

We are a great nation. Can we take the step of assuming that we will be greater yet as we come to live with some more generous understanding of all our possibilities? Our world may be the most beautiful of all the planets, but the state of our international relations is more barren than the craters of the moon.

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. Mailer questions at the beginning of his essay whether fifteen days as an "individual tourist" could provide a basis for offering any perceptions of the Soviet Union. In what ways, direct and indirect, does he answer this question?
2. What does Mailer mean by "scenario," and in what ways does his title reflect the changes he makes in his thinking as a result of his visit to the Soviet Union?
3. In what ways is Mailer's American background important in his perceptions of the Soviets? What parallels does he draw between the United States and the Soviet Union? What differences between the two countries strike him most forcefully? Why does he find the Soviet Union "a sad place"?
4. What is the significance of the story he tells about the woman who writes to the authorities pleading to release Glabikov? How does the story relate to the conclusions Mailer has drawn as a result of his experiences in the Soviet Union?
5. Mailer suggests a number of paradoxes in his essay. What are they, and how do they relate to his main ideas?

PREMCHAND



A Coward

Premchand, the pseudonym of Dhanpat Rai, was born in 1880 in a village near Benares, India. Although poor, Premchand's family was noted for producing men of letters; he studied Persian, Urdu, and Hindi, and wrote in both the Urdu and Hindi languages. A prolific writer in spite of his poor health, Premchand has the distinction of having created the genre of the serious short story in India. In both Urdu and Hindi, he transformed fiction from rambling romantic tales to realistic narratives comparable to the European fiction from which he gained his models—especially from Dickens, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Gorky.

The village life that Premchand knew best became the richest subject for his work. Although life in the cities of India has changed dramatically over the years, the villages still operate within an ancient, rigid, and sometimes cruel social structure: an unyielding caste system, crushing poverty, the exploitation of the poor by landowners and moneylenders, and terror at the possibility of disgrace or loss of face. Premchand's stories re-create these pressures and take the reader to the heart of village culture.

"A Coward" explores the struggle between the power and control of the caste system and two young people attempting to choose their own relationship as students at a university. Although the caste system began among the Hindus with four major castes, each caste representing collective occupations, today there are reputed to be about five thousand subcastes of the original four. Brahman is still the highest caste—originally the caste of Hindu priests; Baniya, one caste down, is the class of merchants. When women marry in India, even now the arrangement usually of their parents, they move to the home of their in-laws, and there are subject to the dictates of their mother-in-laws, too often another cruel aspect of life, especially for women, in India.

Before you read "A Coward," write about a time in your life when you tried to defy a strict rule of your parents. Describe the situation and the rule, why your parents believed so strongly in it, the outcome of your defiance, and what you learned as a result of this experience.

The boy's name was Keshav, the girl's Prema. They went to the same college, they were in the same class. Keshav believed in new ways and was opposed to the old caste customs. Prema adhered to the old order and fully accepted the traditions. But all the same there was a strong attachment between them and the whole college was aware of it. Although he was a Brahman Keshav regarded marriage with this Baniya girl as the culmination of his life. He didn't care a straw about his father and mother. Caste traditions he considered a fraud. If anything embodied the truth for him it was Prema. But for Prema it was impossible to take one step in opposition to the dictates of caste and family.

One evening the two of them met in a secluded corner of Victoria Park and sat down on the grass facing one another. The strollers had gone off one by one but these two lingered on. They had got into a discussion it was impossible to end.

Keshav said angrily, "All it means is that you don't care about me."

Prema tried to calm him down. "You're being unjust to me, Keshav. It's only that I don't know how I can bring it up at home without upsetting them. They're devoted to the old traditions. If they hear anything about a matter like this from me can't you imagine how distressed they'll be?"

"And aren't you a slave of those old traditions too then?" Keshav asked her sharply.

"No, I'm not," Prema said, her eyes tender, "but what my mother and father want is more important to me than anything."

"And you yourself don't count at all?"

"If that's how you want to understand it."

"I used to think those old ways were just for silly hypocrites but now it seems that educated girls like you knuckle under to them too. Since I'm ready to give up everything for you I expect the same thing from you."

In silence Prema wondered what authority she had over her own life. She had no right to go in any way against the mother and father who had created her from their own blood and reared her with love. To Keshav she said humbly, "Can love be considered only in terms of husband and wife and not friendship? I think of love as an attachment of the soul."

"You'll drive me crazy with your rationalizations," Keshav said harshly. "Just understand this—if I'm disappointed I can't go on living. I'm a materialist and it's not possible for me to be satisfied with some intangible happiness in the world of the imagination."

He caught Prema's hand and tried to draw her toward him, but she broke away and said, "I told you I'm not free. Don't ask me to do something I have no right to do."

If she'd spoken harshly he would not have been so hurt. For an instant he restrained himself, then he stood up and said sadly, "Just as you wish," and slowly walked away. Prema, in tears, continued to sit there.



When after supper that night Prema lay down in her mother's room she could not sleep. Keshav had said things to her that shadowed her heart like reflections in unquiet waters, changing at every moment, and she could not calm them. How could she talk to her mother about such things? Embarrassment kept her silent. She thought, "If I don't marry Keshav what's left for me in life?" While she thought about it over and over again her mind was made up about just one thing—if she did not marry Keshav she would marry no one.

Her mother said, "Still not sleeping? I've told you so many times you ought to do a little work around the house. But you can never take any time off from your books. In a little while you'll be going to some strange house and who knows what sort of place it will be? If you don't get accustomed to doing housework, how are you going to manage?"

Naively Prema asked, "Why will I be going to a strange house?"

Smiling, her mother said, "For a girl it's the greatest calamity, daughter. After being sheltered at home, as soon as she's grown up off she goes to live with others. If she gets a good husband her days pass happily, otherwise she has to go through life weeping. It all depends on fate. But in our community there's no family that appeals to me. There's no proper regard for girls anywhere. But we have to stay within our caste. Who knows how long caste marriages are going to go on?"

Frightened Prema said, "But here and there they're beginning to have marriages outside the caste." She'd said it for the sake of talking but she trembled lest her mother might guess something.

Surprised, her mother asked, "You don't mean among Hindus?" Then she answered herself. "If this has happened in a few places, then what's come of it?"

Prema did not reply. She was afraid her mother had understood her meaning. She saw her future in that moment before her like a great dark tunnel opening its mouth to swallow her up. It was a long time before she could fall asleep.



When she got up early in the morning Prema was aware of a strange new courage. We all make important decisions on the spur of the moment as though some divine power impelled us toward them, and so it was with Prema. Until yesterday she'd considered her parents' ideas as unchallengeable, but facing the problem courage was born in her, much in the way a quiet breeze coming against a mountain sweeps over the summit in a violent gust. Prema thought, "Agreed,

this body is my mother's and father's but whatever my own self, my soul, is to get must be got in this body. To hesitate now would not only be unfitting, it would be fatal. Why sacrifice your life for false principle? If a marriage isn't founded on love then it's just a business bargain with the body. Could you give yourself without love?" And she rebelled against the idea that she could be married off to somebody she had never seen.

After breakfast she had started to read when her father called her affectionately. "Yesterday I went to see your principal and he had a lot of praise for you."

"You're only saying that!"

"No, it's true." Then he opened a drawer of his desk and took out a picture set in a velvet frame. He showed it to her and said, "This boy came out first in the Civil Service examinations. You must have heard of him."

He had brought up the subject in such a way as not to give away his intention, but it was clear to Prema, she saw through it at once. Without looking at the picture she said, "No, I don't know who he is."

With feigned surprise her father said, "What? You haven't even heard his name? His picture and an article about him are in today's paper."

"Suppose they are?" Prema said. "The examinations don't mean anything to me. I always assumed that people who took those exams must be terribly conceited. After all, what do they aim for except to lord it over their wretched, penniless brothers?—And pile up a fortune doing it. That's no great career to aspire to."

The objection was spiteful, unjust. Her father had assumed that after his theology she would be interested. When he'd listened to her answer he said sharply, "You talk as though money and power mean nothing to you."

"That's right," she said, "they don't mean a thing to me. I look for self-sacrifice in a man. I know some boys who wouldn't accept that kind of position even if you tried to force it on them."

"Well, I've learned something new today!" he said sarcastically "And still I see people swarming around trying to get the meanest little jobs—I'd just like to see the face of one of these fellows capable of such self-sacrifice. If I did I'd get down on my knees to him."

Perhaps if she'd heard these words on another occasion Prema might have hung her head in shame. But this time, like a soldier with a dark tunnel behind him, there was no way for her to go except forward. Scarcely controlling her anger, her eyes full of indignation, she went to her room and from among several pictures of Keshav picked out the one she considered the worst and brought it back and set it down in front of her father. He wanted to give it no more than a casual glance, but at the first glimpse he was drawn to it. Keshav was tall and even though thin one recognized a strength and discipline about him; he was not particularly handsome but his face reflected such intelligence that one felt confidence in him.

While he looked at it her father said, "Who is he?"

Prema, bowing her head, said hesitantly, "He's in my class."

"Is he of our community?"

Prema's face clouded over: her destiny was to be decided on the answer. She realised that it was useless to have brought out the picture. The firmness she had had for an instant weakened before this simple question. In a low voice she said, "No, he's not, he's a Brahman." And even while she was saying it, agitated she left the room as though the atmosphere there were suffocating her, and on the other side of the wall she began to cry.

Her father's anger was so great at first that he wanted to call her out again and tell her plainly it was impossible. He got as far as the door, but seeing Prema crying his anger softened. He was aware of what Prema felt for this boy and he believed in education for women but he intended to maintain the family traditions. He would have sacrificed all his property for a suitable bridegroom of his own caste. But outside the limits of his community he could not conceive of any bridegroom worthy or noble enough; he could not imagine any disgrace greater than going beyond them.

"From today on you'll stop going to college," he said with a harsh tone. "If education teaches you to disregard our traditions, then education is wicked."

Timidly Prema said, "But it's almost time for the examinations."

"Forget about them."

Then he went into his room and pondered a long time.



One day six months later Prema's father came home and called Vriddha, his wife, for a private talk.

"As far as I know," he said, "Keshav's a well-brought-up and brilliant boy. I'm afraid that Prema's grieving to the point where she might take her life. You and I have tried to explain and so have others but nobody has had the slightest effect on her. What are we going to do about it?"

Anxiously his wife said, "Let her, but if she has her way how can you face the dishonour? How could I ever have borne a wicked girl like that?"

He frowned and said with a tone of reproach, "I've heard that a thousand times. But just how long can we moan about this caste tradition business? You're mistaken if you think the bird's going to stay hopping at home once it's spread its wings. I've thought about the problem objectively and I've come to the conclusion that we're obliged to face the emergency. I can't watch Prema die in the name of caste rules. Let people laugh but the time is not far off when all these old restrictions will be broken. Even today there have been hundreds of marriages outside the caste limitations. If the aim of marriage is a happy life for a man and a woman together we can't oppose Prema."

Vriddha was angry. "If that's your intention then why ask me?" she said. "But I say that I won't have anything to do with this marriage, and I'll never look at that girl's face again, I'll consider her as dead as our sons who died."

"Well then, what else can you suggest?"

"What if we do let her marry this boy? He'll take his civil service examinations

in two years and with what he has to offer it will be a great deal if he becomes clerk in some office."

"But what if Prema should kill herself?"

"Then let her—you've encouraged her, haven't you? If she doesn't care about why should we blacken our name for her? Anyway, suicide's no game—it's only a threat. The heart's like a wild horse—until it's broken and bridled nobody can touch it. If her heart stays like that who's to say that she'll stick with Keshav for her whole life-time? The way she's in love with him today, well, she can be in love with somebody else just as much tomorrow. And because of this you're ready to be disgraced?"

Her husband gave her a questioning look. "And if tomorrow she should go and marry Keshav, then what will you do? Then how much of your honour will be left? Out of shyness or consideration for us she may not have done anything at all, but if she decides to be stubborn there's nothing you or I can do."

It had never occurred to Vriddha that the problem could have such a dreadful ending. His meaning struck her with the violence of a bullet. She sat silent for a moment as though the shock had scattered her wits. Then backing down, she said, "What wild ideas you have! Until today I've never heard of a decent girl marrying according to her own wish."

"You may not have heard of it but I have, I've seen it and it's entirely possible."

"The day it happens will be my last!"

"But if it has to be this way isn't it preferable that we make the proper arrangements? If we're to be disgraced we may as well be efficient about it. Send for Keshav tomorrow and see what he has to say."



Keshav's father lived off a government pension. By nature he was ill-tempered and miserly; he found satisfaction only in religious ostentation. He was totally without imagination and unable to respect the personal feelings of anybody else. At present he was still living in the same world in which he had passed his childhood and youth. The rising tide of progress he called ruination and hoped to save at least his own family from it by any means available to him. Therefore when one day Prema's father came to him and broached the prospect of her marrying Keshav, old Panditji could not control himself. Staring through eyes dim with anger he said, "Are you drunk? Whatever this relationship may be it's not marriage. It appears that you too have had your head turned by the new ideas."

"I don't like this sort of connection either," Prema's father said gently. "My fears are just the same as yours. But the thing is that, being helpless, I had to come to see you. You're aware too of how willful today's youngsters have become. It's getting hard for us old-timers to defend our theories. I'm afraid that these two become desperate they may take their lives."

Old Panditji brought his foot down with a bang and shouted, "What are you saying, Sir! Aren't you ashamed? We're Brahmans and even among Brahmans we're of high rank. No matter how low a Brahman may fall he can never be so degraded that he can countenance a marriage with a shop-keeping Baniya's daughter. The day noble Brahmans run out of daughters we can discuss the problem. I say you have a fantastic nerve even to bring this matter up with me."

He was every bit as furious as Prema's father was humble, and the latter, unable to bear the humiliation any longer, went off cursing his luck.

Just then Keshav returned from college. Panditji sent for him at once and said severely, "I've heard that you're betrothed to some Baniya girl. How far has this actually gone?"

Pretending ignorance, Keshav said, "Who told you this?"

"Somebody. I'm asking you, is it true or not? If it's true and you've decided to go against your caste, then there's no more room for you in this house. You won't get one pice of my money. Whatever is in this house I've earned, and it's my right to give it to whoever I want. If you're guilty of this wicked conduct, you won't be permitted to put your foot inside my house."

Keshav was familiar with his father's temper. He loved Prema and he intended to marry her in secret. His father wouldn't always be alive and he counted on his mother's affection; sustained by that love he felt that he was ready to suffer any hardship. But Keshav was like a faint-hearted soldier who loses his courage at the sight of a gun and turns back.

Like any average young fellow he would argue his theories with a passion and demonstrate his devotion with his tongue. But to suffer for them was beyond his capacity. If he persisted and his father refused to weaken he didn't know where he would turn, his life would be ruined.

In a low voice he said, "Whoever told you that is a complete liar and nothing else." Staring at him, Panditji said, "So my information is entirely wrong?"

"Yes, entirely wrong."

"Then you'll write a letter to that shopkeeper this very moment and remember that if there's any more of this gossip he can regard you as his greatest enemy. Enough, go."

Keshav could say no more. He walked away but it seemed to him that his legs were utterly numb.



The next day Prema sent this letter to Keshav.

Dearest Keshav,

I was terribly upset when I heard about the rude and callous way your father treated mine. Perhaps he's threatened you too, in which case I wait anxiously to

hear what your decision is. I'm ready to undergo any kind of hardship with you. I'm aware of your father's wealth but all I need is your love to content me. Come tonight and have dinner with us. My mother and father are both eager to meet you.

I'm caught up in the dream of when the two of us will be joined by that bond that cannot be broken, that remains strong no matter how great the difficulties.

Your Prema

By evening there had been no reply to this letter. Prema's mother asked over and over again, "Isn't Keshav coming?" And her father kept his eyes glued on the door. By nine o'clock there was still no sign of Keshav nor any letter.

In Prema's mind all sorts of fears and hopes revolved. Perhaps Keshav had had no chance to write a letter, no chance to come today so that tomorrow he would surely come. She read over again the love letters he'd written her earlier. How steeped in love was every word, how much emotion, anxiety and acute desire! Then she remembered the words he'd said a hundred times and how often he'd wept before her. It was impossible to despair with so many proofs, but all the same throughout the night she was tormented by anxiety.

Early in the morning Keshav's answer came. Prema took the letter with trembling hands and read it. The letter fell from her hands. It seemed to her that her blood had ceased to flow. He had written:

I'm in a terrible quandary about how to answer you. I've been desperate trying to figure out what to do and I've come to the conclusion that for the present it would be impossible for me to go against my father's orders. Don't think I'm a coward. I'm not being selfish either. But I don't have the strength to overcome the obstacles facing me. Forget what I told you before. At that time I had no idea of how hard it was going to be.

Prema drew a long, painful breath, then she tore up the letter and threw it away. Her eyes filled with tears. She had never had the slightest expectation that the Keshav she had taken into her heart of hearts as her husband could be so cruel. It was as though until now she'd been watching a golden vision but on opening her eyes it had vanished completely. All her hope had disappeared and she was left in darkness.

"What did Keshav write?" her mother asked.

Prema looked at the floor and said, "He's not feeling well." What else was there to say? She could not have borne the shame of revealing Keshav's brutal disloyalty.

She spent the whole day working around the house, as though there was nothing wrong. She made dinner for everyone that evening and ate with them, then until quite late she played the harmonium and sang.

In the morning they found her lying dead in her room at a moment when the golden rays of dawn bestowed on her face the illusory splendour of life.

Translated by David Rubin

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. In what ways does this story raise questions about who should have authority over a person's life? As the story begins, what is Keshav's answer to that question? What is Prema's answer? On what ideas do they base their answers?
2. What cultural assumptions do Prema's mother and father have about the person she will marry? What power does she have as their daughter, both in their eyes and hers, to assert herself? How and why do Prema's and her parents' assumptions change over the course of the story?
3. What are Keshav's and Prema's assumptions about love in this story? Why do they think they love each other? Why or why not do you think they do?
4. What aspects of this story do you find ironic? Who is the coward of the title?