

Age-Old Tales

A Whiff of Spring

Nagaraj lay still on his bed and waited patiently for the lady in the other room to wake up. She wouldn't stir for another hour or so, although the Spring sunshine filtering through his bedroom windows was already warm. It *seemed* warm at any rate, the way it fell on his toes. He'd know for sure once the sunrays crept up above his waist.

'Another thing to wait for,' he thought, not without joy, as if he were adding a new rule to a well-worn game. The joy didn't last long – his current train of thought led him, quite inevitably, to the morning of the accident.

It had rained at dawn, but not much, so the roads were at their slippery worst. Always a careful rider, he rode his beloved scooter on the middle lane at a stately thirty-five. At least a twenty metres separated him from the bus ahead and there was ample space for faster generations to overtake him from both sides. He was in no hurry whatsoever. The driver of the Call Centre vehicle was. He had to drop his weary passengers home and collect four more for the morning shift. His dashboard clock told him that he was running seven minutes late. Overtaking a rheumatic scooter would have been the easiest chore of the morning. Except that a motorbike cut across him at the last instant. Going at eighty, the Call Centre vehicle swerved left. Nagaraj and his scooter were thrown up in the air. The scooter rose. Nagaraj soared. Landed on his lower back. The Ambassador following him braked an inch from his face. The last sensation he felt before fainting was the smell of burnt brake lining.

Nagaraj chewed saliva and peered hard at the splotches on the ceiling. Whenever he thought about the accident – which was a dozen times a day – he wondered about the reaction of his audience. Did it inspect the tar for a spill of blood? Did it ogle at his helmeted face to spot vital signs? How many people clucked? How many grimaced, how many swore? How many participated in bashing up the Call Centre driver?

How many volunteered to take him to the hospital?

Appu was present at the hospital when he regained consciousness. The first day, he was concerned, sympathetic and loving. Almost the eight-year-old boy who used to fret for his return from the office. The second day, he was sour, hot and defensive all at once.

'Dispose off that scooter, how many times did I tell you? Huh? Tell me. How many times? Riding at your age. And with those eyes! Like an Iron Curtain your cataract has become. That's what the best eye surgeon said, remember? But will you take a bus or an auto? Not you. So. Suffer. Paralysed from the waist down for the rest of your life. What fun. For you. *For me.*'

'No amount of painkillers can counter your words,' Nagaraj almost said.

'And what would you have done without insurance? Huh? Answer me. A waste of money it was, you thought.'

Money, as it turned out, wasn't an issue. Over and above the insurance payments, the Call Centre company gave him a generous Keep-Mum cheque. Nagaraj's employers gave him an early retirement with a pension. The Provident Fund kicked in. So when he returned home – to his inherited two-storey house in the centre of the city – on a wheelchair that a moody Appu pushed, he was, in a manner of speaking, a man of independent means. Just a few minor drawbacks remained – his daughter-in-law refused

to tolerate his presence; his wife had died in this very house nine Springs ago. But, well, money was a non-issue.

Lying motionless on his bed, Nagaraj heard music – the sound of his maid turning a clumsy key to open the front door. The maid directly went into the kitchen to tackle the utensils in the sink. Two minutes later, he heard an utensil clatter onto the floor. He grinned.

‘Everyday, without fail,’ a voice shouted. The voice of the lady in the other room. She was awake! ‘Allah knows how many times you dropped your baby on its head. It’s His Grace that it’s still alive.’

‘I don’t scrub my baby’s head for a pittance,’ the maid shouted back.

Nagaraj counted One Two Three Four Five. The door to his bedroom opened. He shifted his gaze from the ceiling to the door. The splotches migrated there. All he could see was a sharp nose and the outlines of a fair-complexioned face.

‘Do you want the bedpan now or can you wait?’ the lady asked.

‘Now, please,’ Nagaraj replied in his usual pitiable manner. ‘Good morning, Kawkab.’

Kawkab harrumphed half-heartedly, covered his lower body with a blanket, inserted a deft hand inside it to undo his pyjamas and finally positioned the bedpan with laudable accuracy. This was their pact of intimacy. She had memorised the coordinates of his anus; he could smell her frustrations, her half-fulfilled desires, in her night sweat.

‘Stay still,’ she commanded. ‘I’ll be back.’

Her bedpan wasn’t mobile.

As the room swooned under the spell of his smell, the birds outside chirruped a little more, as if they could also smell his produce and didn’t like it one bit. A greens vendor cried ‘*Soppu!*’ as he pushed his cart towards the dead-end house. Of course, he didn’t come all the way – no mistress had responded to his calls these nine years.

‘Done?’ Kawkab asked, peeping in, with a roll of toilet paper and latex gloves on her hands. Nagaraj nodded. The next ritual – toilet paper, deft hand, wipe, wipe, wipe – happened with the two participants staring in opposite directions.

‘It’s a funny thing,’ Nagaraj said.

‘I’m sure it isn’t,’ Kawkab replied.

‘The city has changed. The corner shop sells toilet paper now. That’s a blessing for us, isn’t it? But think a little deeper: had this city not known toilet paper, the accident wouldn’t have happened at all. Progress is strange, isn’t it?’

‘I’ll put you on the wheelchair after I make breakfast.’

‘Okay.’

‘I’ll get to it once that witch with butterfingers leaves.’

So they waited for that witch with butterfingers to leave.

Kawkab wasn’t Nagaraj’s first caregiver. That privilege belonged to a Malayali nurse with a boyfriend in the city and an ambition to fuss over oil-rich Sheikhs in the Gulf. Even Appu felt compelled to fire her the day Nagaraj’s urine tube came undone and made a mess as she and her boyfriend made love in the other room.

She, the Malayali nurse, was followed by a string of professional nurses, both male and female. The live-in variety were an assortment of kleptos, weepers, gluttons and dictators. The nine-to-five variety left Appu breathless.

‘I have to miss my onsite conference calls to deliver your dinner,’ Appu had fumed on one of those nights. ‘One fine *dabbawala* I’ve become. And God forbid, if something were to happen to you in the middle of the night, I’ll never hear the end of it. How could you leave your father all alone, they’ll ask.’

‘Nothing will happen to me,’ Nagaraj had replied. He was hungry and hence irritable. ‘What’s for dinner?’

‘Really, this can’t go on. Mad I’ll become.’ He paused. ‘She suggested a solution today.’

‘She meaning your wife,’ Nagaraj ventured, serving himself.

‘The solution is an Old Age Home. Round the clock service, you’ll get. And the company of people like you. Will work out cheaper as well.’

The first morsel froze in Nagaraj’s hand, befriended stale air, began forming crusts.

‘No rush,’ Appu added, not liking his father’s look. ‘Take your time. For you, I’m there.’

‘It’s a good idea, Appu,’ Nagaraj said. ‘If I bequeath this house to an Old Age Home, they’ll take care of me for the rest of my miserable life.’

Appu never broached the topic again. Nor did he ever discuss anything with his father before a meal. But he tried harder to find a decent caregiver. Someone permanent. Or semi-permanent. Someone who lasted a couple of seasons, dammit.

He found Kawkab.

‘She’s a widow. He died in a war, her husband.’

‘Which war?’ Nagaraj had asked.

‘Does it matter?’

‘If I know the war, I can guess her age, that’s all.’

‘Just listen,’ Appu said. Nagaraj just listened. To a story as old as organised society. Kawkab was born in an aristocratic family. She married into another. For generations, men in both families pursued pleasure and knowledge. The wealth dwindled. In Kawkab’s husband, his family finally found a spirited man, but he chose to channel that spirit in an unexpected direction. He became an officer of the Indian Army. The family was none too happy. An officer? In *their* ranks?

It was ironic, therefore, that his death allowed the family to relive, briefly, its glorious past. There they were, the Hamzas of the 21st century – descended from legendary business Moguls and statesmen – bereaving their most recent hero yet. The media had a field day. Two field days, in fact. But once the TV reporters had shed their tricoloured tears and switched off their halogens, the family swiftly descended into Mortgage Darkness.

‘The net result: Kawkab Hamza has been tending to the oldies in the family for the past many years,’ Appu said. ‘Better than a trained nurse, she’s become.’

‘Nice. Very nice,’ Nagaraj said.

‘But: she’s Kawkab Hamza. A Muslim. Let’s not make an issue out of it, okay?’

Nagaraj chuckled; he looked like a rakish teenager when he did that, with his still thick hair falling over his opaque blue-rimmed eyeballs in an act of mischief.

‘I’ll tell you a story, Appu.’

‘Not a story, *please*.’

‘You’ll like this one. Back in the good old days, the city was walkable in all directions...’

It was a poorer, happier city. Greener than the countryside. The winter morning air pinched better than a scorpion’s pincers and left equally red marks on one’s cheeks. The old didn’t look old and the young looked like Gods.

‘I really don’t have the time,’ Appu said.

‘I’m getting to the point,’ Nagaraj said. ‘Back in those days...’

‘Dear God!’

‘... the city’s favourite pastime was to linger around *GWG – The Portrait Specialists*.’

And with good reason. Watchable movies and alluring theatres were rare; a good cup of south Indian coffee took twenty seconds to gulp down, lather and all; nobody had heard of television. As a result, there was time to kill, and the humungous radio at *GWG*’s took a life of its own. Youths lingered outside the studio for hours, listening to the commentary of the hockey match between India and Pakistan or the romantic songs aired on Radio Ceylon. The owner of *GWG* allowed the ritual because it kept the establishment popular and made photography seem accessible.

One day, Nagaraj, a devoted *GWG* loafer and an Accountancy student, saw a black-and-white portrait inside the studio and discovered a poetry in his heart that was deeper and sweeter than anything that the radio could offer. She, the girl in the portrait, had slightly wavy hair and a sharp Persian nose. There was no decorative mark on her forehead.

‘She was a *Bai*,’ Nagaraj told Appu. ‘*Bai*’s slang for Muslim.’

‘I know.’

But above all, the way she held a cheek by the tips of her fingers and the way her gently-parted lips revealed perfect teeth and haughtiness, Nagaraj knew that this was no orthodox Muslim girl. She belonged to a family that was not only rich, but also scorned the purdah. She probably rode horses and debated with men in her college.

‘But she was a *Bai* nonetheless.’

‘Otherwise you’d have been brave,’ Appu said.

‘This isn’t a love story,’ Nagaraj chuckled, unperturbed by Appu’s sarcasm. ‘I’m not drawing battle lines here. I’m just narrating an episode that has stayed. More so because, as I stood staring at her photo, the girl herself walked into the shop to collect it. She came with a merry laugh and left with a merrier laugh. But what I remember the most is that, as she passed me, I got a whiff of her floral perfume. I can’t quite describe it. I don’t understand flowers, you know that. All I know is that I didn’t smell her perfume alone. It was mingled with her own aroma.’

‘Thank God Amma isn’t alive to hear all this.’

‘Thank God for that,’ Nagaraj agreed. ‘Your Amma was a good woman. No complaints.’

‘There were complaints, that sounded like.’

‘Just one,’ Nagaraj replied sheepishly.

‘I don’t want to hear it.’

‘A small one. What with your Amma’s protruding teeth, I could never kiss her like in the English movies.’

‘Are you done scandalising a saint?’ Appu shouted.

‘Yes,’ Nagaraj replied weakly.

‘Alright then. Let’s get this straight: Kawkab’s surly. I’ve been married to you-know-who and I’m telling you: Kawkab’s surly. Make your peace with it.’

‘Yes.’

‘If she feels she isn’t getting enough respect, she’ll walk out, never mind that she has nowhere to go.’

‘Yes.’

‘You better make this work. Tired I’ve become. Find a nurse in July, find a nurse in August.’

‘Yes.’

‘This ought to be fun. Two people who’ve reached dead ends in their lives, living together in a dead-end house.’

‘Yes.’

Having thus exacted his mother’s revenge, Appu left for the night. The morning brought Kawkab. That was six months ago.

‘Excellent,’ Nagaraj said, licking the last of the *upma* sticking to his lips. ‘Excellent. Your food carries a *Nizami* flavour, do you know that? Even the buttermilk you serve has a *Nizami* flavour.’

‘Hmm,’ Kawkab said.

‘Do you miss non-veg food? You can bring non-veg from outside if you wish. Or cook here, go ahead. Just don’t tell Appu about it.’

‘Kind of you. Do you need anything else at the moment?’

‘No,’ Nagaraj said uncertainly.

‘Feeling like potty?’

‘No!’

‘Sit still then. I’m going for my bath.’

‘Me, me too!’

‘You?’

‘It’s getting warmer outside,’ Nagaraj said, running his cataract-ridden eyes in a circle so that he could catch reasonably clear fragments of her face and piece together her mood. The lips looked peeved, the nose defiant, but the eyes seemed tolerant, even sympathetic. ‘The doctor recommends daily baths,’ Nagaraj added, trying to sound like the master of the house.

‘I’ll go, heat the water.’

When the cauldron of water was hot enough, Kawkab carried it to the bathroom and mixed it with cold water; put his steel bathing chair in place; kept the soap, soapnut powder, towel and fresh pyjamas ready; hollered for him.

Nagaraj wheelchaired till the entrance of the bathroom, feeling excited about what would happen next.

‘Ready?’ Kawkab asked.

‘Ready,’ Nagaraj replied, wrapping his arms around her neck. Kawkab lifted him by his back and thighs. As she carried him to the steel bathing chair, Nagaraj closed his eyes and enjoyed the feel of her fleshy and supple breasts against his thudding heart.

‘Are you comfortable?’ she asked after seating him on the steel chair.

‘Yes.’

‘You won’t topple?’

‘No.’

‘Then let’s start,’ she said, wondering whether to detach the urine tube or let it be.

‘Let it be,’ Nagaraj said, sensing her uncertainty.

Kawkab shrugged, removed the XXL T-shirt off his M body and poured the first mug of water on his head. At first, Nagaraj giggled and manoeuvred his arms for better coverage, but when Kawkab began soaping him in her rough manner, he asked his stock questions without expecting answers.

Had her husband been handsome? More handsome than a typical Hamza? When did he, how did he, die? Did she believe that he died for a good cause? Could any cause that claimed young people be good? Did she regret his death more when *her people* were blamed for bombs going off? Did she remember her husband when those bombs killed people, younger still?

The questions never slowed Kawkab’s actions; they might as well have centred around someone else’s tragedy.

‘The point is, Kawkab, you’ve never even told me which war he died in. If he died in the Kargil War, you’re too young to be taking care of me. Indo-Pak ’71, okay, that’s not so bad. We’d be about the same age.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Seriously, how old are you?’

For the first time in six months, Nagaraj heard something like humour in her voice.

‘You mustn’t ask a lady her age.’

Nagaraj laughed to honour the moment, then said:

‘Aging is a very Western concept. Indian women don’t age. At least, they age differently. They’ll look like youthful damsels for ages and one fine morning, they’ll wake up a matriarch. You, for instance. You have excellent hair and skin. They glow. You could be twenty-five or fifty-five or anything in between. With my eyes, I can’t tell.’

‘So long as all the men in the world are blind, I’d be young forever.’

Nagaraj laughed again.

‘Love is blind, haven’t you heard? Get a man to love you, you’ll feel young. Keep a man in love, you’ll be forever young.’

Later, during the fluorescent heat of the afternoon, Nagaraj lay on his bed and began another wait. As his body struggled to dissipate lunch as gas and sweat, as he waited for sleep or tea, whichever came first, he cocked his ears and listened to the faint sound coming from Kawkab’s room. There it was again – a feeble gurgle, as regular as a heartbeat, repeated every twenty-eight seconds as per his Grandfather clock.

So regular! It gave him an idea for a new game. He gazed hard at the clock and, when the second hand had moved twenty-eight times, he let go. Bubbles travelled up his urine tube, in sync with the gurgle of Kawkab’s hookah.

Kawkab and her hookah. What a romantic pair, he thought. He wondered if the smoke was as pleasant as the sound.

In the other room, Kawkab kept down her hookah and fanned her *dupatta* vigorously over the dying embers. An untouched bit of charcoal caught the mood. She smiled. Today, more than ever before, she was determined to enjoy her time alone. The afternoons were hers; they were precious.

She took a long drag and sighed out the smoke, thinking ruefully that her in-laws had given her three things: an enduring poverty, the opportunity to care for their putrefying bodies and an addiction to rose-flavoured smoke. What boons! What wastrels!! What fatalists!!!

Kawkab muttered an '*Oh-fo!*' to admonish herself. No point thinking about them. They were gone. Besides, life wasn't wholly unpleasant at the moment. She had a dead-end house to live in, almost by herself in some ways. No outsider would invade this turf so long as she kept Nagaraj and herself in good humour. And alive.

She leaned more comfortably on the divan, supporting her head on her left hand, took another deep drag of the hookah, curled her tongue and allowed the smoke to titillate her palette. She closed her eyes and smoked some more. Long after the tobacco was used up, the rose-water and charcoal kept the ritual going.

Finally, she rose to her feet and opened the windows. Fresh air carrying the scent of the garden wafted in. She looked out with motherly pride. Six months ago, the garden was a sprinkling of ageless trees battling overgrown bushes for space and water. It broke her heart to see it like that. So she spent one hour in the garden. Every afternoon, without fail. At first, she dug up, uprooted, piled and burnt the parasites bent on making the world ugly. That done, she planted and sowed with her magical hands – ginger, chillies, basil, coriander and curry leaves for the kitchen; petunias, dahlias, lavender, magnolias, roses, hibiscus and sunflowers for the soul.

Looking at the fluttering flowers, she recalled something her mother had told her. Long ago. Around the time she attained puberty and was no longer allowed to wear short frocks or hold caterpillars on her index finger. The story went thus: around two centuries ago, the first Hamza woman reached the city after a long journey from Persia. Her husband was doing well. Well enough for her to have a garden immediately. So she unpacked the floral seeds she had brought along and began sowing. The years went by. The family grew. One child was born to her at the beginning of each winter. Which set her thinking. And led her to the discovery that her husband found her irresistible in early Spring.

'You know why?' her mother had asked.

'Why, *Ammi*?'

'The scent, Kawkab, the scent. The Spring flowers, the mud and air in this city and our Persian blood mix together to form an amorous scent. Look around! Every Persian family in the city has gardening wives. Every Persian family in the city is filled with winter babies.'

The story had sounded truthful then. It seemed fanciful now. Perhaps it had provided an added incentive to keep gardening. Well, she, Kawkab, didn't need an added

incentive. And this garden was aromatic proof of that. Given her current pace of work, her beautiful creations would reach all the way to the front gate in another three months. And how lovely it would be to walk up and down the garden then. It would be just like her childhood days, when the garden belonged to *Ammi*, the scampering feet to her and the reverential warnings to the servants. The Ambassador on the driveway, of course, belonged to Papa (or *Abbu Jaan*, when outsiders were around).

Why would anybody accept to live any other way? More to the point, how could men allow such a world to disintegrate? And in exchange for what? Laziness, of all things! Unforgivable. She couldn't, wouldn't, forgive this failing in her father, father-in-law, brothers, brothers-in-law. And her husband? Well, he didn't die lazy, from all accounts.

'*Oh-fo!*' Kawkab muttered again. She was being so sentimental about the past today. 'Nagaraj's doing. His mention of *GWG – The Portrait Specialists* and the good old days during lunch.' She frowned. This was the fifth or sixth occasion that the man had ventured an anecdote that revolved around *GWG*. Was he trying to tell her something? And why was he, an otherwise lucid raconteur, so vague about it? It seemed to her that he held back the punchline, as if he wished this particular anecdote to be flat and unmemorable.

Kawkab shrugged. Nagaraj more than made up for his ramblings, occasional flirtatious behaviour, annoying needs and remarkable ugliness by restoring her to the past. This garden was his gift. So was this beautiful house.

Once she finished sprucing up the garden, she would focus her energies indoors, beginning with the *pooja* room. The Gods therein might be Hindu, but the ornate photo frames around them and the large brass lamps were secular enough for her. She would polish these till they shone. She would then unlock the rooms upstairs and seek lost purposes for the clutter lying inside. Nagaraj's father had been a rich man. This was a rich man's house and it deserved to look like one. Well, that's why Allah had sent her here. By the time she was done, the imaginary ghosts gloating within these walls would make way for imaginary guests. *Her* imaginary guests.

For a brief moment, she caught her selfishness by the tail, but it escaped her grasp when she told herself:

'But everybody gains in the process.'

It was true, wasn't it? Even Nagaraj would be more cheerful in a house furnished to please and comfort. That, his blessedly healthy genes and a little affection should do it.

Kawkab pondered over this for an interminable minute. Perhaps she was being a little too grumpy with him. Perhaps she should pamper him more. He loved that.

'And Allah willing, he might actually outlive me!' she thought, readying her garden gloves and whispering a tune to herself.

The doorbell rang.

Appu failed to notice that Kawkab was none too pleased to see him. He strode in, sat heavily on a teakwood armchair – another priceless artefact left behind by his grandfather – and asked for a glass of water, which Kawkab brought, along with a question:

‘So early, no office today?’

Appu tried to laugh, spluttered water onto the floor.

‘Sundays mean nothing in this house, I can see.’

‘Is that you, Appu?’ Nagaraj called from his room.

‘He’ll try to sit up like last time,’ Appu groaned.

‘I’d better go, bring him,’ Kawkab said, leaving. Appu used her absence to quickly scan the contents of the living room and the dining room beyond. Everything seemed proper. Nothing missing.

With Kawkab following him, Nagaraj wheeled himself into Appu’s presence.

‘Both the house and its master are in excellent shape. Good.’

‘He’s put on weight, though,’ Kawkab replied.

‘Lack of exercise, that’s all.’

‘That’s why,’ Kawkab began and trailed off.

‘That’s why what, Kawkab?’ Nagaraj asked. Turning to Appu, he added: ‘She’s a refined lady, Appu. You must coax her to speak her mind. It’s rare for her to venture a word, as it is.’

Appu failed to notice that Nagaraj went from upbeat to rueful in the span of a few words. Hands in his pockets, he raised his eyebrows and asked:

‘You have a suggestion?’

‘A physiotherapist.’

‘A physiotherapist,’ Appu repeated.

‘Could we get one to visit? Thrice a week? It might help.’

‘He won’t walk again. He was clear on that, the doctor.’

‘Don’t be so negative,’ Nagaraj said.

‘You must face reality. The doctor said that too.’

‘I mean,’ Kawkab said, ‘the exercises will keep him fit. Get the circulation going. I’m not very learned, but I read the doctor’s instructions and he recommended a... maybe I misread it.’

Appu studied the water he had spluttered onto the floor, not trusting himself to make eye-contact because right at that moment, he was wondering whether Kawkab and he had conflicting interests regarding his father’s welfare. How would his wife read the situation?

She was completely convinced about Kawkab’s utility, his wife.

‘Hire her; she’s perfect,’ she had said.

‘How come?’ he had asked.

‘Your father’s a balmy character in the best of times. In his current state of mind, he’d get married to a tubelight if he saw happiness in it. Imagine what a scheming nurse can do.’

‘She’d gobble the whole fortune and not even burp.’

‘But not Kawkab.’

‘Why not Kawkab?’

‘She’s a Muslim, idiot.’

‘Haven’t we heard of passion-marriages between Hindus and Muslims?’

‘Do you foresee passion in this case? Really now? Okay, let’s say that Kawkab is a scheming bitch. In that case, she’ll toy with the possibility of a marriage till the point where rationale meets religion. Finito. No further will she go. Meanwhile, the inevitable

will happen and you, the son, can tell the world that you tried your best. You hired a lady with impeccable credentials.'

'I'll go, make tea,' Kawkab said, interrupting Appu's thoughts.

'A physiotherapist costs money,' Appu said, slowly.

'Who cares? I have money,' Nagaraj replied. His tone was explicit enough even for Appu to take note. The old man was taking sides. Not because he wanted a physiotherapist, but because he wanted *her* to win this argument. Well, it certainly seemed like it.

'A clear conflict of interest,' Appu thought, and for a brief moment, he caught his selfishness by the tail, but it escaped his grasp when he told himself: 'He's my father. I love him more.'

'Tea?' Kawkab repeated.

'Before that,' Appu said, taking out his car key, 'Groceries and medicines. In the back seat, I've kept them. Get them.'

Appu met her hurt look with sternness. She took the key and left. Having thus drawn the master-servant equation, he smiled. His wife would devise a new counterstrategy tonight. And it would probably revolve around the fact that Kawkab could be pushed around a bit.

'Tell me something, Appu,' Nagaraj said, pitiable again, 'do you develop your photos at *GWG*?'

'No.'

'I wonder what happened to the radio they had. Back in those days...'

'I've heard this story before,' Appu said, studying his watch. He had booked tickets for a love story. The show began at six. He could spare fifteen minutes for any other story his father had in mind.

'He comes, counts to a hundred and leaves,' Nagaraj grumbled.

'It's okay,' Kawkab replied, not betraying her own preoccupation with Appu's visit. She wished she had been more delicate about the physiotherapist. She wished that he, Appu, would befriend and trust her. It would make things far easier.

'Just leaves. Not a mention of my grandson. As if he doesn't exist.'

'Ready?' Kawkab asked.

'Ready.'

Kawkab lifted him off the wheelchair and placed him gently on the bed.

'Are you sure you don't want dinner?'

'Sure.'

'You didn't even finish your buttermilk.'

'My son's visits aren't exactly appetising.'

'Don't worry. Blood is thicker than water. Things will get better.'

Nagaraj smiled. He liked her in this mood.

'You behave like Mohammad Ali and care like Mother Teresa,' he wanted to tell her. Instead, he said: 'You spoil me.'

'Hmm,' she said, bending close to tuck in his blanket. He smelt that exotic fragrance again. The years melted. He felt transported outside *GWG*. That lovely young

woman in the black-and-white photo walked past him. He took a deep breath. The fragrances matched perfectly.

‘Have you,’ he began and stopped. He could just ask her that question: were you the one?

Outside, an army of crickets chirped. A beehive was taking shape somewhere in the backyard. Otherwise, the world – its visionaries, thieves and builders included – left the dead-end house to itself. Nagaraj sighed.

‘You wanted something?’ Kawkab asked.

‘No, nothing.’

‘You were about to ask me something.’

‘Nothing.’

‘Well, goodnight, then.’

‘Goodnight.’

Kawkab switched off the light and gently closed the door. Nagaraj smiled in the darkness. He realised that he rather liked this uncertainty. He wanted this game to last forever.

Maggots and Gold

The flies received the news first.

The heart stopped beating, the lungs came to a rest, the brain whirred to a slow halt and the temperature began dropping. Almost immediately, a cheesy odour wafted off me; the flies responded. Laid eggs on my mouth, nostrils, navel and, yes, even in those places. It doesn't take much to slump from the top of the food chain and become a terribly self-contained ecosystem.

It's more than soul can handle. I felt angry, cheated. A peculiar heat radiated outwards from the location I seemed to occupy. Simultaneously, I ascended. Without much control or speed. Without a demon or angel in sight.

'Just me,' I thought, as I breached the asbestos roofing of my house. Looking down, I saw that the roof was still intact. No hint of a soul-shaped hole. If anything, the roof looked alive, like an extraordinary array of incisors staring back at the midday sun.

It felt nice and hot out there, after months and years of lying on that patchy, damp divan. Life (or was this anti-life?) was so much better when lived vertically. I kept ascending till I could no longer smell myself or the thick cloud of odour enveloping the slum below. Ah! Clean air at last.

'Take me someplace high,' I told it.

I found myself seated atop a phallic tower painted red and white. Waves, invisible to me even in this state, passed through me, and, could you believe it?, tingled me. Far below, the traffic was dense and strange. Cars I had never seen before, trucks longer than train bogies, buses with doors that hissed to a close. And motorbikes, those dear creations that could be angry and obedient at the same time. I felt a great desire to ride one again.

I swooped down upon a vermilion red four-stroke headed my way. As I got closer, however, I changed my mind. I didn't want to ride the bike. I wanted to ride that sweet thing on the pillion. She was dressed for the weather and the eyes. I swam beside her, wanting to cause harm to the biker-man she was hugging, wanting to hold her, squeeze her. I knew instinctively that I could do none of those things. So I did something that was possible. I dove into the gap between her blouse and spine and rushed out of the other end. It only made her hug her biker-man harder. I let them go. Other people came by to amuse me.

I entered a black car through its air-conditioning vent and spun around with such ferocity that the sleeping infant in the back seat began crying. The car stopped on the shoulder, the mother came behind to pacify the infant and I blew out, straight onto the windshield of a passing truck. It was a new truck, so new that I decided to squeeze into a front tyre and revel in the smell of hot rubber and compressed air. That was a lot of fun – the tyre did the spinning for me and I felt like the master of my own universe. And who in his life hasn't aspired to be that?

And then something happened. I felt an instinct.

I was back in my pathetic hut, but now, my fear was stronger than my smell. I stiffened, and as I had already learnt, stiffening made me ascend. I calmed myself, stayed afloat, almost level with the asbestos ceiling, and searched the floor for the enemy I could hear, but not see. The tin suitcase beneath my divan clattered ominously and the next moment, I saw him climb onto the divan, just inches from my feet. He was undoubtedly

the same bandicoot that bit my toe seven months ago. They had to take me to the hospital, and as it turned out, it was the last time I left home alive, horizontal. That was a terrible day, more so because I was awake when he had climbed onto my divan. He had started hard into my eyes, nodded at my helplessness and then dug in for an ounce of blood. I thought I had screamed loud enough to rouse the whole neighbourhood, but as my wife later explained patiently, even my youngest daughter, who was sitting right outside the house, gossiping, had heard nothing. By the time I was discovered, the bastard had scraped through skin and cartilage. I had denied him a juicy morsel of flesh, and in my wordless, static world, that was my sweet revenge against him.

And here he was again. This time, I couldn't even offer a token resistance. I could only wish that he wouldn't explore anything north of my feet. Perhaps he was interested in the pus that kept oozing out of my bitten toe?

My fear blinded me to the possibility that I could scare him, harm him. Perhaps I could have attacked the hidden pink of his pointed ears and found something inside his animal brain that could be spun and destroyed. Perhaps I could have rushed down his throat and churned panic in his stomach. But all I did was stay afloat and await his first move.

Then I heard music. Footsteps on the loose cobblestones and muck outside. My wife's. I could see her coming, even as I lay suspended in air to observe the bandicoot. He heard her too, for he scurried off to his gutter. I sighed and drooped onto the floor just as my wife entered through the open door. She saw me – the me on the divan – saw the ambience and fanned herself with her sari. She probably thought that she was done for the day, poor girl. Would she complain that I chose to die in the afternoon, when she was already exhausted? Although she wasn't much of a whiner, she had, on rare afternoons in the past few horizontal years, returned from her cart, found the house empty except for me and lamented aloud. It suited her that I couldn't respond to her frustration.

On such occasions, she would describe how she had to wake up at four am to make 500 *idlis*. Ten batches of fifty each, to be scooped out steaming hot so that the next batch could go in without delay. In between, she would grate the coconut and fry the mustard seeds for the chutney, and cut the vegetables for lunch. As soon as our youngest daughter took the last batch of *idlis* out to the cart, where hungry migrant workers awaited them like first love, my wife would prepare the lunch *palya*, which had become increasingly insipid over the years due to boredom and inflation. And then, she would make rice, a cauldron of boiled rice, enough to stir the hunger of even a paralytic man. Just before she left to sell lunch to the same set of hopeless workers, she would feed me with her own hands, as slowly as I choose to open my mouth. Her finger always tasted like grime and fatigue. Occasionally, I would think of what could have been and weep silently.

'What's the use now?' she would ask me. 'A man like you must live the life you did. You'd do the same thing again, given half the chance. Open. Open your mouth, old man. I must leave soon.'

And now, I had already left, so to speak.

From my flopped out position on the floor, I inspected her forearms for burn marks, for she never fried fritters at home. That was always done in the cart, in front of the customers, to fortify the impression that all the food was freshly made. But the gust

and the urgency outside never failed to splash hot oil onto her forearms – in the years since she had opened her food-cart business, they had blackened beyond recognition.

It reminded me of another time, our first night, scheduled after consulting the astrologer and ensuring that the Gods would forgive us for the pleasure we were about to have. She was never really beautiful, but she had been so slim, coy, graceful. *Fresh*. And happy that she had married me, a wealthy man, feared and respected for reasons uncertain to her. It had been her first time, of course. And me? Well, I had fucked every whore and one unmarriageable damsel in my suburb, and my experience had alarmed her, perhaps left her a little bitter.

‘Forty-two years, some happy ones among them,’ I told her. She couldn’t hear me, of course. ‘I wish I could have said goodbye. Had one more night from our youth. I could make it stand up even after drinking a full, remember? It was such fun, especially when you resisted and called me names, and I had to slap you repeatedly before you succumbed.’ Even now, I can taste the sweetness of fennel on her breath, spoiled occasionally by the hint of metallic blood. ‘Had I not become a vegetable, there would have been more such nights. Pity.’

‘Are you awake, old man?’ she asked me. Her tone told me that she wanted this to be a rare afternoon of complaints. But when that body on the divan didn’t respond, she stood beside it, eyed it critically and then checked the nostrils for an exhalation. I noted with satisfaction that she wept. Very discreetly though, and for just about five minutes, at the end of which, she closed the front door.

When she opened it again, I was dressed in my finest clothes, too loose now for my corpse, but I, the I that flopped and rose and whooshed, felt grand.

She retrieved her mobile phone from its nook. The mobile was the only treat she allowed herself, and she normally used it to make a ten-minute outstation call to her sister, once a week. But today, she was calling someone else. And I knew who. The moment the call connected, I dove into the antenna of the mobile phone and resurfaced ten miles away, at my son’s workplace. He didn’t say hello.

‘What’s it?’ he asked, peevish as usual.

‘Your father’s gone,’ I heard my wife say.

‘Are you sure?’ my son asked, twisting the sleeve of his Lathe Operator uniform.

‘Don’t ask stupid questions. Come home.’

‘On my busiest day. Just like him to make life difficult one last time. Alright.’

I was in the boss’ cabin when the news was conveyed.

‘Yes, yes, you must go,’ the boss said gravely.

‘If you feel that I must stay to fulfil the export order...’

‘Naga...’

‘The truth is, sir, I’d be happy to stay back. Not going would feel like spitting on his face.’

‘I understand,’ the bald boss replied, rising from his chair and coming around.

‘But think of your mother.’

‘Who else have I been thinking all these years when he slept in his corner and decayed in our presence? That bandicoot, sir, was God’s messenger. It deserved more time to finish its work.’

‘Naga...’

‘All those years he was in jail, we waited, sir. We hoped that he would return a new man. That didn’t happen. While in there, he didn’t even have the heart to use his ring for his family’s welfare. His gold ring, sir, you remember I told you about his ring? The weight, what weight!, as much as two five-rupee coins. All nine *navarathna* jewels and all that. That ring was more important to him than me. My mother had to sell her *mangalsutra* to cure my malaria. Goes around with a yellow thread to show for her marriage. And he? He’s wearing his ring this very moment. He’s dead, sneering through his empty gums and still wearing his ring.’

‘There’ll be enough time to curse him. Today, you have a duty to do.’

‘I’ll burn him alright. I’ll aim for his arse with the pyre, just watch.’

I seethed. I wanted to whoosh some fear and respect into him. I wanted to make the hair on the bald boss’ head stand upright. But more than that, I wanted to remind my son of the many concessions I gave him. The helium balloons I bought him, the piece of fried fish I brought for him, every night. Even when I had to beg lesser men for my pleasures, and no matter how drunk I was, the last bit of fried fish always went straight down his throat. Even if the little bastard was sleeping, I would have him chew it down.

‘Ungrateful scoundrel,’ I shouted. He would take the bus, take his time coming home. I returned home to find that my wife had swept and swabbed the floor, tidied the ledges that overflowed with all our possessions and lit a whole lot of incense sticks in front of my photo. The flowers would arrive soon, I assumed, breathing hard to capture the jasmine of the incense sticks in my nostrils. Something else, a wholly unpleasant smell, like that of rusted iron, assailed me. I quickly looked at the nostrils of my corpse. I saw the whiteness within. I screamed.

‘Andaal!’ I felt the sobs coming. ‘You too, Andaal? Why?’ She could have crossed the road to buy some cotton. She could have at least used a fresh sanitary napkin. Screw that, she could have spared me this knowledge of my youngest daughter. ‘Whore! Whore!! How could you?’

I wished to be heard. Once, just once. Such long horizontal years I have endured, and all those years, I spoke like a whispering ant and accepted that I would be given an extra dollop of pickle when I actually wanted water. I had accepted all those frustrations, but how could I accept this injustice? I wished that the whole world would acknowledge my anger. I wished that at least my Andaal would hear me and be obliged to reply. But there she was, applying a fresh vermilion dot on her forehead, knowing that it would be the last time, that there was no need to save any of it for the future.

I spun around the room and created a gust that shaved minutes off the incense sticks. You might say that I exited in a huff. I had no clue where I was going, but my thoughts stayed with Andaal and her revenge, and that, for some reason, meant that I could follow her movements from wherever I was.

I saw Andaal exit the house, leaving the door open for the bandicoot – not that I cared anymore – and walk away. She was as composed as ever, except that she chose to walk barefoot in the heat and smell. Too subtle a sign for the slum. Around the corner, she stopped at the decorator’s shop and hailed the proprietor. He came out from the

dinginess of his home to the dinginess of his business area. Andaal thumped on a blue plastic chair gathering dust and slanted sunlight.

‘Looks like you’ve got some business,’ she said.

‘Found a groom for your youngest?’ the man asked.

‘Old man has put down his head,’ she replied. At times of grief, cultured people apparently took refuge in idioms. What lies! But the words had the desired effect. The proprietor’s wife rushed into the outer dinginess, shrieking unfelt sobs, hugging my wife and rousing the neighbourhood, which received the news and spread it around like it changed the flavour of the day. My wife accepted everybody’s sympathies before returning to the transaction.

‘Chairs would be needed,’ she told the proprietor.

‘Twenty, shall we say?’ he asked.

‘Ten should suffice,’ she said, smiling wryly.

The proprietor paused, then said:

‘They may not come for him, but they’ll definitely come for you. I’ll make it fifteen. You pay me for ten, sister. And you’ll need a *pandal*, surely?’

She shrugged.

‘No *shamiana* or other fancy stuff. Just two decorated bamboo poles to show people the way. That’s all.’

‘Okay. And I’ll put the speaker and sound system over there, right beside the lane going to your place.’

‘No need for the speaker and all,’ she said, so sternly that the proprietor closed his dirty notebook and – I could tell these things now – rued his decision to throw in five chairs for free.

I found myself soaring through the skies, feeling the pain of the unsung. This was supposed to be my day, damn it! People telling each other that I was a nice man. That I will be missed. So when I actually heard those very words spoken back in the slum, I thought that it was the vacuum inside me speaking. But I soon realised that that was not the case. I halted. I was in a strange city, dirtier and hotter than mine. Smellier too. Or perhaps that was just the smell I couldn’t escape. My own. Anyway, I heard people say those beautiful words. This, I had to see.

Back in the slum, I whooshed over those speakers. I recognised some of them from my heydays – they were mere boys or also-rans then. Others, I didn’t know – they looked too young to have been around in my heydays. All of them were standing around the wine shop counter, surrounded by the misty aroma of alcohol. All of them spoke the same language.

‘What a man! They had brought three jeeps to nab him. And used special cuffs for his feet, too. Imagine!’

‘They had to bring three jeeps. Hadn’t he escaped from under their very noses on so many occasions? One constable, he punched so hard, he stayed in coma for three years.’

‘He used to have a telephone in his home. In those days. Imagine! Knew everybody in the municipality. You wanted something done, you went to him.’

‘I’ve heard that he’d find jobs for every lad in the slum during the elections.’
‘If you could show three strands of hair above your lip, he’d make you a polling agent. And then you could eat and drink as much as you wanted.’
‘Why election time? He was never miserly when it came to drink. Even when things went bad, he’d use his last ten-rupee to buy you a drink.’
‘Remember that episode at the theatre?’
‘Tell us, tell us.’
‘No, no, tell them about the altercation with the MLA.’
‘Too bold for his own good, he was.’
‘But has our slum produced another guy like him, huh? Answer me that. Then? We must pay our last respects.’
‘I used to look him up now and again. Such a waste of talent. He could have been the best.’
‘That jail term finished him, didn’t it?’
‘Slowed him down. Jail does that to you, ask me. If he had remained a free man, that Ranga couldn’t have gotten the better of him.’
‘But – note this, you young fellows! – although Ranga bashed him real bad – he was dripping blood, don’t you know? – and yet, he walked all the way to his house on his own. Anyone else would have died in the gutter that night.’
‘You said it. Stayed hale and hearty for years after that. Produced his youngest, what’s her name?, the cute one, after *that* happened. Imagine!’
‘Never was the same after Ranga bashed him, though.’
‘So what? He was the best. I’ve never danced at anybody’s funeral, you know that, don’t you? But I’m going to dance in his. Does anybody have money for another round?’

I don’t know how long I lingered amongst those fine men, but soon, the setting sun was setting their glasses afire and I wished that I could swallow that gold and feel it heat my innards. So many years wasted in the horizontal, dreaming of such moments to forget the dull pain in my body, which, at this moment, was reeking of putrefying flesh and menstrual blood. The bitch.

I immediately regretted thinking of her, for it made me aware of what was happening at home. She was there. My youngest daughter was there. So were my elder daughter, her toddler son and her rat-faced father-in-law who seemed extremely unhappy.

‘Is this the decent thing to do? You tell me,’ he said.

My wife didn’t tell him anything.

‘Five *pouns* of gold, he promised. Nothing. And four meat dishes at the wedding. Not a dry bone fell on my plate. My humanity has been my failing. You fell on my feet and *begged* me to take your daughter back into my house. I did that also. Knowing fully well that he wouldn’t get my son a peon’s job at the municipality. He couldn’t anymore. Look at the whore’s son grinning. Who bought all those garlands for him? Okay, forget that. Answer me this: when my son was struggling, and all he wanted was a little of the promised gold to get him going, did you oblige? You gave us sob stories, nothing else. And now, you’re retracting your last promise. You were supposed to hand over the ring

once he died. To my grandson. *Your* grandson too. But where's the ring gone? He was too weak to hide it himself, so don't play games with me.'

Andaal kept mum.

'What a family!'

'This is your house, too,' Andaal finally replied. 'Please feel free to search. If you find the ring, keep it. We have no desire for it.'

I warmed up, just a tad, to Andaal. She was absolutely right in denying this man. My son-in-law had become addicted – yes, there was no other word – to his son. He wasn't breaking his marriage any more than I could stop smelling myself.

My son opened the door, walked in and closed it after him.

'So it's true after all,' he said.

His words intensified the nausea of this meaningless double existence. I screamed:

'Burn me, burn me now! What're you waiting for? *Please*. Release me to whatever lies beyond.'

'And who's paying for the drummers and dancers?' my son continued.

'I didn't hire them,' Andaal replied.

'Well, they're outside.'

'You know how many fans he has.'

'Where's the ring?' my son asked sharply.

'Nice drama,' the father-in-law said. 'Your mother has hidden it, don't you know? She probably plans to melt it down for brand new bangles.'

'Amma?' my son asked, ignoring the father-in-law.

'You know how fond he was of the ring,' Andaal said slowly, as if she was measuring her words. 'He seems to have found a way to deny it to us.'

'Liar!' the father-in-law shouted.

'*Dai!*' my son cried and grabbed his throat.

'That's right,' I said. 'Send him this way. I'll deal with him.'

But the pleading voice of my elder daughter brought my son back to his senses. Calmer, he continued: 'My mother never lies. Haven't you figured that out after all these years? Now, I know your wish. I'll get your grandson a ring. *No*, I'll get *my* nephew a ring. A purer ring. You don't want him wearing something that this fiend wore, do you?' The father-in-law looked down at the floor, massaging his neck. My son discreetly thrust some money on his palm. 'Elderly one, have some *brandhy* and come back on time for the funeral.'

The father-in-law brightened considerably.

'Okay, I'll return soon,' he said to no one in particular. 'He was a good man. We must give him a decent funeral.'

As he opened the door to leave, I saw the many people awaiting their turn to wail in front of my corpse. A minute ago, I had heard them comment uncharitably on the smugness of my family's grief.

'Like it's the first night, with the closed door and all,' one woman said.

'I have a stew boiling on the stove,' another said. 'How long am I supposed to wait here?'

'Just like Andaal to behave as if she's better than the rest of us.'

The thought of these women beating their chests, not for me, but the onlookers, made me sick. I whooshed out of there. I didn't get far. Outside, a lovely crowd of men, some of whom I recognised from the wine shop, had collected around the decorated bamboo poles. The centre of their attraction was a funerary drum. Everybody took turns rubbing the stick up and down the clean, tight skin, producing not only febrile music but also nostalgia.

Funerals have given me much to rejoice during my vertical years. Whenever I came across a funeral, even if I was returning from the wine shop with six nineties sloshing inside me, I would dance with abandon, not even caring whether the dead man was friend, foe or stranger. How did that matter? The dead were the dead; they belonged to a collective that supported my rebellion. Yes, I confess: I have been a rebel all my life. In my heydays, I rebelled from a position of strength. Later, I rebelled passively yet consistently. I rebelled against structure, ambition, responsibilities and an inability to enjoy the moment. With considerable success, let me add. It seemed to me that funerals are events that underline my message: you cannot add to or subtract from the world; but while alive, you can perform a great deal of arithmetic in your favour. And my life proved it. Or so it seemed, till this whole belief system came crashing down upon me today. Now, I only had questions.

Why was I being forced to witness my character assassination? Why did I suddenly feel like I owed an explanation to my family? Did every dead person experience this assortment of guilt and incompleteness? And, most importantly, what will happen once I burn? If this consciousness was real, then I must start believing that something far more sinister was in store for me.

I trembled. For a moment, I thought that the questions were making me jittery. But I soon realised that I was responding to the drum. The sweet rebel in me had managed to bisect even this consciousness, this I that whooshed, and had decided to perform a last act of rebellion. He danced, which is to say that I danced, and I hoped that an undeterred part of my corpse had joined in as well.

I moved like only a breezy ghost can. Of course, I could not see my movements, but I visualised my body arching backwards, with my knees and torso leading the rest of the body in a forward motion. My hands made backstroke movements. I folded my tongue and opened my mouth wide open. My feet barely made contact with the ground. It was a beautiful experience, letting go of myself like that, although all that the world saw were eddies of dust, too small to alarm even a street dog. But, magically, the mood caught on. One by one, my faithful fans started dancing, as if sensing my trance and wanting to share it. Even the chest-beating women, having done their bit beside my corpse, had come out to watch and enjoy the spectacle.

'At least some people know how to treat the dead,' I thought and, of course, immediately regretted it – I again became aware of the happenings in my home. Andaal had bolted the door shut and turned to face her three children.

'Alright,' she said, 'five minutes, I give you all. Retch your hatred now. All of it. Because once that door is reopened, we'll all go out and mourn like a proper family.'

I froze.

'I'll begin,' my son said.

'Anna,' my elder daughter said, 'let it go. He was not so bad as that.'

'Really? How can you say that about a man...'

I whooshed fast, so fast that it barely took a few moments to arrive at and then go past that dirty city I had visited earlier today. I whooshed over a ocean, just above the surface of water, feeling an eerie dryness and licking – would you believe it? – the salts that were forming lumps in my corpse. In the middle of the ocean, the waves had nothing to make noise against, and in the interminable silence, I couldn't help overhearing every word that my family exchanged.

Only an extraordinarily selfish man, my son said, could actually attend college and then not care if his children didn't attend school.

The ocean ended and another, made of sand, took its place. I whooshed over gigantic sand dunes and the heat I felt came, not from below, but from my son's lips.

A man with my capacity for evil, he continued, was bound to transition from books to student politics to petty roguery, but had I only organised my evilness, *sustained* it, things would have been okay. But that was expecting too much considering that I preferred my ring to... if only he could lay his hands on that ring...

I whooshed right into large pointed structures in an attempt to hurt myself and end this consciousness, but I whooshed straight through them. I then whooshed through cities filled with dark-coloured people, oh what lovely shades of dark they were, so unlike the darkness my son had managed to create.

I wasn't as bad as that, my elder daughter repeated.

Her words felt as warm and welcoming as this new ocean I whooshed over.

Why this inexplicable love, my son demanded.

Because, my elder daughter replied, she remembered a night when I came home and gave her the fried fish because my son was feverish and couldn't have it. I never withheld what I wanted to give, she completed.

I turned south to whoosh over a rain forest that exuded a steamy wetness I could only see, not feel. I felt the desire to travel into the past and make my elder daughter my favourite, but my whole being, even this wispy whooshy thing that I had become, turned clammy when I heard my younger daughter burst into sobs. I knew what was coming.

Brute, brute I was, she said. I pounced on her one night. Did anybody expect that, even from *me*? Amma, their mother, had thankfully awakened to her muffled protests and banged a ladle on my head. And a few days later, I had become bed-ridden.

I whooshed over another ocean, or perhaps it was the same one as the last. The water became stiller, colder and less blue. I whooshed into a vast, white landscape, thankful for its desolateness, because back home, four pairs of eyes were looking at my corpse with undisguised contempt.

I sit here now, in our planet's coldest place. I can see my son holding a pyre in his hand, heading slowly towards my corpse. He's a man of his word. He will aim for my arse, which is where Andaal has hidden my precious ring. I don't know how she found the heart to perform the distasteful act, but just before she dressed me in my finery, she braced herself, screwed her mouth and thrust it in, as deep as she could. One tiny maggot got squished in the process and he's been adding to my smell all this while.

Andaal! My sweet girl, I made you promise that the ring will die with me, but, but, those were the words of a demented man. Why did you ever respect anything I said?

Didn't you ever contemplate a counter-rebellion? No, I don't wish to blame you. If I had one wish, it would be that you could hear me at this moment, hear me confess to all accusations. All but one. That night, I thought I was climbing upon you. I swear. No, wait, let me not swear. I don't want to lie anymore and the truth is that I was too drunk to be certain about what I was doing. Perhaps it was the fennel in our youngest daughter's breath, or perhaps it really was a case of mistaken identity. Either way, I suspect that I'll know the truth soon. Here comes our son.

I'm sorry, Naga. Yes, there, right there. Well aimed. The gold is melting. The maggots are frying. Go back a few steps. No need to inhale the charred odour of my flesh. Do stay till the end, though, because I'm going to try and do something for you: I've seen burning corpses raise their hardened limbs, so I'm going to try and raise both my hands at the same time. I hope you accept my apology.

But I doubt if it will happen. This afterlife isn't anything like I had imagined. Now that my corpse is blazing over there, I, the I that whooshes, is coming alive to the coldness of this land.

I'm already shivering.

Shades of Reality

The watchman was up at the crack of dawn, a dawn he was supposed to receive awake, not awake to. He stretched and began his day by completing three quick rounds of the building he guarded; shitting in the public toilet across the building; cleansing his teeth using toothpowder, a forefinger and a mug of water; taking a cold bath with the help of a leaking, hissing, garden hose.

The sun, the poorer citizens and the conservatives were rising by the time he returned, wet and fresh, to his closet-sized basement room and dressed into his spare uniform. As he brought his tea to a boil, he took a stern inventory of his belongings – in addition to his soiled uniform, he owned a single set of casual clothes, some inners, a mirror, a comb, a damaged watch, a pair of shaving blades still in their wrappings, an image of his family deity, and, incongruously, a Mont Blanc pen given long ago by that fine ex-employer who, for some reason, had to sell his bungalow and get rid of his ancient gatekeeper. Those were good days. He had an outhouse all to himself and a corner in the garden to call his own. He had used it to plant rose saplings that never bloomed and potatoes that he uprooted in a hurry. Still, the *yajamaan*, his master, never minded his follies, and his life seemed headed towards a serene finish.

But fate! And here he was.

He took minuscule sips of his tea and heard the building stir. For the umpteenth time, he rehearsed the words he would use to convince the building Secretary, but his rehearsals went unusually well because the deity stood a mute substitute for that irate man.

‘Useless, you are,’ he told his deity and went outside to bask in the morning sun. The day progressed. A car mechanic with a garage around the bend passed his way, exchanged pleasantries. The priest of the temple down the street ignored him altogether. A guest of apartment number seven arrived in an auto-rickshaw, accompanied by Mail Train sleeplessness and heavy baggage that he was obliged to carry till the jerky elevator. The fat flower vendor set her shop on the pavement outside, sprinkled water on buds and wove fully-bloomed flowers into a garland – the fragrance of *malligai-poo* turned the stale urban air bearable for a few moments.

And then the exodus began. The Sales Executive from apartment number three rushed down the stairs, kick-started his motorbike and left in a hurry. The buxom Engineering student from apartment number six walked jauntily down the steps, ignored the Romeo across the street and proceeded towards the bus stand. The twins from apartment number nine came wailing down, wailed as they held his forefingers, and when the school van arrived, boarded it without ceremony, even as their mother watched approvingly from her balcony upstairs.

And his nemesis, the building Secretary?

‘He must still be sleeping, the yam-faced-prick,’ the watchman told himself, adding wistfully, ‘People die, don’t they?’

Much, much, later, he saw the Secretary come down the stairs and walk pompously towards his new car. All of a sudden, the watchman found his own arguments to be inane. He considered for a moment. Should he press his case once more? Or should he beg pardon for yesterday’s foolish threat to quit? He did neither. Instead he mustered

all his strength to hold back the young trunk of a hindering tree as the Secretary carefully backed his car onto the street. Rolling down the window, he let the watchman catch a gust of perfumed cold air.

‘Choose’, he said. ‘When I return in the evening, I either see you or the tree.’

A sultry afternoon breeze lulled the watchman into siesta and fantasy. The Secretary was nothing more than a beetle. He could squash him with his bare feet, hear his muted death-cries. There! That was the end of that. A honeybee whizzed past him, brought him back to reality.

The Secretary was far from being a beetle. He was a man on a mission. A pragmatic mission to chop down that hindering tree. The watchman sighed. Three years ago – wasn’t it? – he had planted a sapling with his own hands. On that empty patch of soil beside the gate. It had grown to be this wonderfully vibrant tree, rustling at the slightest pretext of wind, welcoming cars as they cruised into the compound. Standing on the threshold of the outside world, the tree seemed to proclaim that the inside world could, would, be different.

It rustled. The familiar sound at once calmed and saddened him. Why did He, in His infinite wisdom, ask this tree to lean towards the gate? Why not away from the gate, so that the Secretary’s new car – faster, *bigger* – could pass onto the street unhindered?

‘Fuck the yam-faced-prick,’ the watchman told the tree. ‘You belong to me alone. You go, I go.’

‘Really?’ the tree asked him in return, swaying its young boughs like a happy friend.

‘Not really,’ he replied, remembering the last time he had left the building to visit a niece across town. The roads were full of buses and the buses were full of people – going where, doing what? – and he had felt scared out of his wits. From that day onwards, he shivered at the thought of crossing an arterial road. So where was the question of finding a new job, a new life? ‘Not really.’

‘Well,’ the miffed tree said.

‘You must understand me!’ the watchman said in a honeybee pitch. ‘I can’t raise a hoarse shriek if a thief showed up. The twins count the bones protruding out of my body. That’s their game. That’s my life.’

‘Very well then,’ the tree said, nodding.

They sat there like that, the man and the tree, enjoying each other’s company.

The sun paled. In a moment of epiphany, the watchman hurried to his room and returned with his Mont Blanc and a shaving blade. Using the latter, he peeled an oblong layer of bark off the tree. Upon the smooth innards, he lovingly wrote his name in thick vernacular letters. Satisfied with the effort, he sat down again for a few minutes before fetching an axe.

The One who Returned

‘Tell me again, Grandma, what did he tell you from inside the coffin?’ Arun asked.

Grandma didn’t hear him, or maybe she pretended that she hadn’t. She poured a portion of her coffee into the saucer and almost blew into it before remembering not to – blowing always loosened her dentures. She allowed the coffee to cool, then took a tentative sip. Perfect. Today would be a lovely day.

‘Every day is like a closed envelope,’ she said.

‘I know, Grandma,’ Arun replied. ‘You never know what’s inside till it unfolds.’

‘It’s bad manners to interrupt an elder. Where was I? Yes, the coffee is exceptional, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Grandma.’

‘No, I was saying that it is like a closed envelope...’

‘The coffee?’

‘... which has to be opened patiently. Then you will find that it contains exactly what you need. It’s as heavy or as light as you want it to be. Some people leave the envelope empty and then wonder why they remain unhappy.’

‘Speaking of unhappiness, I was wondering about your cousin.’

‘Which cousin? There were so many of them.’

‘The one who was in love with you.’

Grandma blinked, then said:

‘You ask tiresome questions. Why can’t you be useful instead? Can you hear Angel scratching herself? She needs to be fumigated, no, that’s not the term used anymore. Anyway. Take her to the vet. Once you return, you can polish the candlesticks. Heaven knows it kills you to attend mass on Sundays. But the least you can do is, oh dear God, make her stop, will you? How can flesh and blood endure so much scratching?’

‘She isn’t scratching herself, Grandma. She’s scratching the table. Before this, she was scratching your precious Persian rug.’

‘Really? That’s strange.’ She looked at her grandson as if she expected this kind of behaviour from *him*. ‘Clara, have you watered the plants?’

Clara came out of the kitchen and nodded.

‘Where has the girl disappeared to now?’

‘She’s right behind you, Grandma,’ Arun said. ‘And she has watered them.’

‘Really? And what about toast? And lunch?’ She stared at the sunrays streaming in through the open front door. Yes, it would be a lovely day. There was much to be done. ‘Up and about, then.’

She remained seated. Her arthritic knees needed to be cajoled for a few quiet minutes before they obeyed her. Arun knew that it was now or never.

‘You were quite a beauty, Grandma,’ he said and meant it. From where he sat, he could see a black-and-white photograph – *the* momentous image – that had been taken the day she turned sixteen and wore a full-length sari for the first time. The chocolate brown of her sari had mutated into a dull black, but the image remained as enchanting as ever. It presented a girl-woman wearing, in addition to the sari, an amethyst pendant and a white blouse with puffed-up, perforated sleeves that gave way to milky, dainty arms.

The girl-woman, never known to be self-conscious, had screwed up her eyes ever so slightly, as if trying to spot her future groom through distance and time.

The photo had served its purpose well. The first prospect who saw it married her. Arun corrected himself: the first prospect who saw it, and who did not happen to be a cousin, married her.

Grandma nodded at his steady gaze on the photograph and smiled. She was reminded of the day the photographer from the *Gold Town Photo Studio* brought it home. Oh, what a fuss his family had made about it, his father in particular. As if he had been unaware of his daughter's beauty till that moment. As if that changed anything.

'The suddenness of his discovery made him anxious, I think,' Grandma said, aloud. Arun, who was used to her abrupt jumps into the middle of a topic, did not interrupt. He knew the context, knew what she meant. 'He cordoned off the house till Ma told him to restrict his vigilance to his workplace.'

'He was a mine supervisor, wasn't he?'

'The strictest. He was among the few Indians the British trusted.'

'So much so that he had the honour of frisking the Indians at the end of the shift,' Arun completed.

'The only Indian, technically, to have that responsibility. All the other friskers were Anglo-Indians.'

'What was the difference? I mean, between Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians.'

Grandma took such a long pause that Arun gave up hope of a reply. But eventually, she said:

'The difference between success and failure, between comfort and struggle.'

'Between trust and distrust,' Arun said. He wasn't interested in obsolete socio-political equations, so he quickly added: 'You said your father cordoned off the house. Did it mean no outsiders were allowed?'

'While the curfew lasted.'

'What about cousins?'

'What about them?'

'Were they allowed?'

Didn't the chap ask a question about cousins just a few minutes back? What was with him today? And such a lovely day it was too. She rose, let her knees absorb the shock of her body weight, then proceeded to arrange breakfast for Angel. Arun sighed. Nothing would induce her to chat now, especially since she seemed so reluctant to talk about the whole affair, if he could call it that. He had to find another source, perhaps his granduncle whom everybody called Champion. But the idea of meeting Champion Uncle did not appeal to him, and in order to postpone a decision in this regard, he did a mental summary of the few facts he had gathered.

There was Francis, the ill-fated cousin, born to parents who had falsely proclaimed themselves to be Anglo-Indian. Francis fell in love with Grandma. Grandma married someone else. When she came back to her father's house a year after the wedding, for the birth of her first child – Arun's father – she learnt that Francis had died of tuberculosis. Arun wasn't very sure of what happened at this point, but his Grandma seemed to indicate that she, despite being eight months pregnant, had attended his funeral. And when she went to place flowers in his coffin, Francis allegedly opened his

eyes and said that he would never leave her side. Or maybe he said something else altogether, but nobody seemed to be in any doubt that he spoke to Viola.

That was all he knew.

‘Clara,’ Grandma called from the bedroom, ‘How often have I told you not to leave paper lying around the computer. Don’t you know that it will eat all the paper it can get?’

Arun clucked softly. More than twenty years ago, when his father was a young software professional – a rarity in Bangalore in those days – he used to come home with boxes filled with paper tapes. Seeing him feed them to his home computer, Grandma asked her son:

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m feeding the computer, Ma.’

‘But that’s paper.’

‘Right. This computer loves paper. It will feed on all the paper it can get.’

Since then, Grandma worried incessantly about keeping the computer table clear of paper. Whenever a letter or a receipt went missing, she blamed the computer’s voracious appetite. No matter how much people tried to explain the concept to her, she wouldn’t budge. After all, hadn’t her son told her that the computer ate paper? And hadn’t she herself seen reams of paper with holes chomped on them?

‘Like the whole world is melting,’ Arun thought, perspiring freely.

A dry March heat was fomenting the gutters to raise a stench that blurred the borders between the rooftops and the sky. Street dogs reeled under the combined assault of smell and heat – those that could not find shade roamed aimlessly, or perhaps in search of winter. Even the cows had had enough of their favourite garbage piles – so inedible in this weather. Quite unused to such conditions, most Bangaloreans stayed indoors. Only the hardy, the ambitious and the jobless were out at this hour.

‘And only a jobless guy like me would suffer this for a long-dead tale,’ Arun thought, opening the gate of Champion Uncle’s house. At the front door, he spent a few moments relishing the shade. And then his fear of Champion Uncle returned. He braced himself, rang the bell and prepared for a long wait. Champion Uncle liked taking his time opening the door and anybody who rang twice was clearly a rascal. So Arun pottered around, studying the lettering on the nameplate, the money plant, and finally, the patches of brick showing in the moss-ridden compound walls.

‘Yes?’ Champion Uncle asked in his booming voice. Arun turned to face him. ‘Oh, it’s you. Yes, I’ll come right away.’

‘Sure, uncle,’ Arun said. ‘Uh... where?’

If he were Superman, Champion Uncle would have vaporised him with his breath.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked. ‘To Viola’s house.’

‘Sure, uncle,’ said Arun. ‘Uh... why?’

‘She’s dead, isn’t she? No? Then what are you doing here at this unearthly hour?’

‘I was wondering... if you are free... maybe we can talk.’

‘What about? Has Viola sent you? She might be my sister, but we haven’t spoken for eighteen years this Easter. The last time we spoke, she used to think that computers ate paper. Does she still think so? Come in.’

Arun followed him inside, sat on the edge of a squeaky sofa and wiped his brow.

‘I asked you a question, young man.’

‘What?’

‘Does she still think so?’

‘Actually, yes.’

‘Ha! The old hag will never change. Once she likes a thought, that’s it, she won’t give it up.’

‘And apparently won’t reveal it either.’

‘What?’

‘I was trying to find out about that cousin who wanted to marry her.’

Champion Uncle stiffened and played with the metal band on his wrist.

‘Did you know him, uncle?’

‘Did I know whom?’

‘The cousin.’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘It’s intriguing, isn’t it? After all, how often does a man reassure his lover from his coffin?’

‘Ha! Did she tell you that?’

‘Not in so many words. She was vague. I heard the story a long time ago.’

‘And you believed it?’

Arun shrugged.

‘I don’t know what to make of it.’

The two sat in silence. Arun fidgeted, stole a glance at his granduncle and saw that his face had turned to marble. But somehow, he seemed human for the first time. Almost vulnerable. Champion Uncle cleared his throat loudly and said:

‘I don’t know what to make of it either.’

‘If you can tell me what happened...’

‘I’m getting to it,’ Champion Uncle said and fell silent again, as if to put scattered thoughts in sequence. Finally, he said: ‘I felt sad for Viola. A pregnant woman deserves to do nothing but wait for her baby to arrive. She should have her mind free to count the baby’s kicks. To rest her back. To use her index finger to eat a pot of marmalade if she wants to. My wife, she spent the time designing a new clothes cabinet, tearing up old clothes to make nappies, buying the crib... you know? She told me that planning the arrangements gave her a grip on the human inside her.’

Arun stifled a yawn.

‘Viola wasn’t as lucky. She... she spent the last month dreading the worst.’

‘What happened?’

‘Well, she came home from Simon’s place – Simon was your grandfather, you know? You do? – so, anyway, she came home only in the eighth month. Simon said he couldn’t get leave and they had to wait for a suitable escort heading in our direction.’

‘Where had Grandma relocated?’

‘To a Steel Town, a thousand kilometres away. And given Simon’s situation, she wrote suggesting that she will have a Steel baby. My mother wouldn’t hear of it. She had

to come home and deliver a Gold baby, preferably a boy. Finally, by the middle of the seventh month, she wrote saying that an escort was found. Of course, we didn't believe the reason behind the delay. It was clear to us that she didn't want to come here.'

'Because of Francis?'

Champion Uncle pretended not to hear him and continued:

'We went to the station, I and mother, to receive Viola. She was bloated, but pale as a ghost. We piled into a *tonga* and mother asked to be taken to the cemetery. When we got there, she asked me to wait, helped Viola down, and literally dragged her to visit his grave.'

'Francis's grave?'

'Charlie Chaplin's. Rapsallion! Of course, Francis's.'

'But why?'

'Mother just wanted to avoid what eventually happened, I suppose. Before Viola got married, much before actually, we all kept asking: "Is anything happening between you two?" She always replied cheerfully: "Nothing," and laughed a secret laugh. Mother even made her swear on the crucifix that she meant it; Viola did that without any hesitation. And well, she married Simon without a protest, so it seemed okay. But that man... how could we in the family ignore his fate? We did not know what had happened between him and Viola, but we were clear on what had to happen now. Mother took her to his grave to make peace. To assuage his spirit and let bygones be bygones. It made sense to me then and it makes sense to me now. Only, we achieved the opposite result. We informed a dead lover that his dream woman had returned, as if he needed us to tell him that. That night, Viola ate a hearty dinner and insisted on sleeping alone in her room. By midnight, I was the only one awake in the house. I was studying for the Bar, you know? Viola's room was next to my study, and around three, I thought I heard her mumbling. A minute later, the whole family heard her scream. We all rushed in to find her sitting bolt upright on the bed. She was paler than milk. "He came, he spoke to me," she said finally. Seeing her like that chilled my heart. Viola, my sturdy, unshakable sister was trembling like an autumn leaf.' Champion Uncle paused for a long moment, then said: 'I can still see her wide-open eyes. I can still see the guilt in them. "What did he say?" we asked. She asked for a glass of water, drank it and said in a stronger voice: "I dreamt of him. He was wearing that white dinner jacket, the one he wore to my wedding. He was lying in his coffin. I clearly saw the St. Peter's altar behind it. People were paying their last respects, and I too stood in the line with a small bouquet of dahlias in my hand. You were with me, Ma. When our turn came, I placed the dahlias on his chest and turned my gaze upwards to see his face. He opened his eyes, smiled – no, grinned – and patted my hand and said, "Don't worry, Viola. I'm not going anywhere. I'm your Robert." Those were her exact words.'

The power supply broke; the cantankerous ceiling fan jiggled to a halt. Neither Champion Uncle nor Arun gave it a thought.

'The part that troubled me the most were the words: *I'm not going anywhere*. "What did he mean?" I asked her. She said: "If it's a boy, we'll name him Robert, after Simon's father." Despite all the tension in the room, my mother crossed herself and said: "So it's a boy! Come, you'll sleep in my room now. The worst is over."

'It wasn't, as we discovered the next night. At exactly three, Viola woke up with a startled cry. Only those awake or in the same room would have heard it. I heard it and

mother heard it. We both rushed into her room. Viola was sitting bolt upright, again, and she confirmed that she had seen the same dream, down to the missing button on his jacket.

‘The due date was a month away, and she had the dream every night of that month. I think she stopped screaming or exclaiming after the fourth night, but she was just as shaken. So were we. We asked the doctor to conduct a thorough check-up. He told us that he hadn’t heard a steadier heartbeat in a foetus. Still, we were worried. Viola stopped reminding us that it was a lovely day outside. And she tried avoiding sleep till three. But how long can one knit or read a book? Inevitably, she slept before three and dreamt the same dream. One night, she took my suggestion and set an alarm for two-thirty. She woke up to the alarm and came to my room to chat. I told her some merry jokes. She laughed, I laughed, but both of us had one eye on the ticking clock. I was also trying to study, you know? At one point, I looked up from my book and saw that she had dozed off. I looked at the clock. It was exactly three. I raised my arm to shake her awake when she opened her eyes like in a ghost movie. I had never seen her like that before, in that exact moment when she carried her voluptuous horror into the waking world, the moment before the horror shrivelled and withered. I clear jumped off my chair, I don’t mind telling you. Didn’t sleep for a few days after that.

‘All of us went about our lives with the same nameless fear. Viola had even stopped smiling, forget enjoying the sunshine. And the summer just grew sultrier. The heat was like now, strong enough to absorb sounds out of silences, to the extent that the grandfather clock in the living room sounded like a heartbeat on microphone. The seconds ticked by and we all waited for the dilation to begin. The whole house felt pregnant.

‘I tell you, when I heard your father’s first cry and it sounded human, and I saw his face and it looked like a child’s, I sank on my knees and thanked Him. And Viola, dear woman!, was ecstatic. That very morning, she had told Ma that she was having second thoughts about breastfeeding – how could she let Francis access her breast? But when she saw little Robert, all her misgivings vanished.’

The ceiling fan came alive, began jiggling again. Arun looked up and asked:

‘Did he ever trouble Grandma again?’

‘Yes; he found the ultimate revenge.’

‘How come?’

Champion uncle stiffened.

‘Your father was thirty-five, wasn’t he, when he died? Did he not leave when Viola was still young enough to feel the full weight of his loss? I couldn’t have thought of a better plan myself.’

‘But uncle, there is another way of looking at it. Here was a man so completely besotted to a woman that he returned as the one person she would love more than anyone else in the world, including her husband. He came back as her eldest son. Doesn’t that suggest true love?’

Champion uncle snorted and returned to his usual mood.

‘He came back as the one person who could control her fully. The one person who could hurt her at will, show her pain more intense than what he went through.’

Early the next morning, Arun again rang Champion Uncle's bell. This time, he was expected. This time, Champion Uncle actually welcomed him with a smile. Upon taking their seats, he asked:

'What about tea?' and shouted for some without waiting for a reply. Turning back to Arun, he said: 'I have kept my promise.'

Arun folded his lips and licked them from the inside. Before he took leave of Champion Uncle yesterday, he had asked him to try and remember what he could about the affair.

'You remembered something?'

'I remembered the exact moment that rapsallion fell in love with Viola. It came back to me during dinner last night. Made me lose my appetite.'

'Yes, uncle, tell me,' Arun said, leaning forward.

'I will.' The tea came. Arun sipped and waited. Champion Uncle gulped and began:

'It was, as we learnt later, the night Deadly D'souza stubbed a burning cigar on some idiot's right eye. He must have been left-handed. So, anyway, it happened in Pinto's Parlour. No surprise there. Pinto's customers were the roughest miners in Gold Town. But none was rougher than D'souza. He was my hero, I admired him from a distance. Do you know why?'

Arun couldn't have cared less, but he also had no desire to interrupt Champion Uncle.

'D'souza was the tallest and strongest Indian Christian in Gold Town. He had the habit of wearing only one button on his shirt, the one in line with his navel, so that the top of his big belly was always exposed. Now, the problem with D'souza was that nobody could tell when or why he got angry. You only knew you had displeased him when he used your eye as an ashtray or your face as a pummelling bag. Those days, the Christians in Gold Town were either Anglo-Indians or Indian Christians. And for some reason, the two groups were at loggerheads; people had not talked about anything else but the rivalry for months. Under such circumstances, an Anglo-Indian made a stupid comment and D'souza cigared his best eye.

'So, anyway, that night, Viola, myself and Francis had an adventure, a taboo outing. We used to be good friends, he and I. We were both thirteen. Viola was nine, approaching ten, old enough to suggest that we surreptitiously peep into the clubhouse and actually observe a British cocktail party in progress. I wanted to see the ladies dance, so I agreed with her idea. I roped in Francis because his father was the club's caretaker.

'So much to our mother's delight, Viola and I had an early supper and waited in our room. Francis came, knocked on the windowpane and we set off. His face was twice as bright as the half-moon above us. Due to the adventure, I thought. The three of us entered the wooded area behind our house, and walked between the trees till we reached a small alley which took us to the slums of the Miners' Colony. We were taking the longer route to the club, but by avoiding the main road, we were ensuring that we wouldn't be caught by anyone of consequence. It was nine o'clock. I had never been out on my own at that hour and the world seemed different. In this world we had entered, people seemed to have a healthy disrespect for the clock. Francis was in his element. He purchased a large paper cone of peanuts and offered it to Viola who distributed it among us. We

ambled along, cracking and crunching and spitting, and before we knew it, we had reached the main road of Gold Town. We kept close to the gutters till we reached the compound wall of the club. It must have been six feet high, but to our young eyes, it seemed like ten. "This way," he said and led us to a point where a fallen brick had created a handy ledge for our feet. He shinned up and I did the same. He then helped Viola up and the three of us landed on the other side. The grass was so soft I wanted to be a beetle. You know what unfamiliar luxury does to you? It reminds you of consequences. I suddenly realised how dangerous our adventure really was. And he was no fool either. He would have known that if a *firang* caught us, the thrashing would be nothing compared to his father losing his job and reputation. Why was he doing this for us? We weren't *that* close. Or were we? I didn't have much time to think about it, for he had taken Viola's hand firmly and was dashing across the lawn. I followed them. We could now hear the piano and violins. He led us to the easternmost window of the building's front façade and, for the first time, looked worried. He said, "I had borrowed a table from the shed and placed it here. It was perfect for standing on and looking inside. But the gardener must have removed it." "So what does this mean? All for nothing?" Viola asked. He responded not to her words, but the disappointment in her voice. "I'll bend, you climb upon me," he told her. That's how Viola and I watched well-dressed Brits dance like puppets stuck in a cyclic narrative. I could see that Viola was mesmerised. You must have seen her throw her neck back to talk to someone behind her. No? Well, she learnt that that night. She took her time at the window. He remained bent, didn't move a muscle.'

'Wow,' Arun said. 'What a lovely story.'

'You think that's lovely? The next day in school, he came to me and told me, voluntarily, that he was in love with her. A nine-year old girl who happened to be her cousin! I punched him on the face and never spoke to him again. Him and that scatterbrained friend of his.'

'Who?'

'Professor Williams. Here's his address.'

'Should I meet him?'

'Unless you're satisfied with half the story.' Champion Uncle paused. 'Go. Meet him. And come back to report. I still don't have a clue about what happened.'

Arun stood up to leave and asked:

'Uncle, if I may ask...'

'You may.'

'Why don't you speak to Grandma anymore?'

'She didn't turn up for the Easter lunch after I had specifically invited her. Now move.'

'Champion actually sent you here?' an excited Professor Williams asked.

'Yes.'

'Come inside. This is most unexpected.'

In five minutes, Arun had explained his mission and, thus, reluctantly conveyed that reconciliation was not in Champion Uncle's mind.

‘I see,’ Professor Williams said. ‘I thought that after all these years... but it’s great to meet you, young man. Champion and I used to be the best of friends. Along with Francis, we were quite a trio. We shared the kind of bond that’s possible only at that age. You came to learn about Francis and Viola?’

‘Yes.’

Professor Williams leaned forward in his chair.

‘Does she still remember him, talk about him?’

‘Actually, no.’

Professor Williams stared at Arun with an inscrutable expression on his face.

‘She’s deep,’ he said. ‘Deep as only a woman can be. She’s told you enough to incite your curiosity without revealing anything of importance. And here you are, chasing this puzzle.’

‘Well, yeah. That’s one way of looking at it. But is there any fact of importance at all?’

‘One,’ Professor Williams said. ‘She broke his heart. She knew from the beginning; do you know when it all began? It was the night Deadly D’souza blinded an innocent man for doing his job. Now, there’s one thing you should know about D’souza – he was responsible for splitting Gold Town right down the middle, into Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians. The more he succeeded in fabricating anecdotes, the more he became a hero. That night in Pinto’s Parlour, a drunk D’souza was bragging to his friends about how he managed to smuggle a gold nugget out of the mines. “And guess what,” he was telling his friends, “I came, removed it and... Ah! I never knew shit could smell so sweet.” A mine supervisor seated on the next table confronted D’souza and lost an eye for taking the trouble. D’souza fled town, never to return. But before leaving, he told all the Indian Christians he met that an Anglo-Indian mine supervisor was badmouthing them and he, D’souza, decided to stand up for all of them.’

‘And the same night, Francis took Champion Uncle and Grandma to see the ballroom dance,’ Arun said, veering the narrative back on course without, he hoped, causing offence.

‘Who told you that bit? Viola?’

‘Champion Uncle.’

‘Of course. I won’t repeat that then. But I’ll tell you what happened sometime after that. In school. Francis and I were having our lunch – which was sponsored by the school, something like the midday meals the government has nowadays – when Viola walked up to us and asked: “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”’

‘Why did she say that?’ Arun asked.

Instead of answering him, Professor Williams said:

‘For the first time in my life, I was afraid of a woman. Who happened to be a 10-year-old girl. So haughty. So mocking. Of course, I didn’t understand what she meant, but Francis did. “Willy, let’s write a petition,” he told me, suddenly sounding grown-up. The next day, the principal summoned him to his room and dangled a piece of paper in front of him. It was the petition, requesting the school authorities to extend the lunch program to all Christians, not just the Anglo-Indians. Francis had called the current scheme discriminatory, irrational and, taking my suggestion, “against the spirit of Christianity”. “Who do you think you are? Gandhi?” the principal asked. Francis was given a stern, *final* warning and sent back to class. If he had nurtured hopes of becoming

a hero, it didn't work. Nobody learnt about the incident. I don't think Viola knows about it even today. Perhaps you can inform her about it?"

'I'll try and bring it up,' Arun said evasively.

'Hmm. Where was I? Yes, after this incident, Francis began changing as a person. He used to be taciturn at the best of times, but now, he was restless as well. I was his only well-wisher, it seemed to me. So I took it upon myself to advise him. I told him that he must wait for the rivalry between the Anglo-Indians and the Indian Christians to end and for Viola to turn into a woman.

'The next year, Viola entered the fifth form and moved into the adjacent girls-only compound of the school. By now, Francis was hooked. He had to see her everyday. He took to visiting her house despite Champion's animosity, whose mother, I may add, was a kind woman. She welcomed Francis and fussed over him, probably because she felt for the mother-less boy.

'According to Francis, Viola reacted unpredictably to his presence. "She laughed at my joke," he would tell me one day. But some days later, he would say "She brushes me off like a fly." It certainly was a journey of ups and downs. Of not knowing. Did she love him or hate him? Or worse, was she indifferent to his fate? Despite seeing her everyday, he didn't have a clue. And that was killing him inside. He went downhill in next six years. From being the class-topper, he became a miserable backbencher and eventually lost the sympathy of all the teachers.

'And then, one day, Viola posed for a photograph at the *Gold Town Photo Studio* and the world came crashing down upon Francis. "I hear your parents are seeking a match for you," he told Viola one day. "What if they are?" she asked. "But, but, what about us?" "Us?" "Us. You and me. Why don't you marry me?" "For many obvious reasons," she said. "There's a huge gap between my father's truth and your father's lie. That itself is sufficient." "I'll convert," Francis replied, perhaps hoping to devise a new kind of baptism ceremony. "I'll, I'll announce in the newspaper that I'm not an Anglo-Indian." "You're destined to be my cousin," Viola replied. But that didn't stop him from trying. He couldn't afford an announcement in the newspaper, but he did write graffiti in many walls across Gold Town. Outside the St. Peter's chapel, he wrote *Francis Freeman is not an Anglo-Indian, but a creation of God nonetheless*. And inside the Gold Town railway station, right below a Union slogan, he wrote *Francis Freeman is an Indian and a Christian and nothing more*. And, worst of all, he damaged the front wall of the clubhouse. *Dogs and Discriminators not allowed inside*, he wrote on it. It incited the Club Manager to barge into his room in the outhouse. Francis was lying on his bed in a foetal position. I was seated beside him, having given him the news that Viola was now engaged.' Professor Williams sneered. 'The Club Manager had come to tackle a radical youth; instead, he found a boy shrinking into himself. He shook his head and left.

'Her wedding was to take place three months later. Francis had decided to mope in his room for the rest of his life, so I was surprised that he came to visit me the day before the wedding. "I need good clothes," he said. "The best, the classiest clothes a Gold Town Indian has ever worn. Viola will take one look at me and realise her blunder. Which British officer is on home leave?" Gatley was. I knew his butler. By the time Francis and I convinced him to loan us Gatley's best suit, it was late in the night. There was no time to launder it. Still, when Francis wore the white suit and bowtie, he looked splendid. He was quite handsome, you know?'

'I didn't know that,' Arun said.

'Extremely handsome. We went to the church and Francis insisted on sitting on the last pew. I thought it was because, that way, he would be the first person Viola saw upon entering the church.' Professor Williams sighed. 'Francis had developed cold feet, had allowed his inferiority complex to kick in, that was all. I felt so sorry for him. The one girl in the whole church who didn't give him a second glance was exchanging vows with a stranger. "Did you expect her to run towards you and beg your pardon?" I asked him that night, which is what *I* had secretly hoped for, I don't mind telling you. Francis was still dressed in the white suit and was trying to drink rum as he had seen others do. I think he must have had a thimbleful before he began stammering. "She, she is a stoop, stupid garhl. She proffered, preferred Steel Taw to Go, Go, Gold Taw. Bad bargain." He laughed hysterically. "You hear that? Sheez a bad bargainer. Steel to Go, Go, Gold."

'One month later, Francis fell seriously ill. Viola's mother took him home to take care of him. Viola was still there – her new husband hadn't yet found a suitable accommodation in Steel Town – so during mealtimes, she accompanied her mother to the portion of the house where Francis was confined, but she never actually ventured into the sickroom. "Have you seen him?" she asked me one day, heartily biting into an apple. "He looks like a ghost. Enough to spoil the beauty of a bright day." Later, Francis asked me: "Did she cry when she spoke about me?" I endlessly tried to divert his attention, but he didn't want to speak about anything else. "Was she wearing her purple sari today?" he asked me one day. "Yes, how did you know?" I asked in reply. "She coughed while sitting on the bench outside and it sounded like she was wearing her purple sari." He would say things like that and make me miserable. "You're dying, Francis," I told him one day. "The doctor says it might be tuberculosis," he replied. I nodded. I had just heard from Gatley's butler. His master had died of tuberculosis in London. And he had contracted the disease before he left Gold Town.'

Professor Williams sobbed quietly. Arun let him. Finally, he heard him say:

'Typical of Viola. She was already in Steel Town by the time we buried him. I took the chipped memories of Francis and came to Bangalore to study English Literature. My Desdemona was Viola. My Scarlet was Viola. I never believed in Juliet. I never trusted a woman again.' He ran a hand over his eyes. 'I've been divorced for twenty years now.'

It was late in the evening when Arun reached home and found his Grandma asleep on her chair. Looking at her like that, Arun felt convinced that she would carry her secret to her grave. What did she feel for Francis? Love? Or some emotion that changed colour over time?

He leaned forward to wake her and saw a bit of paper on her hand. He tried to pry it out gently, but ended up waking her.

'Arun,' she said. 'You're back? Looking for something? What's that? Oh yes, the paper. It's for you.'

The bit of paper contained one word.

'Francis!'

‘That’s the name of the cousin you were enquiring about. I remembered it at the vet’s today, so I wrote it down before I forgot. Francis. The silly boy wanted to marry me, kept asking why I couldn’t. Jesus Christ, we were cousins! Why couldn’t he understand that? Come, let’s have dinner. It was such a lovely day, I decided to make pancakes.’

Beck and Call

Abhimanyu Sharma badly needed some sound sleep, but given the situation he was in, he supposed that he couldn't help having that recurring nightmare, the one involving the Cabinet Minister.

The nightmare began as usual, at the dinner table of his favourite 5-star hotel with Abhimanyu himself helping the Minister sink his plump body into feathery cushions. That done, he adjusted his necktie, which frequently turned crooked in his dream, laughed nervously and took his own seat. A bevy of waiters attended to them, and although they were obsequious to a fault, Abhimanyu smelt an enduring conspiracy in their behaviour, especially the innocence with which they recommended whiskeys and spicy dishes.

His brain was always inventive while narrating this part of the nightmare. On certain nights, the headwaiter would suggest Goan Chicken Curry or Mutton Rogan Josh; on other nights, it would be Chettinad Chicken or Shanghai Duck Roast or some other dish he had heard people praise. His wife – in his dreams, she was nothing more than a voice in the periphery – always ordered an unpronounceable Thai dish, with red curry sauce, number five on the spice scale. As for the Minister, he was immersed in a phone conversation, looking grave. Who knew, perhaps it was a call from the Party President herself. This was not the time to bother him with menu cards. So Abhimanyu ordered four dishes for him: something Continental, something Chinese, something north Indian, and also that Jambalaya thing. The chef must outdo himself. The Minister must be pleased or else! The headwaiter nodded, left. The Minister nodded, hung up.

'Sharma, I hope you ordered *sattvik* food for me,' he said.

'*Sattvik* food, sir?' Abhimanyu asked.

'Surely you've heard of *sattvik* food?'

'Yes, of course, sir. I don't take oil or spices myself. You see, sir, when I was young, newly married, the government deputed me to Cambodia for three months. It was an unfortunate trip, sir, I mean for me personally because...'

'Yes, yes, call the boy.'

The headwaiter reappeared.

'*Dal-chawal* for me,' the Minister told him sternly, muttering under his breath, 'Everybody knows I eat *sattvik*.'

'*Dal-chawal*. *Dal*, not *Dal Fry*. And cook the rice well,' Abhimanyu said, as sternly as the Minister. 'And curds. Curds are good, sir. You take curds, no?'

'I'll have Scotch, no ice, with a twist. You must try it. Cools the inside.'

'Surely, sir'

So Abhimanyu drank the whiskey and nibbled the food originally ordered for the Minister. The fluffy fat and the spices – polite but exotic – were sufficient to rouse his ulcer. By the end of the meal, he decided that he would feel more comfortable carrying his intestines in his two bare hands, but he remained alert and faithful to the needs of the Minister, the rigmarole of tomorrow.

The Minister would like to visit the Hanuman temple, then relax in a beach: *the priest would be informed, a beach cottage booked*. The Minister's secretary would visit the office to ask for particulars regarding the Efficiency Report – *he would be well-*

received. The Minister and his entourage would leave the day after, first flight out – *the tickets would be booked, a sattvik banquet dinner arranged for tomorrow.*

As it had actually happened – two years ago – the Minister was mollified with Abhimanyu’s concern and sincerity, but in his nightmare, Abhimanyu forgot to ask someone to book the flight tickets. As a result, the Minister missed a routine Cabinet meeting and was featured on Breaking News; his loyalty to the Party was speculated upon. Abhimanyu was asked to go on an indefinite leave. Indefinite? The word was too vague for his regimented brain, so it just sent a message to his limbs: jolt.

He awoke. The first three seconds of wakefulness were delicious. He felt indefinite, safe. Then he remembered a series of unpleasant facts: he was retiring today; they had constituted a Parliamentary Committee to investigate corruption charges against him; someone anonymous had called him, claiming to have all the proof the Committee would need; and to crown it all, this woman snoring gently beside him wanted a new life, whatever that meant.

He noisily rotated on his own axis, exposing some of his sweat to the draft from the air-conditioner.

‘Will you let me sleep?’ his wife asked, wrapping her quill tightly over her face.

‘Alright. It’s dawn anyway,’ he barked at the quill and went out into the large living room which still retained an air of decadence. Fit for the colonial Governor even today, as his guests told him. He switched on the lights and air-conditioners, and smiled at the abstract painting that now occupied the spot vacated by the head of a stuffed tiger. The painting was more politically correct, even though it showed the silhouette of an adult man suckling on a matriarch.

‘Strange world. Never know what people make of it,’ Abhimanyu thought, remembering the art gallery in Mumbai where the struggling painter made his silly sales pitch. The painting was suggesting many things, he said. That the darkness of the world feeds off feminine power. That even the most powerful forces needed a safe anchor. That the most sublime relationship possible between man and woman revolved around hunger. Before the painter introduced any more layers in his work, Abhimanyu interrupted him.

‘My daughter likes it. So you can consider it sold.’

The painter beamed while Sandhya – his pretty twenty-year-old – held his elbow and grinned.

‘It’ll be worth something one day,’ she said. The painter beamed some more. Abhimanyu shrugged. What the heck! He had some loose cash left over from a transaction.

‘That was a nice day,’ Abhimanyu thought. From the art gallery, he and Sandhya had gone to the revolving restaurant overlooking Marine Drive. Their vista moved from orange sunset to golden traffic to twilight-lit waves. Their conversation moved from the heat wave in Delhi to the bad food in the campus to psychology lessons.

‘I loved psychology,’ Abhimanyu said, biting into a breadstick and enjoying the spectacle of his daughter’s appetite. ‘Psychology was good. And Pavlov was exceptional. That thing he said about mankind being like animals that reflect the environment. Brilliant.’

‘Dad,’ Sandhya said, scooping up a cheese cube with her forefinger, ‘when you misquote psychologists, it can only mean one thing.’

‘What?’

‘That we’ll have another of those conversations. Like, mom must not know and all that.’

Abhimanyu stared in open admiration. She was the brightest kid in the country, even if he said so himself. He had had some doubts about sending her off to that Delhi campus packed with flag-bearing Leftists, but she had not lost her composure. Not for a moment. He had taught her well.

‘Yes. Another of those conversations. But first, order your dessert.’

Over pineapple fudge, he gave her the relevant details. An alphanumeric account number (‘Memorise, never write it down.’), the name of the bank (‘Learn some German, it’ll come handy.’) and the amount awaiting her there (‘All yours!’). Once he finished speaking, he looked her straight in the eye and saw in it an uncharacteristic grimness. Had he gone too far?

‘Dad,’ Sandhya said finally, ‘I think I’ll have another fudge. I can afford it.’

Abhimanyu laughed heartily, beckoned the waiter.

‘You place the order,’ he told her. ‘Throw your voice behind it.’

She did.

‘That’s the real thing. Having people at your beck and call. Money in itself is nothing. Remember that.’

He had felt like he had taught her everything he knew. Even now, the moment made him giddy – his blood pounded through, sending SOS tom-toms to his brain. He crept noiselessly back into the bedroom, groped around his nightstand and found the pills. He took one. “Director *memsaab*” didn’t stir. Outside the window, her tulips were shedding their dark skins, snatching colour back from the sun.

It was raining when his car drove into the office building, and for some reason, the wetness irritated him. He frowned at the drooping flag on his car’s bonnet. He scowled at the raindrops splashing on the marble steps before climbing them nonchalantly, as if he wasn’t aware that he was well-dressed.

The foyer was damp, steamy and filled with people, most of whom either ignored him or sneered in his direction, like it was already tomorrow. But he also received an exuberant, ‘Good morning, sir,’ from Mathur, the Associate General Manager, who in all probability was waiting to bump into him.

‘Good morning, Mathur,’ Abhimanyu replied, allowing him to press the elevator bell. A loud clang spiralled down the stairwell of the building. The elevator was on the third floor where the attendant was, no doubt, gossiping with someone.

‘It’s coming down, sir.’

‘Yes, Mathur.’

‘Drizzling heavily, sir.’

‘It’s pouring.’

‘Last day, sir.’

‘Yes, it is,’ Abhimanyu replied, congratulating himself on saving a few key decisions for today. Else, Mathur would be ignoring him as well.

‘We’ll miss you, sir.’

‘You know how it is,’ Abhimanyu said, thawing visibly. ‘It goes on.’

The elevator arrived.

‘Oh no, sir,’ Mathur said with finality, pushing open the elevator grills, ‘nothing goes on just like that.’

‘Nothing goes on just like that,’ Abhimanyu repeated absently. The elevator attendant hadn’t rushed forward to carry his suitcase. Had Mathur blocked his way?

‘Nothing goes on just like that,’ Mathur insisted, keeping the grills open for him. Abhimanyu stepped inside. Mathur closed the grills. The attendant pressed 1 on his panel. ‘Things were different before you. Things will be different after you. I mean, you brought structure; no confusion with you, sir.’ The first floor arrived. Both officers exited. ‘I mean, I’m not just saying this because you’re my boss. What to tell, sir? You know very well that I fought with the previous Director. I lost my promotion because of that. But truth is truth, sir. And the truth is that we’ll miss you.’

‘Thank you, Mathur,’ Abhimanyu said sourly. A farewell speech this early in the morning was a virtual confirmation that there won’t be a farewell party in the evening. ‘I’ll see you later.’

‘Enjoy the day, sir.’

‘Hmm,’ Abhimanyu said. As he stepped into his floor, all activity came to a standstill. The keyboards went silent, file pages froze at half-flip, and that careless accountant in the corner forgot to take a drag on his cigarette. What did they expect? That he’d be sucked into the ceiling fan or that his grey suit would develop black fibres and swallow his face like in Spiderman?

The TV channels had broken the news of the Parliamentary Enquiry Committee at, what?, 6 pm last evening? And those few sound bytes – a passing two-line mention – had transformed his own people into complete strangers. Would they have behaved the same way if he had one more year of service left? Of course not. They’d have bet on the certainty that he’d find a way out. They’d have stuck by his side, urged him to file a defamation lawsuit, taken a protest march on the lawn outside. But as matters stood, even his Public Relations Officer hadn’t called to enquire if they should draft official statement to the press. And where were the journalists anyway? Was nobody interested in his version of the story?

He bowed his head and walked briskly towards his office. En route, he heard a muted, uncertain, ‘Good morning, sir,’ from a clerk. A few more joined in. He nodded and entered his office. Inside, the phone rang even before he could switch on the air-conditioner. It was his wife.

‘Have you decided whether you’re promoting the Mathur gang or the Datta gang?’ she asked.

‘Is it necessary to say *gang*?’ he barked.

‘Very well. Have you decided which of your lieutenants will remain loyal to you after you’re gone?’

‘My world is more complex than you think.’

‘Than I like,’ she replied. ‘I know that Mathur and his cronies are less complicated by nature, but Datta and his cronies have better relations with the Union Leaders and Class D officers. Am I learned enough for you?’

‘It’s the *Toughest* day. In my life. Can you *try* to be sympathetic?’

‘I’m being more sympathetic than you can imagine. Maybe you should imagine more, Abhi.’

‘Hah.’

‘Let me know once you’ve made your choice. It’s for your own good.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Yes,’ she said, trailing off and then sounding strong again, ‘be prepared for all possibilities.’

‘I am.’

‘Face the consequences with dignity.’

‘Or else I’ll disappoint you?’ he asked, mocking.

‘Your value system, Abhi. Live it fully.’

She disconnected. Abhimanyu felt amazed, yet again, that he hadn’t ever guessed her inner nature till Sandhya left to study in Delhi. He should have known, what with her insistence in wearing cotton saris all the time and buying tulip seeds for the garden with her savings instead of using the funds *legally* allocated by the government. But he had been too busy with other things. He had convinced himself that bookworms have the right to be odd.

His instinct told him that she was planning her revenge right now, when he was at his vulnerable worst. But, he decided, whatever happened, he wouldn’t let her go and lead an independent life. Such an arrangement might scar Sandhya for life.

He sighed, looked at his near-empty desk, then at the shadow of falling rain on the wall opposite him. He drummed his hairy knuckles on the foam-covered arms of his chair. Important as the day was, there wasn’t much he could do. In places near and far, things were being done on his behalf. The phone would ring soon enough. After that, he’d take the decisions that shaped his future.

The phone rang soon enough, as he had predicted.

‘Happy Birthday, Dad,’ Sandhya shouted.

He smiled for the first time since 6 pm last evening.

‘Thank you, *beta*. You remembered!’

‘D-uh! Of course I remembered. Are you, like, okay?’

‘I’m fine. Retiring today. Relaxed life ahead.’

Both went silent for a while.

‘I know there’s a retirement age and all that, but don’t they give a grace period of, like, a few months?’

‘They do, they do.’

‘Dad, you can talk to me if you like.’

‘I know.’

‘I’m a big girl now. Talk to me, Dad.’

‘Saw the news last night?’

‘Read the paper this morning.’

‘Which page?’ he asked eagerly, for he had avoided calling friends in Delhi to enquire about the coverage in the Delhi edition.

‘Nation. Small. One column.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Totally, like, unnoticeable, Dad.’ Abhimanyu laughed. ‘So want to tell me what happened?’

‘Nothing, *beta*. Well, something happened during the Minister’s visit two months ago. A local journalist carried a story.’

‘Lemme guess. Eight visits in one year kind of thing?’

‘Yes, yes. There were photos. One of him lazing on the beach. One of him partying with friends.’

‘Taxpayer’s money wasted, blah, blah. But how’s this your fault? He should have been, like, careful.’

‘The journalist carried the story because he wanted to settle a score with me.’

‘The bastard.’

‘*Beta!*’

‘Sorry.’

‘So, anyway, that’s the reason. And as you can, the Minister has chosen his moment well.’

‘What’s the journalist’s name?’

‘Blasius Rodrigues. Why?’

‘I’ll send him a curse. Everything will be fine, like, by the evening.’

Abhimanyu started to laugh again and stopped himself when he saw Datta, another Associate General Manager, creep into his office with a box of sweets and an obsequious smile.

‘We’ll talk again in the evening, *beta*. Yes, yes. Don’t worry. I’ll fix this. Bye. Yeah, bye, bye. Yes, Datta.’

‘Sir,’ Datta said, smile broader and offering the sweets.

‘No, Datta. No sweets. My sugar is quite high nowadays.’

‘But it’s your barthday, sir. You must hab a little. This much bonly. You’re sarprised, sir? Eberybody in the oppice can porget your barthday, but this Datta bill not porget.’

Five minutes after he coaxed Datta out of his office, Abhimanyu received a call from an ex-factotum, now retired and relocated to Tirupati, who informed him that his prayers and offerings had reached the Lord of the Seven Hills.

In less than an hour, Blasius Rodrigues stood outside his office, apologising for not taking an appointment, asking for what he termed a farewell interview.

‘I don’t have much time to spare,’ Abhimanyu said. Even his wife would have agreed that he sounded dignified.

Rodrigues ran a hand up his oil-less hair, opened a notepad and said:

‘I’ll get straight down to it then. I’ve come to know from reliable sources that someone is trying to blackmail you.’

Abhimanyu started. There was no way anybody could have known. He had not discussed last night’s anonymous call even with his mirror. Perhaps the blackmailer had informed Rodrigues to exert pressure. That was the only possible explanation. He laughed unconvincingly.

‘Firstly, the whole thing is a huge misunderstanding. I’m sure my name will be cleared up by the honourable members of the committee. The facts will emerge. And they will be quite different from the elaborate stories you people have written in today’s papers.’

‘You must have noticed that my paper hasn’t carried anything today. Our story will appear tomorrow. It will be based on this interview.’

‘Good. That’s the right way. I hope you deal with facts. Only facts.’

‘It’s my job to bother about facts. In fact, I can quote the exact amount the blackmailer has demanded.’ He spoke a figure. It was wholly accurate.

Abhimanyu understood and this time, his laugh was genuine because it came out of relief. He then said:

‘You must check your sources, young man. And use your common sense. Can a mere public servant afford to pay that much?’

‘You’re saying that your reputation is not worth that much?’

‘*You’re* saying that. I’m saying that a person like me need not fear any blackmailer. If a blackmailer calls me and tells me he has proof against me, I’ll tell him he’s bluffing.’

It was Rodrigues’ turn to feel cornered, uncertain. He reached forward, as if using his body to concede the point.

‘You’re an exceedingly safe bureaucrat. Even your enemies say so. But have you invested enough in cultivating your image? If you could go back in time, would you try to communicate your achievements to the public?’

‘The public has the right to know,’ Abhimanyu said generously. He liked where this was going.

‘It’s not too late, is it? Maybe we could do a special feature on your organisation. And you.’

‘And the Minister. You must focus on the Minister. It’s rare for such a busy politician to be so concerned about his Ministry. He wants efficiency; he goes into all the details.’

‘His inputs have been valuable, I suppose. Maybe that could be the lead story. And would you like to remain in the background?’

‘Background, yes. The background for me. A small box on the side, maybe.’

‘With a photograph.’

‘You decide,’ Abhimanyu said, leaning back. They spoke about the special feature for a long time. They finalized the payment details within three oblique sentences. They kept chatting till Abhimanyu’s mobile rang. His lunch date had arrived from Delhi.

Rodrigues gathered his untouched notepad, wished him luck and left.

Abhimanyu hadn’t met Vidur before and by the time the meeting ended, he wasn’t sure if he would like to meet him again. Vidur wore a designer suit, a Harvard tie, round rimless glasses and an attitude that kept his palms at bone-chilling temperature. Much to Abhimanyu’s disgust, he ordered mulligatawny soup, even making it sound like a Scottish dish. Abhimanyu asked for a clear chicken soup – ‘Tell the chef it’s for me’ –

and decided to wait for the soup before asking for an update from Delhi. Vidur had other plans.

‘I’ll be frank,’ he said. ‘This will be an equivalent of an exit interview.’

Abhimanyu shifted his buttock-fat, said:

‘There was a time when you folks just took care of the money. Take from A, give to B, keep the rest safe.’

‘The parallel market, *Sharmaji*,’ Vidur replied, ‘is growing at the same rate. It’s time we put corporate structures in place, don’t you think?’

‘Value-added services. That’s the latest phrase, right?’

‘Already passé,’ Vidur said, smiling slowly. ‘But you’re right in the sense that we do more for you than yesterday. Otherwise you’d be trying to negotiate with the Minister using unskilled middlemen, or worse, by yourself. Huh, *Sharmaji*? You can’t negotiate with a man who’s holding your balls, can you?’

Abhimanyu felt raw anger – nobody spoke to him like that. Nobody other than his superiors, as designated by the government, spoke to him like that. He swallowed the anger – hell, it was raw – and wished that the soups would hurry so that he could do something with his hands.

‘But we can negotiate. With anybody. Best price for both parties. Guaranteed. 99.9% safety. Guaranteed.’

‘99.9%,’ Abhimanyu snorted. ‘What the hell does that mean?’

‘One in a thousand deals might lead to termination, non-payment or a media expose. For reasons beyond our control. But this isn’t a sales pitch, is it?’

‘It’s an exit interview, I believe.’

‘Exactly. Shall we begin?’

The soups arrived. They began.

‘*Sharmaji*, we did a valuation of the chair you occupied,’ Vidur said, hissing out peppery breaths. ‘Still occupy, for three more hours. Know what it’s worth to our business? Eighty million per annum.’

‘Rupees?’ Abhimanyu asked, unimpressed.

‘Dollars. And not Zimbabwean,’ Vidur said, smiling slowly as usual, perhaps to suggest that even his teeth was designer. ‘Knowing that, the turnover you generated for yourself, and for us, has been... disappointing, won’t you say?’

Abhimanyu sipped water and stared coldly across the table.

‘You presided over an era of opportunities without much to show for it. You sat on the Special Economic Zone proposal for six months. That gave NGOs and farmers enough time to launch a visible campaign against it. The key in such initiatives is to be proactive, race ahead.’

‘I’ll have curd rice. What about you?’

Vidur placed his order for the main course, then said:

‘And then there was the modernisation drive. The Ministry earmarked one hundred million. Your fact-finding report took four months. You accepted five out of seventeen recommendations. Only three were actually implemented. You lost yourself thirty million, right there.’

‘Enough,’ Abhimanyu said, loud enough for the adjacent tables to take notice. Lowering his voice, he continued: ‘You can’t judge me like that; you don’t know the juggling act that we bureaucrats do. Just to keep it going. That SEZ, huh?, do you know

that I could have easily landed on the front pages? One false move and, and, they'll ask me to go on an indefinite leave. And that modernisation drive, do you think the labourers would have simply agreed to, to...'

'Good points. Excellent points. My intention is not to hurt you, Sharmaji. We just want to maximise our business model, you understand that, don't you? What I just heard was that the SEZ and the modernisation drive were risky projects.'

'Highly risky.'

'Business is about risk, Sharmaji.'

'Not in this line,' Abhimanyu said firmly. 'If you go around the country telling us bureaucrats that crap, we'll take our money elsewhere, that's all.'

'In fact, I've been going around the country collecting feedback. Five top-level bureaucrats retiring this month.'

'I'm sure you got the same response from them.'

'I did. Till I suggested that we'd take away the risk. Almost zero risk for you. If I gave you that option two years ago, would you have gone ahead with the SEZ?'

'No noise in the media?'

'No noise,' Vidur replied, leaned forward and detailed a new business model. When he finished speaking, Abhimanyu said:

'That's beautiful.'

'Makes you wish for a few more years, does it?'

'Born in the wrong age,' Abhimanyu said, shaking his head.

'We'll need ex-bureaucrats to operate the new model.'

'I need to survive the current crisis first.'

'Almost forgot,' Vidur said, smiling really slowly. 'The deal is through. For the Minister plus the Parliamentary Committee, it comes to this.' He wrote a figure on the hotel tissue paper and turned it around.

'Dollars?' Abhimanyu shouted.

'Rupees,' Vidur replied, giggling like a child. Abhimanyu looked at his new friend with open admiration, almost as much admiration as he felt for Sandhya. 'Only ten percent as advance from now on. The politicians must start taking responsibility for early elections.'

'And the money remains with you either way.'

'That's the idea.'

Abhimanyu's phone rang. It was his wife. Again.

'Huh? Can we talk later? No. What? Mathur. Yeah, sure, Mathur. Yeah. Bye.'

'Good call,' Vidur said as Abhimanyu hung up. 'Datta won't try anything funny if he's denied a promotion. Mathur might. He's desperate right now. Which isn't good since there's one person in the Committee we can't do business with.'

'Is there anything you don't know about me?' Abhimanyu asked.

'I don't know why you haven't tried Reiki to cure your ulcer. It's the rage in Delhi.'

He was glad to see the last of his office. Going forward, he would always associate the place with the bitterness of the morning which, in a way, defeated even the

major triumphs of the day. Pity. Till yesterday, it had been his happy place, a place where he could so easily have spent a conventional retirement day. Feeling the blues, chatting with everybody, collecting praise, being generous in return, accepting the inevitability of tomorrow, feeling the teak corners on the way out. Nothing of the sort had happened. He hadn't heard a peep from his Public Relations Officer till the end. Even Mathur hadn't showed up to thank him.

The car sped past the gates of his colonial bungalow, another place that had once given him peace and now seemed alien. The gardeners had gone home. The sky promised more rain. The indoors promised another dull evening with a difficult woman. He felt blue. True-blue. He got out of the car and walked inside.

Upon entering the bungalow, he was greeted by a lusty, animal shout that almost knocked him backwards. It took a few moments to register that a band of people were shouting Happy Birthday. It took even longer to realise that the band of people was Mathur and his cronies. There were festoons on the walls and across the ceiling, a sugar-free cake, a sign that said *We'll miss you*, snacks. The works. Abhimanyu thanked everybody, ordered everybody to start feasting and asked to be excused for a wash and change.

His wife followed him into their bedroom, saw him sitting on the bed, came up from behind and massaged his shoulders.

'Thanks,' he said, without looking back.

'Sure.'

'I didn't expect you to...'

'No, you didn't.'

'It's the sweetest thing you've ever done for me.'

'You've achieved nothing in your life, Abhi,' she replied, neither changing her tone nor kneading more pressure on his shoulders. 'They'll tell you what a good man you are. How stable, how responsible. You need that to survive the rest of your life.'

Abhimanyu turned around, experiencing for a change, not his hatred for her, but her contempt for him.

'What do you want?' he asked.

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'Well, I already told you what I want. Live independently. In one of the flats you've purchased in my name. Or in my brother's house. Whichever you choose. So I thought a farewell party would be a nice farewell present.'

'Why do you hate me so much?' he asked, on the verge of tears. The last time he wept was when Sandhya had malaria. She was in school then.

'I don't hate you, Abhi. I've given up strong feelings.'

'Then why?'

'Hmm.'

'Why?'

'You took my child away from me.' She didn't sound angry. Just sad. 'Once you decided on your path, you had to take her along. You couldn't allow her to question you. That would have ended your mission in life.' She paused, then said: 'She could have been special.' Walking towards the door leading out of the bedroom, she said: 'Come soon. They're waiting.'

Mridula Sharma left the room.

Abhimanyu fumbled around the bed till he reached his nightstand. He took a pill for his heart, sat heavily and urged his smile to reappear.

The Wellspring

Sub-Inspector Nalini circumambulated the house as she braced herself for the ghastly sight that awaited her inside. Passing by the bedroom windows, she took in a familiar putrefying stench, made faint by a kind and dispersing wind; passing by the kitchen windows, she smelt the more earnest, if subtler, odour of meals cooked in the recent past. Going around the well, she smelt nothing, not even the richness of water in an arid landscape, although it struck her as odd that the grill atop the well was padlocked whereas the front door, as far as she could tell, had been left unlocked.

Reaching the front door for a second time, she looked at her constable, Ilaimaran, from the corner of her eye. Was he smirking at her? Did he think she'd back out of the ordeal just because she was a woman, the bastard?

'Whose invitation are you waiting for? Let's go in,' she told him in her sternest voice. She trooped into the house, crossed the living room and entered the bedroom to view the anticlimax. An old woman and an older man lay on the bed, facing each other. They were quite dead. They didn't grin sneeringly as in penny thrillers. They didn't have serene expressions as in romantic pulps. In fact, neither sported any expression that could be described with certainty. They lay dead in a matter-of-fact way, as if to say, 'Figure it out if you can.'

It was a challenge to Nalini, yes, she had to admit that. Quite unlike the cases she was used to. She took a step back, then another and another, till she was back in the living room.

'Don't touch anything,' she warned Ilaimaran. The forensic team would arrive in an hour or so, she reckoned. Enough time to spin Holmes-like theories, in her own pragmatic way.

'What do I know so far?' she asked herself, looking out of a living room window, the one that was open and without curtains. Well, she knew their names from the nameplate on the front door. Chidambaram and Ambujam. Two oldies who had chosen to build a house in this wilderness, and what was more, chosen to reside in it! Of course, wilderness was an inaccurate word considering that the area had an authorised name – Vikas Nagar – and boasted a layout plan, even if it existed only on paper. In fact, on paper, the area had streets, streetlights, well-demarcated plots, invisible water and sewage lines and a Block Development Officer presiding over it all. But Vikas Nagar had fallen off everybody's radar around twenty years ago. The BDO was hard-pressed to even recall the name of the area when she had been made a Sub-Inspector, with independent charge of the Percot Industrial Zone.

'Something that suggested development, progress. Hold on, this file will remind me; here it is, Vikas Nagar,' the BDO had said. 'I knew it was to do with development.'

'But the area was left undeveloped,' Nalini had said, more as an observation.

'Happens,' the BDO said, shrugging. 'When the government sold the Vikas Nagar plots, there was no plan to create the Percot Industrial Zone. The plan was to develop residential colonies like Vikas Nagar on the other side of the National Highway. We had predicted that the town would gain importance. Get congested.'

'Which has happened.'

'But the real-estate boom happened on the town side of the highway. Happens.'

‘The reason I’m asking is: I need to plan. Will this area, this Vikas Nagar, become important soon? Should I have my men patrol it or not?’

‘No need,’ the BDO said, with the ease of a man making someone else’s decision. ‘It’s an empty patch of land. Not enough grass to keep even the cattle interested.’

‘*Saar*, one plot is occupied,’ the BDO’s assistant had reminded him from his table.

‘Yes, that’s true, isn’t it?’ the BDO replied.

‘The old man, *saar*.’

‘With that funny tuft of hair?’

‘Correct, *saar*.’

‘What a nuisance! I had to send a Survey Officer and portion out his precious piece of land. Just for him. I tried telling him that all the other buyers have either sold off their portions to speculators or simply forgotten about Vikas Nagar, as he too should. I tried telling him that his land was four kilometres from the highway. Two and a half from the nearest vegetable vendor. One kilometre from a village that’s fast disbanding. Paints a picture, doesn’t it? No water, roads, buses, electricity, gas cylinder connections. Nothing.’

‘But he was adamant,’ the BDO’s assistant said. ‘He kept coming here everyday till we sent out the Survey Officer. “It’s my land and this is where I’ll live and this is where I’ll die,” he had said.’

‘Ominous,’ Nalini told the window grill, still looking out. ‘Still, what could I do? Send my beat constable on an eerie detour every night to check upon the oldies?’ She cleared phlegm, as noisily as she had trained herself to. ‘They deserved to die for being so reckless. Idiots.’

‘It is rumoured that the MLA is interested in Vikas Nagar,’ Ilaimaran said, preparing a pinch of snuff.

‘What was that, Ilai?’ Nalini asked.

Ilaimaran snorted snuff, making an exhibition of his bad teeth and double chin in the process, and looked at his SI with that odd mixture of deprecation and mockery.

‘You can make my life difficult, but not impossible,’ his expression seemed to say. Aloud, he said: ‘The MLA is interested. *Our* MLA, madam.’

Nalini glowered at him.

‘You know I slept with him. Everybody knows I slept with him. What’re you going to do about it?’ she thought. Aloud, she said: ‘So the MLA is interested.’

It was early evening by the time the forensic team bundled the bodies out of the house and declared the premises ready for messing.

‘Any first impressions?’ Nalini asked the lead coroner.

‘This isn’t fast food,’ he replied, laughing like a man who couldn’t figure out why nobody else found him funny.

‘Still.’

‘Smells like two days. Maybe three.’

‘What else?’

‘Same two sets of fingerprints, except in a few explainable places.’

‘Like?’

‘The knob on the front door.’

‘Do we know the cause of death?’

‘No external wounds. No signs of poisoning. No marks around the windpipe.’

‘Could have been a massive heart attack?’

‘For both parties at once?’ asked the man, laughing louder.

‘A startling event in the vicinity. Both were quite old.’

‘They, and no one else, heard an alien spaceship land in this dump.’

‘No need to be rude.’

‘You asked for theories, madam, and the best theory I can offer as of now is that living in this depressing place killed them.’ He laughed some more. ‘If you want something more accurate, wait for the post-mortem.’

‘How long?’

‘Tomorrow. Maybe.’ He sniffed the air. ‘Do you smell that? Ammonia. From that fertiliser factory. In the morning, the smell was from the paint factory. Did they come here seeking this kind of serenity? That’s a question I don’t need to answer.’

With that, he laughed and left.

Nalini returned indoors and sat heavily on a sofa, prompting its springs to creak in protest. She looked down at herself critically. Her breasts had recently given up the fight to stay ahead of her tummy. The valley between them was now narrow, shallow. Bumpy. Before she began thinking of how different she used to be, she rose from the sofa and swept her eyes around the house. The living room was big enough only for the sofa, two armchairs and a bamboo teapoy. On the western side was the equally small bedroom, attached to a bathroom that had an extra door on the outside to access the well. Towards the north was a boxy kitchen, on the threshold of which they would have eaten their meals, one after the other, or perhaps as a progressive twosome. The walls were bare except for a calendar that the oldies had cadged or demanded from their bank in the city. That was it. The whole of it. A world they had created out of sheer obstinacy. Why? The coroner was right – it was a question that begged to be answered. Why Vikas Nagar? Why a piece of land shunned alike by nature, capital and civilisation?

‘Idiots,’ she told the room, and almost immediately saw a vision. Of the old woman, well-groomed, wearing a crisp nine-yard sari, entering the kitchen while delivering a high-pitched admonishment over her shoulder. In response, she saw the old man coming out of the bedroom, laughing indulgently, defogging his spectacles and offering a placation.

Nalini turned in a flash and rushed into the sunshine outside. For once, she wished that the stoical Ilaimaran was by her side, but she had sent him to complete a few routine rounds. She walked rapidly away from the house, down a path that hadn’t been defined by too many feet. Once she was fifty yards from the house, she found the courage to look back. Barring that it lacked a compound wall and a decent lick of paint, it seemed like a liveable house. A house for flesh-and-blood mortals. A cuckoo mocked her with its melody. Crickets cajoled her sense of reality with their electric chirps. Two butter-coloured butterflies went about their fuzzy journeys, unmindful of her presence. In the distance, she saw Ilaimaran return with the jeep.

She composed herself.

Nalini sighed as she always did while climbing the stairs up to her home. The muck on the stairway, the heavy smell of middle-class grievances, the cacophony of routine and above all, the brazen, almost fluidic feel, of her Police Staff Colony was just a precursor to her real grief.

Upon reaching the second storey, she heard her eight-year-old son refusing to do his homework, even as his father tried to reason with him. She quietly entered her home through the open door, slammed it shut and faced her son. His terrified eyes looked at her right forefinger and saw it wag a predictable command: 'Come here.' She allowed him to take his time walking towards her. When he finally reached her, she glared hard, waited for his tightly-shut eyes to open and then, only then, slapped him. He reeled, steadied himself.

'Go do your homework,' she said. He obeyed. Her husband went to the kitchen, where she joined him after bathing and changing into civilian clothes.

'I'll manage the dinner; you must be tired,' he said. Nalini looked at him sideways, feeling a familiar anger surface, make splashes on her skin and then submerge itself. God, she hated everything about him. He oozed an unctuousness that came easily to real-estate agents, although in his case, he hadn't developed a stopper for it. 'Really, I'll manage it.'

'Stop it!' she wanted to say. She smelt fear on his skin. A limitless fear, unlike the petty criminals she dealt with. He feared her. He feared his own son, the spineless fellow. And he feared the world outside, more so since it had conspired to create a working relationship between her and the MLA. Yes, he knew about it quite well, but instead of confronting her over it, he continued being the least successful real-estate agent in the country, and a husband who regularly dropped her name and designation to get the commissions due to him. And she had to learn about such things from the likes of Ilaimaran. Sometimes, she fantasised about getting him killed and fabricating a land grab case over it. Perhaps that would become necessary soon – the more she hated him, the more she changed in ways that left her feeling for the ground beneath her feet.

'If you want to cut the carrot, *cut it*. What's there to think about?' she asked, rinsing the rice.

'No, no. Thinking of something else. The old man,' he replied, pouring oil into a hotting pan. When she didn't respond, he continued: 'I knew the murdered man, you know?'

Nalini showed interest in his words for the first time in, maybe, eighteen months.

'You knew him,' she said, almost interrogatively.

'I dealt with the Survey Officer for him. And then, there was the well.'

'The well.'

Ponnayagan operated out of a closet-sized office on the highway. Location was everything in his business and he was located well. He had also invested generously on a large signboard that occasionally made cars whizzing between Chennai and Bangalore halt and take note.

It was the highway that brought Chidambaram to his office more than a decade ago. He needed help with the Survey Officer. Ponnayagan helped him out with the grease. The plot was portioned out and everything seemed settled, but Chidambaram arrived at his office a week later, looking scarlet and disturbed. He needed more help.

‘We’ve been sinking a bore well since sunup and it just isn’t working. They say that there’s at least forty feet of rock to bore through.’

‘So they’re claiming that the machinery needs to be hired for one more day?’ Ponnayagan asked.

‘That’s a given,’ Chidambaram replied, wiping his perspiration, ‘but I’ve been thinking... if I must spend extra, why shouldn’t I make better use of the money? Why have a bore well when I can have a well? That way, I don’t need a generator to draw water. My arms are healthy enough, and by God’s grace, so are my wife’s.’

‘So what do you need from me?’

‘Let’s blow up the rocky layer.’

In a country being flattened out by miners, excavators and builders, finding dynamite wasn’t a difficult proposition for Ponnayagan. The challenge was in doing it in hours, and leaving enough daylight for the bore well guys to finish the job, if the need arose. But the desperation in Chidambaram’s eyes galvanised him. He made a few phone calls.

‘It’ll cost at least this much,’ he told Chidambaram, cupping the phone with one hand and scribbling a figure with the other.

‘Sure, sure. But it has to be done today.’

Within a couple of hours, a new crew had assembled at Chidambaram’s plot with enough dynamite to bring down a locality. But the mood wasn’t optimistic – how deep down was the groundwater at Vikas Nagar? Nobody knew.

‘What do you say, old man?’ the blasters kept asking him every now and then. ‘Blast some more?’

‘Blast.’

‘It’ll cost more.’

‘Blast! Blast!! I need water,’ Chidambaram had replied, looking a little maniacal, with his unruly hair standing bolt upright, matching the fever in his eyes.

At the end of it, Chidambaram threw a few pebbles into the inky darkness they had sculpted into his plot and was satisfied that the splash, though delayed and distant, was heard each time. He paid everybody with a sour face. Ponnayagan stayed back and helped him cover the hole with a thin iron mesh, to prevent stray dogs and goats from falling in.

‘We hadn’t planned for this,’ Chidambaram said, in a voice weak with worry. He sat down on the mud, facing the setting sun. Ponnayagan felt sorry for him. He didn’t have the heart to tell him that this was just the beginning. Once the construction of the house began, the contractor would find many reasons to escalate costs. He would point out that his workers had no access to food or even *bidis*. Or that the security personnel of the Percot Industrial Zone had to be bribed to allow the supply trucks in, as the only road coming in passed through the Zone.

‘But he managed to build his dream home,’ Ponnayagan said. ‘Thanks to his wife, I must add. I used to visit the site whenever I was headed that way and I found her by his side all the time. They would snuggle inside a grandfather umbrella and keep a watch over the workers. She used to sing to keep their spirits up.’

‘Tell me,’ Nalini said, stiffening, ‘did you make money for helping with the well?’

‘Yes. I made my bit,’ Ponnayagan replied evasively.

Things were back to normal the next morning. In other words, there was trouble at the paint factory inside the Percot Industrial Zone. The MLA’s chosen Union Leader had been assaulted in the middle of the night. A rival Union Leader was involved; that went without saying. But did the fellow have the backing of the management? The MLA charged Nalini with investigating this angle, which meant that she spent the whole morning softly grilling the Industrial Relations Officer of the paint factory. She had just managed to ruffle his feathers somewhat when her mobile rang. It was the lead coroner.

‘The post-mortem is complete. Are you ready?’

‘Go on,’ Nalini replied, suddenly losing interest in the MLA’s mission.

‘They died of natural causes.’

‘What?’

‘Natural causes. At 1:45 am, Sunday.’

‘Both of them?’

‘Both of them,’ the coroner agreed, laughing, but not as heartily as usual.

‘Yesterday, you spoke of alien spaceships...’

‘And today, I’m saying that something even more spectacular has happened. I feel like calling a press conference. Imagine! We’ll be featured on every freak channel in the world.’

‘Not amused.’

‘I’m telling you. You’ll receive the official report soon. The case is closed, madam.’

‘Case is not closed?’ Ilaimaran asked.

‘You forgot to seal the house,’ Nalini said gruffly, trying to read the constable’s reaction in the rear-view mirror.

‘You didn’t ask me to,’ Ilaimaran replied sourly.

‘What next? Should I remind you to carry handcuffs?’ Nalini asked, firmly holding the support bar welded to the jeep as her driver brought it to a halt. She sat on her seat, remembering the vision of the old man defogging his spectacles.

‘So I just lock the house and we turn back?’ Ilaimaran asked.

‘Huh? No. Let’s have a look around.’

Peeping indoors, Nalini saw the obvious – an empty house. A house that had recently lost the ability to host anybody or anything, even a vision. She entered it with respect in her heart and began a systematic search, although there wasn’t much to search.

The cupboard contained clothes, photo albums and guest-calibre cutlery. The showcase contained gewgaws that could be precious and meaningful only to their owners. The loft held together the most unusable objects in the universe – a termite-infested stool; an aluminium vessel designed to cook community feasts, perhaps handed down from a pre-Independence generation; a spray that once dispensed pesticide but couldn't even hiss now; a lady's purse that had lost its press-button; a million other things that Nalini didn't even bother to inspect.

On the teapoy rack was a directory, containing telephone numbers and addresses of a select few. Nalini had already used this to call "Margadam (Sister)" the other afternoon, to inform her of the tragedy. Margadam was inconsolable when the phone call began, but managed to sound like a successful philosopher by the time she hung up. She even accepted the delay in formalities like God's will – 'Yes, we'll wait for the post-mortem. Cremate after that. The bodies will come to my place. I insist. She was *my* sister. Thank you. There's nobody else to take this up anyway.'

Nalini sighed. She was done searching. Unless. She entered the kitchen and tried to spot something that was out of place. Utensils on the racks, a hygienic kitchen counter, made wholly of stone, and at the ground level, a pantheon of Gods facing the gas burners. An arrangement that would seem strange only to those who had never tackled a space crunch.

Bending down, Nalini groped around in the space between the wall and the framed picture of Hanuman that leaned out at an angle, held in place by a nail and a thread. In that space, she found a well-thumbed copy of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and a moth-eaten diary. She took the diary to the creaking sofa for scrutiny. The first entry took her breath away.

March 2, 1956

Today, my gynaecologist spoke to me like I was a child. He has more letters behind his name than I have in my name. He studied in Amahreeka and he must know many things I don't; he told me that I must accept the inevitable for my own sake, that I must either speak aloud the dreadful words or write them down. My dream-man suggested that I write them down, since we shouldn't utter such inauspicious words. I'm therefore writing them down.

Having had three abortions, I can no longer become a mother. I shall remain barren. This is my destiny. This is our destiny.

Nalini looked around the room, feeling a lot more equal to seeing a vision of a woman in a nine-yard sari. Neither the old woman nor her dream-man obliged. The house seemed to have entered a state of long-awaited slumber. She read the entries that followed.

June 18, 1961

We don't talk about it anymore. Sometimes, I feel that our interactions – the demands we place on each other, the petty quarrels we have, the games we invent – are

ways of quenching our urge to parent. We're each other's little ones. We're what the other wants us to be at that moment.

Yesterday, I told him that I never forgave my father for preventing me from playing a game of marbles on the street. Because I was a girl, already nine, with incipient breasts. I wasn't conscious of them. My father was.

Today, my dream-man brought home a clutch of marbles, so fine and polished that I felt like eating one. We stripped into our underpants and played in our bedroom till his pile had depleted alarmingly. As a last resort, my dream-man removed his underpants. To improve his concentration, he said. The inevitable happened. The marbles gave way to the bed. Later, I felt like weeping. He didn't ask me why. He knew. We weren't sinning, he said. In faarin places like Amahreeka, and, why, in the land of our very own Queen, man and wife did such things without worrying about God. We needn't feel guilty.

I think he's right. Marriage is a wonderful way to make room for the infinite. If it isn't so, it ought to be so.

August 15, 1975

As tourists in Yercaud, it is possible to forget anything, even that an Emergency is in place. A forgotten hill station can make one forget anything, I suppose. But we didn't lose track of the mission that brought us here.

My dream-man thinks he's getting old. Who knows how much longer we can keep up the amour... It is a scary thought, I confess. What we now see as the ultimate form of consummation must become, in our perception, a preparatory act in the relationship. It would be a huge leap for us as a couple. Hence this trip. Yercaud will help us create a coherent lump of the youth still left within us, something we can hold in our fists without fear of disintegration.

I felt bad telling Margadam that we wanted to be alone in this trip. I hope she doesn't sulk for months, as she's wont to do.

A more recent addition, made using red ink, said:

We needn't have rushed to offer these last rites to our middle-age. The amour outlasted my menopause.

'Sex diary,' Nalini told herself. She flipped a page.

December 28, 1996

Bharat made a surprise visit today. Margadam hadn't told me he's coming. He's the same sweet lad we've always known. But he wasn't alone. He has found love in Amahreeka. Her name's Caroline. She's staying in a hotel for the time being. Till, Bharat told us, we convince Margadam about her.

'Who else can I trust in this endeavour, uncle?' he asked my dream-man. My dream-man is made of strong fibre. I ought to know. So it was special to see him weep.

But he was again strong when we informed Margadam about Caroline. There are some matters that cannot be discussed. Love happens to be one of them.

Once Bharat is wedded, we'll start building our dream home.

Nalini took the diary home. She didn't allow Ilaimaran to seal the house.

She waited only till her son fell asleep in the other room. Once Ponnayagan began snoring, she wouldn't find the desire to see this through. Outside, a commune of unemployed youth were still shouting obscenities at every animate object. Inside, in the semi-darkness, she ran her toes up her dream-man's *lungi*. He was startled, she could see that, but she had to ensure that he didn't speak and ruin the moment. She nudged closer and embraced him.

A man denied this pleasure for an eternity hardly needed any more encouragement. He crushed her close, even offered her decent foreplay. He gave her vigour, but, unfortunately, not time. And then, like a man embarrassed for himself, or perhaps for the both of them, he rolled over and slept.

Nalini clutched her blanket and wept noiselessly.

Margadam lived in the heart of Brahminical Chennai. Her house smelt of filter coffee, incense sticks, steaming *idlis* and certainty. Hibiscus, jasmine and marigolds, sufficient for many altars, grew conspicuously in her garden. And when Nalini sat on the couch, she sank a full centimetre deeper than she expected.

'How was the funeral?' she asked, out of politeness.

'Since when are women allowed inside the crematorium?' Margadam asked in response, before her sharp eyes dilated and gave Nalini a once-over. 'Not everyone gets the opportunity to do a man's job.'

Nalini had dealt with tough men, at first by gritting her teeth, and later, as a matter of routine. But she melted under Margadam's scrutiny. Never before had another woman hoisted her against an invisible spotlight and tried to strip her soul bare. The absurd mixture of curiosity, envy and sympathy in Margadam's gaze, the implicit assumptions therein, made her squirm and say:

'I came to talk about your sister.'

'Hmm.'

'And her husband.'

'I was told that the case is closed.'

'Yes, it is, for all practical purposes. You see...'

'You believe that they've been murdered, don't you? Someone's trying to hush the truth.'

'No, no,' Nalini said quickly, remembering Ilaimaran's reference to the MLA.

'If that's the case, you needn't worry one bit. You stay anonymous if you like. I'll get the Women's Council to intervene and by the time we're through...'

'I assure you, I have no reason to doubt the post-mortem report.'

Margadam relaxed, perhaps a little more than Nalini would have liked, because the focus returned to her. After an interminable silence, Margadam said:

‘Hmm. Ambujam has evoked your curiosity. I can feel it. You think you’ve stumbled upon something deep and meaningful, something you find in novels and under the *bodhi* tree.’ Nalini chose not to respond. ‘Let me save you the trouble. There’s nothing there. One experiences this exact curiosity when one is as young as you. I went through it myself. Spent a good many years tormenting myself, wanting to reach that wellspring.’

‘Did you?’ Nalini asked, wondering why her knees felt a tremble.

‘A wellspring that doesn’t exist cannot be reached. There’s a certain kind of shallowness that masquerades as divine contentment. One feels compelled to plunge headlong into it, but one hits the bottom and finds that not even the nose is wet from the ordeal.’

‘I... I’m unable to understand you.’

‘No need to. Just understand this: when people described Ambujam and Chidambaram to you, they were describing smugness.’

‘Smugness about what?’

‘About each other, of course. Isn’t that *obvious*?’ She paused. ‘Of course, one finds it necessary to be smug about something or the other. But Ambujam married beneath her, you see? Chidamaram was, I won’t say lazy, but he was quite aimless. No ambition. Over the years, when our husbands proved to be such different men, I found Ambujam becoming more and more distant. You couldn’t invite them over for dinner without getting the impression that you’re intruding into their time with each other. That was their smugness acting as a shield. The real reason, of course, was that Chidambaram felt inadequate and Ambujam was honour bound to minimise his embarrassment.’

‘So they were quite unsociable?’

Margadam snapped her fingers.

‘That’s it. And can love be unsocial? True love? When one finds something precious, one seeks a museum to exhibit it in. One doesn’t run away to live on the wrong side of an Industrial Zone. “They’ll finally discover how bored they really are of each other,” my husband said when he heard of their decision.’

‘That doesn’t seem to have happened,’ Nalini said, finding firm words at last.

Margadam dilated her eyes to acknowledge that she had cornered herself, then said:

‘I would have been happy to lend her money, if she had only asked. But their smugness, *aiyoo Muruga!*, it never allowed her to speak her mind. I never learnt if she had enough to be happy.’ She sighed. ‘We were so close before she married, you know? Had I been the elder one, things would have never come to such a pass.’

Lying in an uncomfortable bed in a government Guest House, with coir strands poking her back, she felt embarrassed, not of her nakedness, but the preamble to her nakedness.

‘You aren’t due for a promotion for two more years. Even I can’t do anything,’ the MLA had told her, squeezing her breasts like a famished trucker.

‘I didn’t come for me. I came for you,’ she had replied, trying on a bewitching smile.

Having confirmed, yet again, that no man, powerful or meek, could hold her in a spell, she allowed the air-conditioner to lull her into a dream-like state where even a brutish politician was human enough to be posed questions to.

‘What do you think of Vikas Nagar?’ she asked him. Seeing that he had dozed off, she shook him lightly and repeated the question.

‘I don’t think of Vikas Nagar,’ he replied hazily. ‘Lie quietly for a while. After tea, maybe we’ll...’

‘Wake up, will you? I know about the old man and woman.’

‘Huh?’

‘Wake up!’

‘What old man and woman?’ the MLA asked. His voice was throaty with sleep and irritation.

‘Why pretend with me?’ she asked, trying to sound sweet. ‘I know. Just tell me why you killed them. And how.’

‘You’re not yourself today. Focus on the real thing. The paint factory. You haven’t helped one bit in that. Reminds me: keep your people away tonight. There’ll be some action.’

‘So you didn’t kill the oldies?’

The MLA was on the verge of rising to deliver an admonishment when his eyes fell on her discarded uniform. He lit a cigarette to calm himself, then said:

‘If I’ll kill oldies or youngsters or even a rabid dog in your jurisdiction, you’ll be the first to know. Is that understood? Good. Now tell me about your meeting with the Industrial Relations Officer of the paint factory.’

‘What was I thinking?’ Nalini asked herself. She was back at the crime scene, which had become a sort of evening sanctuary for her. Of course it couldn’t have been the MLA. His murders were always loud, awe-inspiring. So the oldies died due to something else, and she already had a theory about it.

She had spoken separately and at length with the man running the Fair Price Shop in the nearby village, the teacher of the primary school, the priest of the only temple in the vicinity and the far-off vegetable vendor. All of them testified that the oldies lived through two eras over the last decade.

In the initial years, they were friendly, even affectionate, towards everybody, to the extent that if the government’s water tankers failed them, some of the villagers approached the oldies for water and were never turned away. Chidambaram used a bicycle while travelling alone, but in the evenings, he and his wife always walked to the temple. The priest enjoyed listening to their quaint concerns about the temple being monopolised by a non-Brahmin God. Once he liked them enough, he installed a small deity of Parvati, the Goddess of valour, on one side of the temple. This thrilled them to bits and, for a brief period, even prompted them to put more money on his brass plate.

They were daily customers for the vegetable vendor as well. And since neither he nor the oldies had a refrigerator between them, they made a verbose ritual out of finding the daily quota of fresh vegetables.

The primary school teacher recalled the numerous occasions when the old man, during his trips to Chennai to stock up on scented *supari*, magazines, torch batteries, mosquito repellents and other essentials, would bring back alphabet charts and read-aloud tales for the children.

All this changed a couple of years ago. The oldies turned aloof. Just like that. Chidambaram stopped ringing his bicycle bell to acknowledge the nods of wayside huddlers, haggled endlessly with the vegetable vendor and almost always cursed the Fair Shop and the government for the quality of rice provided. Ambujam's rarely visited the temple, and when she did, people could see that she had lost her ready smile.

'She's paling,' Selvi, their housemaid from the village, told anybody who wanted to know, which was everybody. 'Anything smaller than a button, she can't see. I pick the stones out of the rice for her. I draw water from the well for her. Maybe I'll have to become their live-in maid.'

The opposite happened – they discontinued Selvi's services. When concerned villagers tried to talk to Chidambaram about the changes, his aloofness gave way to an exaggerated rudeness. He picked a fight with the vegetable vendor one day and stopped buying vegetables altogether. He had nothing to put into the priest's plate. Very soon, he had nothing to discuss with the temple Gods either. He aimed wanton kicks at street dogs as he pedalled through the village, and on one such occasion, lost his balance and fell on his right leg. Of course, he glared so menacingly that none dared help him up.

Used to deterioration as they were, the villagers clucked sympathetically and tried to mind their own business. But everybody noticed that the candlelit silhouette of that distant house vanished earlier and earlier each passing night. It was almost as if the couple had decided to sleep off all the hours that the sun disapproved of.

'They're outsiders after all. We shouldn't try to understand them,' was the consensus.

'Madam,' Ilaimaran called for outside, interrupting her thoughts, 'you asked to see that girl from the village? She's here.'

'Ah, Selvi! Send her in,' Nalini said, not getting up.

Selvi came in, carrying a sleeping child on her shoulder.

'Sit,' Nalini said, shutting her tired eyes.

Selvi sat on her haunches, patting the child.

'When did you last see them?' Nalini asked, her eyes still shut. Selvi remained silent. Nalini opened her eyes, her instinct telling her that this was an interrogative situation. 'No need to worry. I know you haven't done anything wrong.'

'I've grown up in Ambujam *amma's* shadow. I can't do anything wrong,' Selvi replied in a surprisingly strong voice.

'You knew them better than anybody else in the village, I suppose,' Nalini said, choosing the soft approach.

'I was this high when I first started working here. My boy here is healthy thanks to the meals I had sitting at this very spot.'

'Did she teach you to speak so haughtily as well?'

Selvi smiled wryly.

‘That was Chidambaram *aiyaa*’s doing. He taught me to read, then he made me read all kinds of Tamil magazines – they were magazine buffs, both of them – and he taught me to derive meaning in this world based on what I was reading.’ She paused. ‘He allowed a woman’s natural haughtiness to blossom her. I would be at my husband’s house right now, were it not for him.’

‘How so?’

‘I’ve seen a better kind of man. I can’t settle for less.’

‘So tell me, Selvi,’ Nalini said, warming up, ‘did you meet them recently?’

Selvi nodded.

‘Sunday morning. As soon as I returned from my husband’s house, I left my boy in my mother’s lap and came here. I heard them talking, so I know why they died.’

‘Tell me,’ Nalini said, leaning forward, sensing that her theory was about to be proved right.

‘I see the pain they’ve left behind in your eyes,’ Selvi said, hesitating.

‘Nobody needs to know,’ Nalini said.

‘Very well then. Sunday morning, as I approached the front door, I heard them talking. I drew back a few steps and listened.’

‘The Yercaud trip ate away a few months,’ Ambujam said.

‘Worth it,’ Chidambaram replied.

‘Yes,’ Ambujam replied, sounding a lot more optimistic.

‘I keep thinking of Bharat’s wedding gift, though. We could have added a year there.’

‘Shiva-Shiva! Our only son. Don’t even think like that.’ Selvi leaned to see the couple and found Ambujam polishing her gold nose-rings – the only object she was sentimentally attached to – for all she was worth. ‘I wish he would come visiting, though.’

‘He must be busy,’ Chidambaram replied, defogging his spectacles.

‘Do they sparkle?’ Ambujam asked, raising the nose-rings close to her eyes.

‘They look splendid. Now put them on. You look bare without them.’

‘Not now. Evening. Just before we leave for the temple. They must sparkle like the most precious things in the universe.’ Pushing the floor with an open palm, Ambujam rose painfully to her feet. Then a thought struck her. ‘Let me polish your watch as well.’ She sat down heavily and took his watch. ‘Does it occur to you...’

‘What?’ Chidambaram asked.

‘Does it occur to you that the world is a lot more decent than we assumed?’

‘It’ll turn around. Have faith.’ She must have started weeping noiselessly, for he knelt beside her and consoled her. ‘Have faith in your God. I have a feeling that it’ll work out. Soon. Very soon. It could happen tonight.’

Selvi wept on her haunches, patting her child simultaneously. Nalini wept on the couch.

‘I didn’t want to embarrass them, so I turned and left. But do you know what I really wished to do? Barge in right then and tell them that their plan won’t work in a thousand years,’ Selvi said. ‘They couldn’t deceive people with their rudeness. The one thing they hadn’t learnt was to provoke the world’s anger. And it was too late to learn that trick now.’

Nalini walked up to the mantelpiece, to gaze at something she had missed altogether: a faded black-and-white photo of Chidambaram and Ambujam, taken in the flush of youth. It was a studio photograph, but unlike any of that era – wherein either the husband or the wife sat on a chair and the other stood beside – both were seated in this photograph. And both were grinning from ear to ear.

She knew the why now. She also knew the how. Perhaps their childish plan worked. Perhaps some scumbag who prowled the Percot Industrial Zone decided to rake in some easy pickings. Perhaps a village drunkard had seen the nose-rings sparkle when Ambujam wore them to the temple that fateful Sunday. Or perhaps it was just a gust of wind, sent down by Goddess Parvati, that creaked open the front door. All Chidambaram and Ambujam wanted from the world was a slight prod. They did the rest on their own.

‘Case closed,’ she told the photograph. She decided to ask Ponnayagan if they could take a trip to Yercaud.

Two days later, the last person seeking them arrived at the slumbering house. It was the postman, none too happy that his frontiers were being stretched. He carried a letter from the bank that informed Chidambaram and Ambujam, joint account holders, that their account was being closed due to insufficient funds.

Close to Out

She was sleeping when he entered the geriatric ward. He tiptoed in, sat carefully on the plastic chair beside her bed and watched her in silence. This was her, his grandmother, his Pati. This was a total stranger.

Her mouth was twisted in a cynical sneer, her full-sleeve sweater was dirty with neglect and, in an attempt to make best use of the coarse black rug, her body was curled into an incomplete ball. He wiped his brow with a handkerchief, wishing that the ceiling fan was on. It was a hot summer day.

He's too young to remember his age. He wakes up with a shudder; he realises that he's been shivering in the dark. She's up immediately. The light is switched on. She peers anxiously at him. Seeing her, knowing that she's right there, comforts him. He tries to tell her something, but his lips are quivering. She shushes him and places a palm on his forehead. Her hand feels like a cold piece of steel. She hurries off to the kitchen and returns with a saucer of water and a clean cloth. She wets the cloth and places it on his forehead.

She coaxes him to eat some gruel. He agrees. She reheats it and feeds it to him with a spoon. He eats three spoonfuls and stops; swallowing is hard. She nods, wets another cloth for his forehead and caresses his hair.

'Pati, it's cold,' he mutters weakly, although he knows well that she's covered him with two blankets, double-folded. She quickly removes her blanket, double-folds it and wraps him in it.

'It's cold,' she agrees, 'but this blanket has Muruga's picture on it. He'll protect you. You aren't feeling cold anymore, are you?'

He shakes her head and asks:

'I needn't be afraid?'

'Afraid? What for? You'll be fine by morning.'

He's satisfied. He closes his eyes. Slowly. She remains awake. The light remains on.

There were three more beds in the ward, each occupied by a woman of seventy or more. Perhaps they were good friends of his Pati. Perhaps they had happy times in this room, playing cards or chess together, having their siestas together like at this moment, or talking about their families. Perhaps his Pati had bored the other ladies with stories about him. The possibility made him smile.

She awoke to that smile. It took a few long moments for her to recognise him. She then rose, so slowly, so painfully, that he had to help her into a sitting position. She hugged him hard and sobbed. Keeping his tears in check, he held her and caressed her till she was ready to face him.

'You?' she said hoarsely. 'Here? In this what's-this-place?'

‘Yes.’

‘Nobody told me.’

‘I wanted to surprise you,’ he said, giving a grin that, for twenty eight years, had never failed to lighten her spirits. But she didn’t smile back. If anything, she frowned in an attempt to comprehend what he had just said.

‘My sweetheart,’ she said finally, ‘how long have you been away! At times, I thought I would die without...’

And she burst into a sputter of sobs again.

‘Pati, don’t talk like that,’ he said, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

She waved her hand dismissively.

‘Ten months, sitting idle, relying on others. A burden.’

He’s not born yet. Even his father is a mere boy. She’s young, very young. Mother of seven. They live in a 170 square foot house. Not enough space for everybody to sit in a circle and have meals like a true family. Thankfully, there’s seldom enough food to go around, so the question of eating together doesn’t arise. Especially for her, eating is optional, an indulgent hobby.

She finishes breastfeeding her youngest child and hands it to her eldest daughter. She has work to do. For the next few hours, she operates her sewing machine like a woman possessed. The machine creaks, rattles, spits venomously. Blouses, frocks, petticoats take shape under her hands. Once in a while, a customer knocks on the door, collects her clothes and leaves. She deposits each payment in a sweaty little purse that goes back inside her blouse. The sewing machine creaks again. The youngest child, which had woken up to the silence, goes back to sleep.

The years go by. When his father is tall enough to reach the topmost ledge in the kitchen, he starts to deliver milk bottles to five buildings in the locality. Slowly, the family forms a labour force, diversifies. Mondays are reserved to prepare kohl and pack it in disc-shaped green boxes. She and her four eldest children spend at least three days a week packing safety pins in bunches of ten. As with everything else, she’s twice as efficient as her young ones.

She stretched out for the ringer with her able hand, allowing her rug to slip down. He saw that she was wearing a flimsy nightgown – standard attire at the hospital – that only came down till the knees. He had never before seen her in anything but a nine-yard sari. He felt shocked. He looked away. She recalled him to the present.

‘Press the bell for me,’ she said.

He obeyed her. The ayah responded to her call and addressed them in the local tongue, unfamiliar to both him and her. She cut the ayah short and said:

‘Water bottle.’ The ayah came forward to take the bottle. ‘Ten thousand a month, my sons pay. And for what? For such bad nurses? In front of guests, they’re all smiles. But when no one’s around, they scowl. See? She’s scowling even now. Water bottle. Go. Fill. Bring.’

He's nine. Pati asks if he'd like to accompany her to the market. The answer is no longer a ready Yes. He thinks about it and says:

'Only if you buy me an ice-cream.'

'Alright,' she says, beaming.

'And we take a taxi,' he adds.

'But of course,' she says.

She takes him to the family jewellers. Her mission is delicate, her words hesitant. Eventually, she gets to the point. The ring she ordered last month seems to have less gold than one would expect.

'Are you accusing me of theft?' the jeweller asks.

'I wouldn't dream of it. Perhaps someone made a mistake,' she says.

'No. We don't make mistakes.'

'Well, I can't give this to my new daughter-in-law. It's not pure enough.'

The jeweller gets wild, says that he did make one mistake – accepting her business. That could be rectified in a hurry. He shouts at his cashier and ropes in his support. It's a distrusting world, he says. No place for decency, he laments.

She picks up the ring, rises and says:

'My two daughters got married wearing the jewels you made. You played a part in my family's happiness. Thank you.'

With that, they exit the shop. He assumes that he'll no longer get his ice-cream, but she hasn't forgotten. She buys a pistachio cone for him and a vanilla cup for herself.

'Why didn't you tell him something?' he asks between licks.

'Who knows what his compulsions are?' she asks in return.

This was his fifth visit to the hospital in as many days. During his second visit, she complained of not having enough prayer books. He noted down a wish-list and got her the books. But she immediately complained that her spectacles had become too loose to read anything. So he took her spectacles to the optician and got a new pair made. Now she complained that it was impossible to hold up the book with one good hand, especially since her legs had become virtual stumps and couldn't be manoeuvred to shift positions.

He didn't want to get used to this. In fact, his mission was the exact opposite of getting used to this – all he wanted was to find his old Pati in this woman lying in front of him, cribbing incessantly about the ten-thousand rupee fee. Yes, his mission reeked of selfishness. Yes, he had come to place yet another – final – demand on her. But he felt that he had no other choice.

There was only one way to accomplish his mission, he decided: he had to remind her of herself.

'Do you remember what you used to say about good news and bad news?' he asked her, as she sipped lukewarm, weak tea out of a hospital mug.

'What?' she asked, blowing through gaps in her front teeth.

‘That most people prepare for bad news and simply accept good news when it comes.’

He’s five. He returns from his kindergarten school with a report card, jumping with joy.

‘Pati, I passed. See, Pati, I passed.’

She accepts the report card reverentially by placing it on both her eyelids. She then places it in front of her Gods for further blessings.

‘You promised chocolates for me if I passed,’ he says.

She smiles, digs inside her blouse and removes the largest pack of chocolates he’s ever seen. It’s warm and gooey, just the way he likes it.

‘Of course, I knew you would pass,’ she says in answer to his gaze.

‘Remember?’ he asked. He could almost hear the rustle of the chocolate’s golden wrapper. ‘That’s your philosophy. Accept bad news when it comes, but prepare for good news.’

‘Huh? I can’t understand what you’re talking about. Good news, bad news. What good news?’

He had experienced such dead ends with alarming regularity over the past few days. So he tried to think of something else from the past, something she would still remember. Deep in the recesses of her brain, neurons were collapsing, synapses were becoming electrochemically impotent. But surely, somewhere inside, there was an event or a thought that had not sizzled away?

He spoke dartingly about many things, like a man in a hurry. About his youngest aunt’s wedding. About Deepavalis celebrated over the years. About the family doctor who ironed his currency notes to keep them crisp. About Jimmy and the Pinto family. About him riding his tricycle right over her feet and being thrashed afterwards.

Once or twice, her eyes sparkled at his words, but only fleetingly – before he could press home the advantage, she had turned blank again.

‘Why?’ he thought, looking not at her, but the woman in the neighbouring bed who was dragging a walker ahead of her using just one hand. ‘Are you afraid? Is it the fear of the unknown? Will you be any different if you knew that I’m experiencing the same fear?’

He’s twenty-eight. He’s sitting inside a whitewashed room, waiting, watching the snow fall outside. The neurosurgeon arrives, carrying his MRI report. He looks grave, but not really sad. He shows an orange-coloured, marble-shaped portion in the report. It’s a tumour in his brain. Malignant. Like this world? Advanced. As in hi-tech?

Intense stress. Unhealthy lifestyle. Workaholic's due. Heavy smoking. The doctor busily speculates the cause of the malady like a two-penny novice. A Harley-Davidson rumbles down the street below, thudding in the terrible diagnosis.

He's furious. He gets drunk. The next morning, he feels sorry for himself. He tells his best friend. He turns furious again. He calls his boss and gives him a piece of his mind. That calms him somewhat. He makes a list of things he's never done. A prostitute comes to his studio apartment and, for an extra hundred, spends the whole night with him. She wants to leave in the morning, but he begs her to stay. She doesn't have extra clothes on her, so he takes her shopping. On the third day, she leaves. He goes to a café and tries eating chicken. He vomits on the table. He's asked to leave. He goes to an Irish pub and has three goblets of a twenty-dollar brandy. He goes to the park nearby.

He sits there on a bench till even the hobos fall asleep. He catches snowflakes on his palm. He thinks of her. A memory comes alive.

He's six. Returning from school, he finds the house filled with people. He lets go of her forefinger and enquires:

'What's happening?'

'We have guests. You'll stay in Pinto uncle's house for the afternoon.'

'Why?'

'No space inside, is there? You won't be able to sleep in the noise.'

He agrees. He plays with Jimmy, the Pinto household's dog, till she arrives with his lunch, which she feeds with her own hands. They smell of sandal and flowers. He becomes suspicious, peppers her with questions. Where's his Amma, his Appa, his aunties, his uncles? She answers him patiently as usual. His Amma and aunties are in the kitchen, busy with many things. His Appa and uncles are out, running some urgent errands.

'Where's chinna Pati?' he asks suddenly. He means her younger sister, his "younger grandmother".

She thinks about it, then says:

'She's gone to be with God.'

'When will she be back?'

'People go to God to be with Him always.' Seeing the tears form in his eyes, she adds: 'But she's happy and we must be happy for her.'

'What about my happiness?' he asks, weeping.

'Since she's so happy, she'll send you some of her happiness. So you'll be happier. For every person who goes to be with God, you'll be happier than before.'

He refuses to eat anymore. She cajoles him, points out that only two mouthfuls remain.

'I don't want happiness. I want you,' he says slowly, looking hard at her. He spots an out-of-place emotion on her face. 'Tell me, will you also go to be with God?'

'Don't be silly. I'll be with you forever.'

So he had placed a call home and told his parents that he was returning. And here he was.

He stayed with her till he felt a familiar ache inside his skull. He promised to return tomorrow, as usual, and left.

The breakthrough came on the tenth day. He arrived at the geriatric ward to find her reading the Ramayana. Her face looked serene, almost like in the good old days. Eventually, she looked up and acknowledged his presence.

‘Pati,’ he said, ‘do you remember how you used to tell me stories every night? Sometimes, even in the afternoons. I would stand on your legs to massage it, and in return, demand a particular story. Rama, Krishna, Ganesha, Vamana, Narasimha, Muruga... do you remember?’

‘Yes, I remember.’

He wanted to shout in jubilation. It was a voice he knew. Mellifluous, and wonder of wonders, dripping with nostalgia!

‘Of course, I remember. Those days, we had so many guests at home. I would be tired after a long day and you were the perfect weight. You knew just how much pressure to put on my calves. And you would never tire, my sweetheart. But do you know what I remember even more? The time you started walking. We had bought you these oversized slacks. Every time you took a step, it would drop down from your waist. We would pull it up, you would take two more steps and it would come down again. And I remember the confusion in your face. How I hugged you tight and laughed. But most of all, I remember the first time you called me Pati. Your father had taken you to the market and when you came back, you walked up to me and said “Pati”. It was the first time anybody had called me that. That’s why you’re my favourite grandson.’

He wept. She wept with him. They hugged.

Before he left, he informed her that he had to travel for some urgent work. She shouldn’t fret because she would be going home soon. And no, she shouldn’t cry. She should say goodbye the way she had taught him.

Reaching the door leading out of the geriatric ward, he turned back for one last look. She was smiling. He would begin chemotherapy tomorrow.

Withered Awake

Thimmappa felt out of place, like a minor celestial body that had inexplicably slipped into an active galaxy. It was close to ten years since he had ventured out of home other than to visit his grocer or pay the electricity bill, so he felt nervous as he shuffled along.

‘Careful, oldie, you’re breaking the speed limit,’ a mocking pedestrian said as he left Thimmappa behind.

‘Move to the side; you’ll get run over,’ someone else warned.

But Thimmappa was too preoccupied with his own ordeal, and too hard of hearing, to be affected by their words. Eventually, he reached the police station and stood in front of three imposing stone steps, wondering what to do next. He could turn back and avoid those steps altogether, or he could try and see this thing through. He cursed softly, put his entire weight on his walking stick and made it to the first step. He looked around, as if searching for something, perhaps a round of applause, perhaps a water cooler to quench his thirst, anything to goad him along. But all he saw was a constable standing guard at the head of the steps. He reached out with his hand; to his relief, the constable came down and helped him up the steps.

‘What brings you here, elderly one?’ the constable asked, feeling both sympathetic and amused at Thimmappa’s frailness. He had to repeat the question louder before Thimmappa replied:

‘Complaint. I want to give a complaint.’

‘What about?’ the constable shouted.

‘I can’t sleep,’ Thimmappa replied, sounding peeved, as if he was being asked to explain the obvious.

‘Very well,’ the constable said, smiling. This seemed a case for Head Constable Y. K. Gopalakrishna, a man who had the patience and the relish for the unusual. ‘This way.’

They navigated through a maze of odd-sized offices, around desks, through the din of rude voices, till they reached a comparatively quiet room at the back. It was a small room, with just for one desk, behind which sat a thick-moustached, pot-bellied man in khakis. His official hat, which belonged more to the Wild West than an Indian metro, rested on the desk.

‘Old man can’t sleep,’ the constable said, winking.

‘Is that so? Sit, elderly one.’ Thimmappa sat. ‘Tell me about it.’

Thimmappa opened his mouth with effort and closed it again. The roof of his mouth felt like sandpaper. He gestured with his hands.

‘Water?’ YKG asked.

‘Water,’ Thimmappa agreed.

He drank two glasses. With his mouth deliciously wet, he began speaking, in the process spraying spittle all over the desk.

‘I’m an old man, sir. I’m eighty-three. I too used to work in the government. My wife, she died eight, or is it nine?, no, eight years ago. Since then, I have been living alone. Here, close by.’

‘Is that so?’ YKG asked, trying to imitate Thimmappa’s halting speech.

‘A maid comes each morning to tidy up the place,’ Thimmappa continued. ‘I’m a man of neat habits and she still finds a way to keep the place messy. I pay her five hundred rupees for that. There was a time – during the British rule, it was – that a man could run his house for eight *annas*. Sometimes, I think that the entire notion of a freedom struggle has been in vain.’

YKG looked up with new respect.

‘So you were a freedom fighter, sir?’

Thimmappa winced.

‘I will have you know that once we became independent, we didn’t have sufficient people to run the country. What could the so-called freedom fighters do? Make crude bombs. Or wear cotton and march in protest. But we civil servants, we had learnt to administer under the British. So we had to step in and take charge. But what was our reward? Before independence, the freedom fighters called us traitors, cowards. After independence, they themselves exploited us.’

‘Is that why you can’t sleep?’ YKG asked, picking a fresh matchstick to clean his ears.

‘What? No. That’s not the reason.’

‘Have you seen a doctor?’

‘A doctor can’t help me,’ Thimmappa said firmly, almost condescendingly. ‘You can. I’m sure it’s no big deal for you. Agreed, insomnia is at the root of the problem, but can a doctor put those slum people in their place?’

‘Oh, I see now. The slum people keep you awake. Festival processions and fights and things like that?’

‘I’ll tell you if you let me,’ Thimmappa said.

‘Take your time,’ YKG said, smiling indulgently. He imagined his matchstick closing in on a lump of earwax. He raked in the catch. Slowly. He had as much time on his hands as the old man.

‘I live right opposite a slum,’ Thimmappa said finally. ‘Of course, when I bought the house, the area was bald as an apple. Standing outside my gate, I had an unobstructed view of the rising sun. Paradise, it really was paradise. No traffic, no noise, no slum. But now, there they are. With their noisy children and their chicken and their water tanker quarrels. That isn’t the problem, mind you. I’m only mentioning these things so that you can fully comprehend my situation. I don’t ramble. I’m a busy man. Was, at one time.’

‘Ah!’ YKG said, eyes closed, all his energies focussed on the matchstick.

‘Lest I forget, let me tell you: they are noisy. So much so that I’ve become quite used to sleeping late. I try sleeping early, mind you. I have dinner by eight. Then I lie down and wait. By midnight, the televisions are switched off and the gossipers go to bed. The drunks fool around till one, one thirty, and then, they too disperse. After that, the street dogs claim the night. They bark their heads off. Continuously. God knows what ghosts and bandicoots bother them.’

‘Interesting.’

‘All this is still normal, mind you. I have been putting up with this since my wife’s death. My body has accepted.’

‘Till what time do the dogs keep you awake?’ YKG asked, eyeing the muck on the matchstick with satisfaction.

‘What dogs? Oh, I see what you mean. The dogs are footloose till four thirty. Then, finally, I find peace. I start dozing. It's a great feeling, isn't it?, when the body surrenders and the brain doesn't have to worry about it for the next few hours. Yet, body and brain come closer together in sleep than in the waking hours. Who was the philosopher who said that sleep is the only mass-consumed metaphysical state?’

‘Four-thirty, you fall asleep,’ YKG said, looking at the wall clock.

‘What's that? Yes. I was saying that I fall asleep and don't wake up till the maid rings the bell. But lately, I haven't been able to sleep at all.’

‘Is that so?’ YKG asked, yawning gigantically.

‘Precisely at four thirty, a vehicle passes by. And as it reaches the speed-breaker right outside my gate, the driver rams on his brake and honks. It's enough to rouse the dead. The first night, I jumped out of my skin. I couldn't sleep after that, as you can imagine. And that's been the case every night since then. It's become such a regular feature that I lie awake waiting for the vehicle to pass. I think of noisy places – railway stations, fairs and such – so that I won't be startled by the horn. But it always startles me. This morning, the vehicle came five minutes late, and the tension of waiting nearly killed me.’

Thimmappa's eyes had turned glassy. Perhaps he was on the verge of tears. YKG rose from his chair, sat on the desk and asked:

‘Have you tried sleeping pills, sir?’

Thimmappa's eyes turned glassier.

‘I don't want to die,’ he said.

‘Quite so, but...’

‘I don't know how many pills I took the other night. They had to take me to the hospital.’

‘When did this happen?’

‘Long ago,’ Thimmappa said, shrugging.

‘Do you have family? Children?’

‘One son living abroad. Doesn't care for his father.’

‘Relatives?’

Thimmappa snorted.

‘Got it. How long has this sleep problem been going on?’

‘I have not been able to sleep since my wife died. That is now eight, or maybe nine, years.’

‘The vehicle, dear man, the vehicle,’ YKG said, unable to control his laughter. The old man infuriated him as much as the situation intrigued him. He very much wanted to get to the bottom of it. He sobered down and rephrased the question. ‘How long has the vehicle been bothering you?’

‘A week. Maybe a month, maybe three. How can one know these things?’

‘How indeed! Give me your name and full address.’ He wrote down the details, along with a brief description of the complaint. ‘Alright, Thimmappa, I'll send someone to your place tonight.’

‘What for?’

‘To talk about old times,’ YKG said, laughing. ‘And he'll see about your vehicle as well. So long.’

With that, YKG hummed a happy tune. A song to invoke Spring. Winter shuffled away.

Thimmappa thought he heard the doorbell ring.

He had eaten whatever he could of his supper – the plate lay on a stool beside the bed and it's contents were already drying, fermenting. He had even constructed a fortress of pillows on his bed and settled down as best as he could. And then the doorbell rang! Why did it do that? He clutched his *rudraksha* and felt comforted by its familiar corrugations. Of course, the doorbell hadn't rung. He was just being silly. He decided not to open the door and make a fool of himself. The day had tired him out, that was all. Maybe he would sleep early tonight! Maybe he had nodded off and dreamt of the doorbell ringing. Wasn't that a happy thought?

The doorbell rang again. There was no mistaking it. And there was nothing to do but dislodge his bedding, put on his dentures and respond.

'Who is it?' he asked, when the door was finally in front of him.

'Balanna.'

'Huh?'

'*Hawaldaar*, sir. Constable. You had complained at the station?'

Thimmappa opened the door. Without waiting for an invitation, Balanna stepped inside, parked his *lathi* and wireless by the door, and stood aside for the door to be closed.

'Why are you here?' Thimmappa asked.

'Because my father couldn't control himself thirty-odd years ago.'

'You have to speak up,' Thimmappa shouted.

'The Head Constable you met is my sister's husband. My brother-in-law,' Balanna shouted in return, more out of frustration than to comply with the old man's request. 'He said I must speak to you and learn all about your wonderful life.'

'Huh?'

'And then it'll be four-thirty and we'll stand outside and await the vehicle.'

'The vehicle must go,' Thimmappa said passionately, leading his saviour into his living room. Balanna wrinkled his nose and almost obeyed his instinct to spit on his left. He swallowed and wondered about the smell, which could only be caused by a million events working in tandem: the windows hadn't been opened in years; the maid had given up the struggle against the grime caking the floors; generations of rats had left their droppings anywhere they wished; filthy undergarments had pickled atop lamp shades as a matter of routine; the old man had gas trouble.

Balanna felt the urge to turn around and flee. But if he did, YKG would give his sister plenty of grief over it. And a man who liked to study everything, even his wife's response to his sexual excesses, had to be respected for his sickness.

'I think I'll sleep in the ante room,' he told Thimmappa. The ante room was far less horrifying.

'Don't you want to hear my life story?' Thimmappa asked.

‘Alright,’ Balanna said, looking into his glassy eyes. After all, he had to give some kind of report to YKG tomorrow. ‘We’ll talk for a while. And then I’ll sleep in the ante room and since, well, you *can’t*, you can wake me up on time.’

A lizard clucked its throat even as another raced across the floor towards the largest cockroach in the vicinity. Balanna inspected the cushions of a chair minutely, banged them hard against each other and then took a seat.

‘Your maid doesn’t do a good job, does she?’

‘You said it,’ Thimmappa replied. ‘She’s the worst.’

‘Why don’t you fire her?’

‘Huh?’ Thimmappa asked and then fell silent, as if such a possibility had never occurred to him. Eventually, he said: ‘She’s more a cook than a maid. Even an old man like me needs to eat a little.’

‘Did she take the day off?’

‘Huh? No. She came. She was very much here.’

‘That food carrier below the bed, that’s from a caterer.’

‘Huh?’

Balanna looked away. He no longer believed that a maid or a cook, or any other human being for that matter, had ever stepped into this house in years. The old man, he decided, lived in a time warp.

‘Never mind,’ he said.

‘All this talk has made me hungry,’ Thimmappa said. ‘I think there’s a box of sweets in the fridge. If you fetch it, we can both have a bite.’

‘Where the fridge?’ Balanna asked cautiously.

‘In the kitchen.’

Balanna looked anxiously towards the kitchen. He reminded himself that he had once hauled the body of a rape victim from the bottom of a storm water drain – he could do this. And yet, nothing in the living room had prepared him for the kitchen. The moment he switched on the light, the scraping-grating noises came to a halt and animals of all shapes and sizes took cover behind the gas cylinder and cooking utensils. A saucepan crashed down into the sink. Balanna quickly opened the refrigerator, tried not to breath in the cold, nauseating fumes, and searched frantically for the box of sweets.

‘Here it is,’ he told Thimmappa upon returning to his chair. The air in the living room seemed pure and invigorating after the ordeal. ‘No, I don’t feel like a sweet.’

Thimmappa fluttered his fingers over the box and selected a large piece.

‘Tired?’ he asked, biting hard.

‘Double shift,’ Balanna said. ‘The Home Minister was in town.’

‘Your brother-in-law makes you work like a donkey,’ Thimmappa said, smiling, as if he liked the idea.

‘He isn’t my boss. I’m posted in a different station.’

‘But he makes you do the odd jobs. Since he can’t spare his men for my problem, and since he wants to know what makes me tick, he’s sent you here. I can see that.’

Balanna allowed his face to show surprise.

‘You’re still very sharp,’ he said.

‘I have been a brother-in-law as well,’ Thimmappa said, pleased. ‘But in my case, *he* was the bully. He used to challenge *me*, the man who married his sister. I’m sure you wouldn’t do such a thing.’

‘What happened to him?’ Balanna asked, yawning.

‘Huh? Died. He died.’

‘How?’

Thimmappa’s turned his face away from Balanna, paused for a few moments, then said:

‘Tate aimed for his heart, but the bullet went through his head. I saw it happen with my own eyes. He fell slowly. He didn’t look cocksure then. No, he didn’t.’

‘This Tate was a white man? That would make your brother-in-law a freedom fighter.’

‘He used to call himself a revolutionary. Kill, burn, drive out. And those who disagreed with him were fools, apparently.’

‘Still,’ Balanna said, stretching his legs wide, ‘he didn’t die in vain.’

Thimmappa snorted, said:

‘We all die in vain. God creates and destroys us by the millions, the same way our body creates and destroys body cells. That’s what we are. A dispensable *limitless* supply of ignorance. We assume roles for ourselves; we’re consumed by those roles. Isn’t that how my brother-in-law died as well? He claimed to fight for freedom, but was he free? Inside?’ Thimmappa tapped his temple. ‘*Hawaldaar?*’

Balanna had fallen asleep on the chair. Thimmappa continued nevertheless.

‘I’m the only free man in the world. Because no idea can own me. That’s what I tried telling her. But I shouldn’t have waited till she was on her deathbed – she was too weak to understand me. Too weak.’

Thimmappa stopped talking – he could feel his wife staring up at him, listening, spellbound even in her state. He told her that he had done what was good for him, for her and for the child she was carrying. If he had disobeyed Tate, he would have been punished, perhaps removed from government service. By obeying him, he had progressed. He never seriously considered disobeying Tate. It had to happen, sooner or later. So he summoned his brother-in-law for a clandestine meeting. He came. Tate was waiting.

She heard him out completely; she didn’t die immediately as he had anticipated. She died only on the next day, but all through that last day, she didn’t speak to him. She just kept staring at him. Her eyes conveyed fury, disappointment, hatred. All of those things.

‘She died with her eyes open,’ he said, aloud. ‘When she went, she took my sleep along with her. I used to be famous for sleeping like a log, you know?’

He stayed awake till his mind went blank, which happened sooner tonight because of the reassurance of another human being dozing nearby.

Balanna awoke first. Outside, the day looked bright. Inside, Thimmappa breathed as regularly as a napping child. He checked the bedbug bites on his forearms, cursed softly and left.

Two days later, YKG summoned Balanna to admonish him for leaving a job half done.

‘I’ll get to it tonight without fail,’ Balanna replied.

‘Too late. Thimmappa’s dead.’ Balanna gaped, although he wasn’t sure if he was sorry to hear it. ‘Massive heart attack. 430 am yesterday as per the post-mortem. We had to break our way in.’

‘Do you think it was the horn?’

‘Maybe it was,’ YKG said, laughing. ‘Any guesses about the vehicle? No? It’s a milk delivery van. A young boy who lives in the slum opposite Thimmappa’s house has become a milkman. He started a fortnight ago, as soon as he failed his matriculation exam. Obvious, isn’t it? All delivery vans honk to wake up the boys.’

‘True,’ Balanna said.

‘Interesting. These things work out, you know. I hardly notice the mayhem anymore. I see patterns and logic. Can you give me a better example of the older generation making way for the new?’

Balanna nodded.

‘It’s the strangest thing, but I feel like I have heard that before.’