easier to find jobs there. And I want to get back to India soon. I will be more happy there. I'll get back as soon as I make enough money for return ticket.

For her dream-god, in faraway Paramakudi, love now comes by air mail. Occasionally Anne sends him money. In the evenings Krishna sits alone on the banks of the Vaigai building ashrams in the air.

Won't she come back? The sands of Vaigai stir softly.

—MAXWELL FERNANDEZ

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K. V. STUDIO