

# **The Mamamkam and Other Stories**

## Foreword

Although some of the stories are entirely fictional a few, such as *Two leaves, a bud and a camera*, *A Child of her own* and *What's in a Name?* are based on actual events although the characters are fictional. *The Inn of the Good Samaritan* is based on an experience that my father had in Palestine shortly after World War II.

*The Mamamkam* describes the ceremony that took place on the banks of the River Bharathapuzha every twelve years in the Malabar until 1743 at which the ruling Zamorin of Calicut would permit armed warriors owing allegiance to his vassals to mount an assault on his person. This bizarre yet unique ritual is little known outside Kerala. Even in Kerala, although almost every Malayalee has heard of the Mamamkam, very few know exactly what took place. It is to correct this that *The Mamamkam* is included in this collection.

*A bridge to another world*, *Before the lightning struck* and *A bit of gas* are the only ones that are entirely true. *A bridge to another world* is published here with the full blessings of Joji, husband of Bina whose true story it is, while Shirani and Soman, the protagonists in *A bit of gas* aver that it is true. Dilip Abraham has read *Before the Lightning Struck* and insists that not even a comma should be changed.

*The Kili* and *Advice* have been inspired by Somerset Maugham. while *The Meddle-aged Americans*, *Always a winner*, *Mother's Net*, *The wise guy* and *There was a brown crow* are entirely figments of my imagination

I must acknowledge the contribution of my wife Geetha, my son Rahul, my daughter Miriam, my sister Elizabeth, friends Dilip Abraham, Talitha Mathew, Priyadarshini Sharma, RJK Thomas and Shirani Thomas. All of them gave generously of their time and helped by providing the background for some of the stories, suggesting improvements, correcting errors and proof reading. Although I have profited from their help and advice, it goes without saying that they are not responsible for any mistakes.

## The Author

# There was a Brown Crow

*Language was given to man to conceal his thoughts*

**Stendhal**

Malcolm Grandige sat in his office, looking down through the glass window at the traffic flowing through Shakespeare Sarani. He remembered when the street had been plain Theatre Road, not this fancy double language name. At least, he commiserated, there was some connection here between the old and the new, unlike Harrington Street, which had been renamed Ho Chi Minh Sarani in honour of the North Vietnamese leader! Renaming a street was, he often thought, the cheapest way to honour someone.

His work was finished but he lingered there staring at the black rickshaws nestling one behind the other like a stack of dominos on the verge of collapsing. He wondered, not for the first time, whether these antiquated vehicles were presently used anywhere else on the face of the globe. It had shocked a lot of his friends and relatives back home, this degradation of the human being that pulled these vehicles. But he knew that during the monsoons with almost all of Calcutta under water, these rickshaws were almost indispensable and that in many parts of the city, were the only vehicles that could even move around. Perhaps it would be more appropriate in that context, Grandige thought, that these vehicles should be thought of as antediluvian rather than antiquated.

It was well past twilight, and although the Saturday Club was only a couple of hundred yards down the road, he did not have the heart to go there. He knew that by then there would be quite a few of the expat crowd, at least all the chaps he knew, hanging about in the old wood paneled bar.

Grandige had known some of them for well over twenty-five years, but that group was part of a dying breed. These days they tended to be bankers, not like in the old days when his fellow countrymen had dominated the entire gamut of business activity and the civil services. He had liked some of them, disliked a few and been bored to death by the rest. But now the thought that he would be seeing them for perhaps the last time ever, gave him a pang. Yes, they would ply him with drinks, but he could not bear their heartiness. They would make speeches, tell him what a good fellow he was, express their regret at his departure and wish him long life.

He had prepared his speech, of course, in which he had surveyed the changes that had taken place. There was so much that he had to say; so much he had to reminisce about. He could recall the early days when the clubs and the upper echelons of the old merchant houses were still very much a British preserve. On any given weekend the Tollygunge Club, with its three hundred odd acres of manicured lawns, golf course and horse racing track, could have been mistaken for a patch of Old Blighty. There was a time, of course, when no Indian would have been admitted into the hallowed portals of what his Indian colleagues sometimes referred to as the relics of the Raj. He knew it too, but it had never seemed to him a regrettable matter. After all, every community has the right to confine the membership of its clubs to members of its own race without outside interference

He recalled with amusement the furor that greeted a proposal to admit Indians to the Calcutta Swimming Club and of how a few years later, in the seventies, after the Marxists had won the West Bengal elections the new government's ebullient Sports Minister, Ram Chatterjee, had taken a busload of Santhal tribals to the club, where they had all stripped naked and jumped into the pool! With an alacrity that did not surprise anyone, the CSC had then thrown open its doors to the citizens of the

country!

A few years after his arrival in India he had come across an old copy of the Times of India. It was, he recalled, a 1935 issue and because of its antiquity he had read it from cover to cover. Among the *Letters to the Editor* he spotted a letter in which a reader had mentioned, among other things, that the Asian Club, a top Parsee club did not allow any resident European to enter its precincts and that none of them had ever complained about their exclusion. The letter had also pointed out that it was an irony that although, of the total cost of Rs.19,000 incurred in 1875 for the Bombay Gymkhana's pavilion, Rs.5,000 had been contributed by a wealthy Parsee, Sir Cowasjee Jehangir, no Indian had yet been admitted for membership of the club! Grandige had wondered while reading the article why the Parsee baronet had not made any stipulations regarding membership when he had made his very generous contribution to the club.

His thoughts then turned to the long years he had spent in India. He thought of the strange customs that he had seen and now become so used to and of the many languages that the country boasted. He smiled ruefully at the thought that he had not, after spending almost twenty-five years, learned either Bengali, the local language of West Bengal where he had spent all his life in India or the national language, Hindi. Whenever he was stumped for a local word he would remember his predecessor Tim Grosely, who had helped him to settle in and recall with a quiet smile the older man's advice that there was no need to learn the local languages.

"Why not?" he had asked.

"Each and every one of the staff at the office and at the clubs speak English and you shouldn't have any difficulty there."

"What about the servants?"

"They speak a kind of pidgin English. You'll get used to it after a while."

Grosely had then smiled and added, "Hindi is very much like English, they say."

"What!" Grandige had exclaimed.

"Well it's like this; if you want your man to open the door, all that you have to say is. '*There was a cold day*' and if you want him to close the door, you merely say, '*There was a brown crow.*'"

The chuckle that followed suggested that his leg was being pulled, but it had taken him quite a long time to find out exactly what the old boy had meant. The strange and amusing part of it, however, was that it worked. He had tried it out and to his surprise the peon at the office had carried out his request without even batting an eyelid. Although he was pleasantly surprised he did not try it again, flummoxed perhaps by the familiar words and the unexpected results they produced!

Grandige soon discovered that although he could manage quite well with English, there were the snafus as for instance when he asked a peon, a new recruit, to request the clerk who had prepared the draft of a letter to see him.

The fellow seemed a bit puzzled but went off, only to come back a little later with the query, "What sir?"

“I asked you to bring the clerk who prepared this draft,” he repeated.

“Claack?” the peon asked.

“Yes, the clerk,” Grandige echoed in exasperation.

The man’s face brightened and he went out of the room once more and returned a while later with the wall clock that had hung in the hall!

Apart from minor and often hilarious incidents such as this, he managed well enough to disagree with Emerson’s contention that no man should travel until he has learned the language of the country he visits for otherwise he voluntarily makes himself a great baby – so helpless and so ridiculous. That, Grandige felt, did not apply to an Englishman in any country that was part of the British Commonwealth.

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Grandige finally left for the club, musing along the way that most of the fellows waiting for him at the bar would have presumed that he was a bachelor and in these days of well-known personae with alternate lifestyles, may have even presumed him to be so inclined.

That, he thought, would have tickled Margaret no end.

He had always been rather a private person and therefore no ladies man. So it came as a surprise to everyone who knew him when he married Margaret after a short but whirlwind romance. Her father had been in the Indian Civil Service and so she had spent a great deal of her childhood in India and had very fond memories of the place.

Grandige had met her at the Tollygunge Club when she had come down to India on vacation to revive old memories. They had taken to each other and before he knew it they were discussing marriage! That was in December and they had to wait until the following summer when Grandige went home on furlough, to get married.

After Margaret died, the wives of colleagues and friends tried to persuade him, without success, to marry again. He was often reminded of the American humourist, H.L. Mencken who claimed that men have a better time than women because they marry later and die earlier. It was not that he had been unhappy in marriage. But then few marriages are; it’s the living together afterwards that usually causes the problems, he ruminated.

But even that had not been a problem; in fact they had had a good time together. There were servants to take care of the domestic work and so theirs was not, as one wit had commented, a community consisting of a master, a mistress, and two slaves, making in all two. Margaret had been rather easy going, she was used to the country and had no great ambition to make her husband top dog in the company or anything like that. Grandige knew that he was rather easy to please and although he did his share of work at the office, he was not one of those chaps who sat late and slogged it out.

Like most of the expatriates, Grandige would leave as soon as the office closed for the day, pick up Margaret and head for the club where they would play a round of tennis after which they would sit on

the lawns and play a few hands of bridge. If there was a dinner on, and there usually was one somewhere, they would go back home, and after a bath and a change of clothes, go to the party. On Saturday evenings and early morning on Sundays they would play golf at the Royal Calcutta Golf Club. ‘Would anyone back home believe that the RCGC is among the oldest golf courses in the world?’ he had often wondered.

It was an easy and carefree life in those days. Food was cheap, servants easily available and accommodation, transport, and club membership taken care of by the company. And there was the annual leave, when he could fly home on company expense.

But when she died in childbirth a few years later, Grandige found that he just could not think of living with another. She was a part of him that would never ever wholly leave him, nor ever wholly return. He had been lucky in Margaret. Would he be as lucky a second time? He thought it unlikely. No, there would be no encore. Could there ever be an encore to a tragedy?

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Grandige came out of his reverie as he entered the club where he was received by his old friend Richard Prentice and ushered up the stairs leading to the Phoenix Room where his farewell party had been arranged. Although it was in his honour, the party was well into its stride by the time he reached there and quite a few of the regulars were already in very convivial spirits.

An hour or so later it was time for the speeches. As expected they told him what a wonderful chap he was and how marvelous it was that he had stayed the course and how happy he must be to be returning home at last.

He did not quite agree with most of what they said, but he made no protest; perhaps he knew that in a sense it was true. In his reply, however, he chose not to dwell on them but rather punctuated his speech with quite a few humorous anecdotes that made it almost twice as long by the laughter that impeded its progress.

Finally it was all over and he left the Phoenix Room to a noisy rendition of ‘*Auld Lang Syne*’

On his way out, Grandige paused and winked at the bearer who stood just outside the door, and said, “There was a brown crow.”

“*Ji ha saab,*” said the man as he closed the door behind Grandige.

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## A Bit of Gas

*Nothing can be stated so perfectly as not to be misunderstood.*

**Philip Melanchthon.**

**1971**

She had had a trying day. Nothing seemed to go right. She had told the gardener to trim the frangipani and he had promptly chopped off so many of the branches that that lovely old tree now looked like a gaunt skeleton. The maid had taken offence at something she had said and had gone into a sulk and to make matters worse, the new houseboy, Kannan, did not seem to understand a word she said. She had asked him to get some petrol so that she could get the maid to clean a smudge that had appeared on the carpet. What was so difficult about understanding that? They seemed to have no difficulty when Soman used the word. She thought she had the word down to a pat. And here was this fellow telling her, “*Masilamani inge ille,*” at least that is what she thought she had heard. She well knew that there was no Masilamani in the bungalow. She didn’t need the houseboy to tell her that!

India was so bewildering! Sixteen official languages and thousands of dialects! And then there were the scripts with each language having its own, often a vastly different one from the other. And it did not help that she had spent four years studying in Allahabad. They spoke quite a different language there, one that was poles apart from the Tamil spoken by the workers on the estate. She had been married for a little over a year now, but her husband was a Malayalee and that meant that he spoke Malayalam, yet another language and, having grown up in Bombay, although he could get by in his mother tongue, he was not all that fluent in the language.

But she had tried. No one could say that she had not. Every time she heard a new word, she asked what it meant or tried to figure out its meaning. She would then roll it off her tongue. Tamil she found was manageable, but Malayalam was impossible. An almost insignificant shift in accent could mean a totally different word. For instance, *palli* for church and lizard and words that were common to Malayalam and Tamil could mean totally different things. For instance *vali* in Tamil meant ‘way’, while in Malayalam it meant ‘fart’!

It was not that she had all that many complaints. At over three thousand feet above sea level, the climate was deliciously cool. The small bungalow they lived in was set in a lovely garden, beyond which the tea fields spread their carpet of green. There were plenty of servants to take care of all the work and she had little to do most days. The executives on the estate and their wives were very westernized and hardly ever spoke in any language other than English. She had stayed on tea estates in her native Sri Lanka and found very little difference in the life on an estate in South India compared to that in Nuwara Eliya and the other tea districts of Sri Lanka. Like their counterparts in other plantation districts throughout the British Commonwealth, they were westernized, sometimes even to a point of ridicule.

Of course, she committed the occasional *faux pas*, such as when, on one evening at the club, she had in response to a query from another Assistant manager’s wife, given her opinion on the quality of mutton that she bought on the estate. How was she to know that it was the Group Manager’s wife who had the goat slaughtered and that it was she who had sent the parcel of meat her way!

But what was she to do with this imbecile who did not understand anything she said? She would now have to wait for Soman’s return from the tea fields and take a bit of petrol out of his motorcycle. But

then the morning would have gone by. It was impossible.

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She heard the throb of the motorcycle echoing through the valley as it climbed the steep and winding road that led to the bungalow. A while later Soman came in after having divested himself of his boots and padded windcheater at the rear entrance.

“That Kannan is useless!” she said as soon as her husband had sat down.

“Why? What’s the matter?”

“He does not even understand simple things,” she fumed.

“These guys are dumb, but what did you ask him to do?” he asked.

“I just asked him to get me a little petrol.”

“And?”

“He just stood there saying there is no petrol.”

“You should have asked him to go to the factory. Or you could have sent a chit to the factory and asked the tea maker to send some petrol.”

“I guess I could have done that, but it was so infuriating to talk to a fool who just doesn’t understand anything.”

“Yes, Kannan is new and he doesn’t know much English. I’ll tell the head clerk to assign someone else.”

“I didn’t speak to him in English. I spoke to him in Tamil,” she said exasperatedly.

“In Tamil! What exactly did you ask him?”

“I told him ‘*Masilamani iriku dei*’. Why can’t he understand that?”

“Masilamani?”

“Yes. Masilamani. That’s what you always ask for when we go to the petrol pump. I have been listening to you very carefully and I have even got the accent and intonation down pat.”

“But Masilamani doesn’t mean petrol.”

“Then why do you ask for Masilamani, every time we go to the petrol pump. And when you do they fill up your tank without even a murmur.”

“That’s because Masilamani is the name of the fellow who cranks the pump.”

“What?!”

“He’s the one I ask for when I go to the pump for petrol. All this time, and you never realised that it was his name?”

“Well...not really.”

“Next time, maybe you should ask for what you want before complaining about not getting it, hmm?”

“That reminds me...we need some petrol.”

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# The Wise Guy

*Avoid a person who asks questions, for such a man is a talker; nor will open ears keep faithfully the things entrusted to them*

**Horace**

It was early afternoon and I was seated in the compartment of a train approaching Quilon from Trivandrum. Beside me, to my left sat a middle-aged man. Lean and tall, he had that confident look of a man who thinks he knows everything and is sure that he is right. Beyond him on the aisle seat was a young man of middling height. He would have been, I estimated, in his mid twenties and had the earnest look of a young professional on the threshold of his career.

I had by then finished reading the sports magazine that I had purchased at the Trivandrum railway station and although I had a window seat, with the sun beating down fiercely, I had lowered the shutter, leaving just enough space for the wind to come through. I had nothing to do but listen to the conversation around me.

“Where are you going to?” I heard my immediate neighbour ask the young man seated across the aisle.

“We are going to Cheruparambu.”

“Ah, then you’ll be getting down at Quilon.”

“Yes, are you familiar with Cheruparambu?”

“Yes. I live there.”

“Oh, that’s a coincidence.”

“Have you been there before?”

“No. We are going there for the first time.”

“We?”

“Yes, my parents and I,” the young fellow replied, pointing to the middle-aged couple sitting on the other side of the aisle.

“Ah,” observed my neighbour. I saw him glance up at the luggage rack, but thereafter lapsed into a long thoughtful silence.

The train rattled on as I tried to keep my mind occupied.

“What is your name?” I heard him ask the young man.

“Georgekutty,” the young fellow replied.

“My name is Koshy Varghese. I run a chit fund.”

“I am a chartered accountant,” Georgekutty volunteered.

“Which denomination do you belong to?”

This question may require some elucidation for a stranger to Kerala’s multi-ethnic society and I shall therefore try and explain.

It is not widely known, but there have been Christians in Kerala almost from the dawn of the religion, from the time of the Apostle Thomas. Tradition has it that the saint arrived on these shores in 52 AD, that he converted seven Brahmin families to the new faith and that he went to the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu where he died and was buried in a sepulchre in Mylapore in present-day Chennai.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the Portuguese controlled most of the coastal areas of Kerala, they considered the local church, then ministered under the Syrian Orthodox rites, to be part of the Nestorian heresy and did everything they could, including killing a few Syrian Christian bishops, to put it down. Many of the old Christians crossed over to the Catholic Church and as a result there came into being two distinct sects of the same faith. When the Portuguese began to convert local Hindus to their faith, the old Syrian Christians maintained a separate identity within the Catholic Church and called themselves Syrian Catholics, while the new converts became known as Latin Catholics. To this day they maintain their separate identities, even to the extent of maintaining separate basilicas within the same city. There were also the Knanayas, the descendants of a group of people who had come over from Syria in the 4th century. The Caldeans were yet another such group of immigrants and these tiny sects have maintained many of their traditions and distinct identities even to this day.

When the Dutch and then the British became dominant in this part of the world, various factions of the Protestant Church began to take root here. Later, a faction, known as Mar Thoma broke away from the Syrian Orthodox Church, which itself later split into two factions - the Orthodox group owing their allegiance to a local Metropolitan based in Kottayam and the Patriarch faction owing allegiance to the Patriarch of Antioch. This was a bitter parting of ways and the ensuing fight over church properties and privileges continues even to this day and is very often the most hotly debated topic of conversation within the community.

This was the backdrop against which Koshy made his query.

“Orthodox,” Georgekutty replied.

“How old are you?”

I saw Georgekutty’s eyes search the ceiling. Clearly he did not like the personal nature of the question, but not wanting to sound churlish, perhaps, he replied, “Twenty-five.”

“Then you must be going to see Cheriachen’s daughter Usha,” I heard Koshy say.

“What! How!” sputtered the startled young man.

“You and your parents must be going to see Usha,” the older man repeated.

“How could you possibly know? Only her family knows of our visit. We haven’t told anyone and they

had promised us that they would not tell anyone, at least not until we had come to an understanding.”

“Nobody told me. It was obvious.”

“Obvious?”

“Well not obvious, perhaps, but I suspected it and now I know I am right.”

“But how?” Georgekutty asked in utter stupefaction.

“Well, you and your parents are going to Cheruparambu for the first time. Nobody has moved into Cheruparambu for many years and it is therefore unlikely that you are related to anyone there. It is also unlikely that a young chartered accountant would be going to Cheruparambu on a weekday just to look up friends or relatives.”

“Perhaps, but how do you know that it is Usha that we are to meet?”

“That was easy enough. You are of the Orthodox faction so it is unlikely that it could be Kuriachen’s daughter Meena. You admitted to being twenty-five years old. Therefore it could not have been Varkey’s daughter Sheila, for she’s almost that age herself.”

“Aren’t there any other eligible young women in Cheruparambu?”

“Yes, there are. But Johnny and Ammukutty were on board the train this morning. They would not have gone out of their home today if a prospective groom were coming to see their daughter. Valsa, Kuriachen’s daughter is down with chicken pox. There are other girls of course, but none of them are likely prospects for a qualified chartered accountant,” Koshy declared in triumph.

Georgekutty was silent and I saw him glancing at his parents, but they appeared not to have caught even a drift of the conversation.

After a while, Koshy tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone.”

Georgekutty did not say anything and merely shrugged his shoulders. When Quilon finally drew near he stood up and without a word of farewell to his co-passenger helped his mother get up and led his parents out of the compartment.

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## **The Meddle Aged Americans**

*If an American were condemned to confine his activity to his own affairs, he would be robbed of one half of his existence.*

**Alexis de Tocqueville**

### **21<sup>st</sup> December 1980**

My hometown, Kottayam, is today rather well known for its proximity to the lake resorts at Kumarakom, a village on the edge of the world famous Vembanad Lake, the largest of the twenty nine lakes that form Kerala's unique backwater system, a geographical phenomenon which more than any other factor had catapulted the entire state into the National Geographic's list of "50 Places of a Lifetime".

At the time of this narrative, however, it was merely a place well known for its Syrian Christian churches, in particular, the 16th century Valiapally and the Cheriapally with its four hundred year old vegetable dye paintings, and its importance as a centre for the production and trade in rubber.

It is now a few years since that day and I cannot now remember the name of the church. I remember, however, that it was on the outskirts of the town and that the parish hall, which was larger than the church, was rather crowded by the time I got there for the Christmas carol programme.

I had been told that a parishioner, who had emigrated a few years ago to the United States of America, had returned to his hometown after many years and that his sons, both accomplished musicians, accompanied him. The boys were expected to perform that night and I looked forward to that.

I spotted an empty seat and claimed it, the only one perhaps - at least so it seemed to me - and sat down in time to catch the last few sentences of the speaker, a balding man in his early fifties.

".....it is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents. Yes, it may be a land with the worst of influences, but there is no doubt that more than any other nation America offers the greatest of opportunities, particularly for the young."

In the general swell of comments that followed, I heard the man seated on my right tell his companion, "Thomman may call it the land of opportunity, but even the Americans feel it's still so only in an election year!"

I glanced at him. He was about fifty-five, stout and although he was sitting, I could make out that he was of middle height. He had a bald shiny head, a stubbly moustache and horn-rimmed spectacles that did not quite cover his bushy eyebrows. I could gauge from his broad Malayalam accent, tinged with a drawl, that he had spent quite a bit of time in the United States of America.

His companion laughed. "John, I dare say that all you've picked up in the States is that dreadful American drawl and a lot of jokes about the Yanks."

He was of the same age, but unlike my immediate neighbour, was tall and his gray hair, which was cut very short, was still thick. He was clearly the better educated of the two and it was evident from his speech that that he had studied in England, perhaps at Oxford or Cambridge.

An Oxonian or a Cantabrigian in Kottayam? Strange as it may sound, it was not altogether incongruous, for this little town had sent quite a few young men to the hallowed portals of those famous universities. The most well known of these was of course the eminent diplomat K.P.S. Menon who had studied at Oxford. There was also George Verghese - and he had been a Rhodes scholar to boot – who a few years later was to become world famous after being featured in his niece Arundhati Roy’s Booker Prize winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, which the author and others claimed was at least in part autobiographical.

I was therefore not very surprised to hear such strangely accented English in my hometown and perked my ears, realizing that whatever was to follow could perhaps be as interesting as the programme itself.

“Kunju, what else is there to pick up in America? They have no history to speak of. One wit claims that there are only three stages in American history – the passing of the buffalo, the passing of the Red Indian and the passing of the buck!” he guffawed again drawing quite a few irritated grunts from those seated nearby, a chuckle from his friend and an amused grin from me.

“My dear fellow, it is a young country.”

“Well many Europeans feel that America isn’t a young country any longer. They say it has reached meddle age!”

“Meddle age? Ha, ha. Yes, the blighters meddle in just about everything, don’t they?”

“Half the time they don’t even know where exactly they are meddling.”

“Even their presidents are no better.”

“They are invariably more clueless than most others in government.”

“I always wonder why it is that America with all its resources cannot find better men to lead them.”

“That’s because the men the American people admire most are the most daring liars and the ones they detest most are those who try to tell them the truth. How else do you explain a B grade film actor like Reagan becoming President?”

“And he beat the incumbent president Jimmy Carter by a wide margin.”

“It’s easy to believe that any American boy can become president when you consider some who have.”

Just then we heard the low wail of a saxophone and then, soon after the organ joined in, the curtains parted and the choir began singing *Adam lay abounden*. The choir did fair justice to that carol which I remembered quite well for its refrain .... ‘*and all was for an apple, an apple that he took*’. I assumed that the youngster on the sax was Thomman’s son and thought to myself that the accompaniment, though unusual, was rather good.

The carol over, the curtain came down and Thomman appeared once more before us.

“What amazes me is that although I left Kottayam quite a few years ago, it is almost as if I had not ever left the place; it is almost exactly as it was ten years ago. Yes, there are a few new buildings and of

course there are more cars on the roads. But nothing else seems to have changed. The same red flags, the same old posters urging a strike or condemning management - even the film posters don't seem to have changed. But the world is changing and fast. The Americans say that it is moving so fast that you cannot even stay wrong all the time, even if you tried!"

That drew a few smothered laughs from the audience.

"What we must understand is that constant change is here to stay," he continued. "We cannot have progress without change. Of course there's always resistance to change - even in America. There they say that most people hate any change that doesn't jingle in their pockets and that although most people continue to change jobs, friends and even spouses, they never think of changing themselves."

"Thomman should have realised by now that the average American is no role model. They have no clue about life outside their country. Their national baseball championship is called the World Series!"

"Yes they are a funny lot. As someone once observed, they drink whiskey to keep themselves warm; then they put some ice in it to make it cool; then they put some sugar in it to make it sweet; then they put a slice of lemon in it to make it sour. Then they say, 'Here's to you,' and drink it themselves," John drawled.

"John, there's nothing the matter with Americans except their ideals. The real American is all right; it is the ideal American who is all wrong."

"The problem is that they have only two classes there - the upper middle and the lower middle. That's why that which the English call the middle class is, in America, the whole nation, and as you say, they all like to meddle."

"Yes, they are a queer people; they just can't rest. Someone compared America to a large, friendly dog in a small room. Every time it wags its tail it knocks over a chair."

My attention went back to Thomman and caught his final lines, "...Americans tend to see history as a straight line and imagine themselves standing at the cutting edge of it for the benefit of all mankind. They believe in the future as if it were a religion; they believe that there is nothing they can't accomplish and that solutions wait somewhere for problems."

The curtains parted as Thomman left the stage and the choir began singing. It was unfamiliar and not particularly uplifting. My attention went back to my neighbours.

"Thomman is quite right, you know. Americans do not want to keep too much of the past in their heads. They consider it unhealthy to remember mistakes, neurotic to think about them and psychotic to dwell on them,"

"America is an anachronism. Tell me, what is America's largest industry?" John asked.

"The automobile industry, I suppose."

"Yes, and who buys American cars?"

"Only the Americans."

“Exactly! No one other than an American wants Detroit’s products and that is the anachronism. America imports more than it exports. That according to practically every accepted economic theory is the symptom of a weak economy. Yet it is the strongest economy in the world. Japan on the other hand exports far more than it imports, but it is a weaker economy than the USA.”

“That’s true, but why?”

“It is very simple. What do we do with our money?”

“Spend it, I suppose.”

“No! We don’t spend it. We save it. We are the world’s greatest savers. That used to be another yardstick of a sound economy. Not any more.”

“Why is that so?”

“Well we save our money in many ways – buying property, buying gold, buying securities and the like. Our government and most other governments these days keep their reserves in US dollars. The dollar is today America’s principal export and that is what strengthens it and enables the Americans to become the most conspicuous spenders on the face of this earth. They now say that although not many Americans have been around the world, their money has.”

“I’ve heard it said that the American dream is owning a British sports car, smoking a Havana cigar and drinking Russian vodka on the French Riviera.”

“Well quite a few get there. They say that US now stands for unlimited spending!”

“Ha, ha, ha, ha!” Kunju laughed.

The carol over, Thomman made his appearance as if on cue.

“When I left home, America was a dream. It was that wonderful place where forbearance was natural and personal freedom unquestioned. After having lived there I realised that America too has its problems and some of them are massive. But I will never forget what an inspiration it had been and what a place it has been for my children. It may be the most powerful country in the world, but it is not just a power, it is an example. An example to anyone who has the determination that whatever your background, if you have the will you will find a way in America. You must remember that although these days it attracts a lot of talent from all over the world, the people who made America what it is, were from the labouring classes, the lower classes of Europe. To raise them to this level of self-respect, competence and success is indeed most remarkable. America has proved that by education, and the spread of knowledge any man can not only make it, but stand on par with those who were once considered his superiors. That is something that we in Kerala, with our education and knowledge of the world, could emulate. Americans do not beg in the streets and they do not offend you with tattered clothes. If they are poor, it is not an abject poverty. These are what impresses you most and form the testament to the success of America and her institutions.”

The strains of a violin slowly permeated through the hall. It began on a low note and as it grew louder Thomman stepped back and disappeared behind the curtains.

“I guess it’s true what he says, but we have never been able to see the American except in caricature.”

“That’s perhaps because they stand out. They are usually very tall and big built. They often dress rather loudly and they seem to spend a lot wherever they go. One wit has called America the land of the spree and the home of the crave!”

“They can afford to, for they buy everything on credit.”

“Yes. They have mastered the art of being well-off and broke at the same time. Someone once told me that the first thing that a typical American will ask when he gets to heaven is the amount of a down payment on a harp.”

“They say that if the Americans only bought what they could afford, it would destroy their economy! That’s why it’s a country where Groucho Marx has more followers than Karl Marx,” John chuckled.

“Trouble is that half the time they don’t know what they want, but they are willing to kill someone to get it. Did you notice, when you were in the States, that Americans unlike their cousins, the British don’t carry umbrellas?”

“Now that you mention it, yes. Why don’t they?”

“Because they prepare to walk in eternal sunshine.”

“And mostly in the wrong direction.”

The carol came to an end and when the curtain dropped, a priest appeared on stage and said, “Let us pray.”

We stood up with our heads bowed until the short prayer was over. We then joined in the Lord’s Prayer after which the priest delivered the benediction. That was the end of the proceedings. As I turned to move to the aisle, I hear Kunju chuckle and say, “Americans are getting like a Ford car – they all have the same parts, the same upholstery and make exactly the same noises.”

“Yes, but then who but an American can afford chairs that vibrate and cars that don’t?” John guffawed as they left the hall together.

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# The Mamamkam

*By the proud Nayars the noble rank is claimed  
The toils of art and culture they scorn  
The warrior's plumes their haughty brows adorn  
The shining faulchion brandished in the right  
Their left hand wields the target in the fight  
Of danger scornful, ever armed they stand  
Around the king a stern and shining band*

Luis de Camoens

## Mid February 1538

The silent and still reflection of the temple in the placid waters of the nearby Bharathapuzha and the verdant rice fields that gleamed in green and gold in the morning sunlight gave no hint whatsoever of the flurry of activity that we could see before us.

From the western gate of the temple, which stood to our right, ran a perfectly straight road about half a mile in length. It cut through the surrounding plains and paddy fields until it reached a stretch of terraced ridges about a hundred yards towards the right of the hillock on which we stood. Alongside was Odeyan, who, although a part of the *Zamorin's* soldiery, did not have any duties other than that of escorting us.

Granite blocks buttressed the sides of the ridges that faced us and the entire edifice would have looked like the advance fortifications of a grim fortress, had it not been for the gay flags and other festive decorations that we could see on the smooth plateau of hard laterite that topped these ridges. The other sides of the plateau were gently inclined with the lower slopes bosomed in trees. Above the upper terrace was yet another stretch of level ground where several thatched sheds had been erected.

The hillock on which we stood gave us a commanding view all the way from the terrace, which was to our left, to the temple and the placid river beyond.

“Where is the *Zamorin*?” I asked.

“He will come later; on the eighteenth day. From then on he will take his daily stand on the *manittara*, that is the terraced area beyond those granite ridges.”

Before us was spread the most colourful spectacle that I had seen in a long time and easily the largest assembly of people I had ever witnessed. Thousands upon thousands of men, women and children massed the huge plain, at one end of which were hundreds of stalls selling a variety of merchandise - jewellery, clothing, utensils and other articles of daily use, wooden and cloth toys and food.

A huge bull elephant, the largest that I had yet seen, was being caparisoned on the *manittara*. Its tusks had been sawn off at the tips and the ends were encased in bands of gold. A gold face guard hid most of its head from a broad swathe at the top that tapered until it reached about half way down its trunk. After a while a group of men carrying a long gold chain approached the beast.

“Is that pure gold?” Hugh asked.

“Yes. That’s Kudaman, the Zamorin’s elephant. Kudaman, you see, can be caparisoned only with pure gold trappings. That chain is solid gold and it has, including its clasp, a hundred and fifteen links. Anything that looks like gold on Kudaman is pure gold; nothing else will do.”

“Why are they caparisoning the elephant? You had told me that there was going to be some fierce fighting!” I said.

“It is only after the Zamorin’s men start caparisoning the elephant that the challenge takes place,” Odeynan replied.

“Why is that?”

“This is the one ceremony that the Rajah of Valluvanad cannot permit to continue unchallenged for it formally announces that the Zamorin is the protector of the *Mamamkam* and of all the people assembled here and thereby that he is their suzerain.”

“What happens now?”

“The Zamorin’s men will continue caparisoning the elephant. The first challenge will be mounted only tomorrow, early in the morning.”

“And who will lead the attack?”

“Those rajahs who acknowledge the Zamorin’s suzerainty have already sent their flags as tokens of their fealty. You can see their standards flying all around the *manittara*; a couple of them are just behind the elephant. The Rajah of Valluvanad, however, never sends his flag; instead he sends the *Chavers*. They are all his men and they have to run a gauntlet through several thousand armed men of the Zamorin.”

“Why can’t the Zamorin subdue the Rajah and make him a vassal like the others?”

“He does not need to, for he is supreme here. His ancestors have beaten the Rajah’s ancestors and he himself need not wage war to prove his superiority. However he has to give the Rajah or, for that matter, any of the other rajahs who chose to do so, the opportunity to overcome him. But it’s only symbolic, for the *Chavers* will not succeed in getting anywhere near the Zamorin, let alone hurt him. They can reach him only if his vassals desert him.” Odeynan paused, looked at me and then pointed to the scene below us, “Just take a look at that.”

The plateau teemed with soldiers. Behind the soldiers was a host of people - camp followers and the women of the Zamorin’s household. Thousands of others, including soldiers, swarmed all over the plains below.

“There must be tens of thousands of soldiers,” I observed.

“There will be more tomorrow. Presently there are about fifteen thousand Nairs of Ernad and about five thousand from Polanad.”

“If the *Chavers* have no hope of succeeding, why do they even try? After all they are sure to die in the process if they cannot succeed in reaching the Zamorin.”

“As I’ve said before, it’s their destiny; it is what they were born to do. Even today, if there were war, the *Chavers* would form the vanguard. They would be the first to die, for the front line is the hardest hit and the first to go down.”

“So it’s a suicide squad,” I remarked.

“You could call it that. But that is our tradition and it has been that way for centuries,” Odeynan replied.

“What would happen if the *Chavers* succeed in hacking their way through?”

“That would never happen!” he exclaimed.

“But what if they did?”

“It would be a miracle.”

“All right. What if such a miracle took place?” I persisted.

“Then the Valluvanad Rajah would be our ruler,” he replied.

“Won’t the next in line stake their claim to the throne?”

“Look to your right across the river. The camps that you see there are the camps of those next in line to the throne and they are here to see that nothing goes wrong. But if the *Chavers* manage to carve their way through the Zamorin’s guards, most of us would decide that it is the Valluvanad Rajah who is fittest to rule and flock to his standard.”

“That’s a very mercenary attitude.”

“No! That is our destiny. We Nairs are born to bear arms. If the Valluvanad Rajah overcomes the Zamorin here, he becomes our suzerain. That is what this entire exercise is all about. It is our *karma* to follow whoever wins.”

The proceedings continued throughout the day without a break. Towards evening we went with Odeynan to the Zamorin’s camp, where we were given shelter for the night.

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We rose early the next day, in time to see the Zamorin returning from the temple where he had offered his prayers. When he had climbed the steps that led to the *manittara* and then disappeared from view, we took up our positions once more on the hillock.

The plain below swarmed with troops, their banners waving gaily in the sun. The road from the temple to the plateau teemed on both sides with hundreds of Nair soldiers pressed into a dense pack bristling with spears. But although they swarmed on both sides of the road, the route itself, all the way from the temple to the Zamorin’s stand, was clear of them. Not a soul stirred there. From our perspective it looked as if there was hardly any space for the *Chavers* to run that glittering gauntlet and I mentioned

this to Odeynan.

“Those barrel palisades that you can see on both sides of the road are placed two spear lengths apart. The Zamorin’s soldiers are not allowed to enter that narrow lane. They must stay outside,” he replied.

“Does it make any difference at all? The sheer weight of their bodies and the combined points of their spears make it an almost impassable obstacle. There’s just a tiny gap at the end and the *Chavers* must squeeze past that if they are to get at the Zamorin.”

All around us swarmed a host of men, women and even children. Every vantage position was taken up. People stood on every available piece of high ground and many sat perched on the branches of the trees that ringed the plain.

We could hear it, muted at first, then the loud noise of cymbals and trumpets and in the distance we could see an immense crowd approaching the *manittara*. In the vanguard was the Zamorin’s elephant, so richly caparisoned that it looked like a mountain of gold. The golden face mask and the long chain blazed brightly in the sun as it slowly made its way from the river to the temple and from there to the *manittara*. On its back was a splendid canopy, a creation in red and gold, under which the Zamorin sat in regal state. Below the canopy was a broad cloth, again of red and gold and myriad other bright colours, which almost covered the elephant’s body.

Behind Kudaman were several other elephants, almost as brilliantly dressed as the royal mount, bearing the other rajahs and nobles. After that came a host of people carrying brass idols and lamps, followed by drummers, trumpeters and flautists accompanied by all the paraphernalia of a royal procession - banners, flags, fans made of peacock feathers, brightly coloured silk *kudas* and brass lamps.

Seven lovely girls, dressed in cream *mundus* with gold brocade edgings, sprinkled water from silver vessels that they carried on their hips, as they walked in front of a strapping soldier who carried, on a cushion, an enormous sword.

“That is the sword of Cheraman Perumal,” Odeynan informed us.

Several thousand soldiers brought up the rear and we could see them slowly marching into view as the procession neared the *manittara*.

While the others stopped, the elephants went up to the foot of the stairs and then on cue from the *mahouts*, they knelt down to enable the Zamorin and the others to dismount.

The Zamorin got down from the elephant and turned and faced the assembly. He was dressed in a white silk *mundu* from his midriff to his knees. On his left arm, above the elbow, he wore three bands of gold studded with precious stones. The middle one was the largest of the three and the most richly adorned. A large diamond, as thick as a man’s thumb, hung from it on a golden chain and glittered in the morning sunlight. Around his neck was a long string of pearls, each the size of hazelnuts, which took two turns and yet reached down to his middle. Above that he wore a gold chain on which was suspended a jewel in the shape of a heart surrounded by large pearls. In the middle of the pendant was a breathtaking gem, a dark green emerald, the size of a large bean.

His long, dark hair was gathered up and tied in a knot on the top of his head. Within the knot, he wore on a pin, a single pear shaped pearl, larger than all the others. Around the knot was a string of pearls of

the same size as those around his neck. His ears were pierced with large holes and bore many gold rings with precious stones set in them. However, he wore no crown, just a frontlet studded with precious stones.

“That’s a lot of jewellery,” I commented.

“All those jewels belong to the ancient treasury of Calicut;” said Odeynan. “The Zamorin has to wear them all today”.

“If you abduct him, there would be no need to ransom him,” Hugh chortled.

With his attendants bearing long-handled lamps before and behind him and flanked by hundreds of his bodyguards, the Zamorin ascended the steps leading to the *manittara* and disappeared inside the royal pavilion.

For a while there was silence and all waited patiently for the proceedings to begin. Suddenly all eyes swung towards the *manittara* and we could see the Zamorin approaching the northern edge of the terrace.

“He will now take his stand,” Odeynan informed us.

We watched as the Zamorin slowly approached the rim of the *manittara*, wielding in his right hand that huge sword of Cheraman Perumal. His pages followed just a step behind. One held a red shield with a border of gold and jewels and a boss about the length of hand span in his left hand. The centre, too, was encrusted with gold and jewels.

“That shield is no good in a real fight!” declared Hugh.

“Yes, it’s encased in gold. Even the rings inside are of gold.”

The page on his right held a short sword, with a hilt of gold and a strap with pendant pearls while the one on his left carried a gold cup with a wide brim. Two other pages carried large fans made of peacock feathers with which they fanned the Zamorin, while another carried a white *kuda*.

“Why does he carry that gold cup?” I asked.

“It’s not a cup, it’s a spittoon,” replied Odeynan.

When the Zamorin neared the steps that led down from the *manittara*, he raised the sword high above his head, pointed it to the heavens and shook it in short vigorous jabs.

“That is the signal for the *Chavers*. Now they will mount their assault.”

We could see the first batch of *Chavers*, about a dozen of them, emerging from the temple where they had offered their last prayers. They were all bare bodied and wore *mundus* draped around their waists and drawn between their legs, over which they wore a red waist-belt. Ash was smeared on their faces and they had garlands of flowers around their necks. They were all armed with swords or spears and round wooden bucklers covered with bright red leather. Within their bosses were metal balls left loose so that when the men moved there was a jingling sound, like that of the small bells on a dancer’s

anklets. When these shields were shaken vigorously, the combined noise was indeed very menacing.

A moment of hushed silence descended as everyone waited breathlessly. It was the kind of moment that a man experiences but rarely, perhaps never; a moment that has both an infinity and an evanescence.

Suddenly, with a loud cry that rent the quiet of the countryside, they charged down the road. The shields jangled and rattled loudly as they hurtled down like living projectiles towards the defenders who in turn raised their shields in unified defence.

Steel clashed against steel as the *Chavers* tore into the first ranks of the Zamorin's men. Although it was from the start a one-sided affair it was the most incredible assault that Hugh and I had ever seen. One *Chaver* leaped high into the air, his spear gripped in his right hand and like an eagle in flight, swooped down on one of the defenders in the first row. The defender raised his spear to ward off his assailant, but with a dexterity I would have thought impossible, the *Chaver* swerved in mid-flight and skewered his spear through his hapless victim. He landed with both feet on the ground, his shield held ready in his left hand to ward off any attack and, almost in the same motion, tore the spear out of the Zamorin's man, with a mighty twisting heave of his body.

The defender standing to the right of the fallen man struck out with his spear, but the *Chaver* parried it with his wooden buckler and he thrust out his spear. That caught the second defender high on his shoulder. But that was all that the *Chaver* was able to do, for no sooner had his spear pierced that soldier, another defender lunged forward with his spear and broke through the *Chaver's* defences. The blade went cleanly between his ribs and he fell down on the ground where he was stabbed repeatedly by the other defenders and left lying in a pool of blood, which slowly seeped into the brown dust of the road.

Another *Chaver* leaped up. He raised his left leg and turned his body in one swinging movement so that it was at once parallel to the ground yet turning in an arc to complete one half circle before he descended. It was spell binding; the adroitness with which the *Chaver* rolled his body while leaping up and the manner in which he threw his spear in mid-air was little short of magic. The spear went past the front rank and pierced through the stomach of a soldier in the second row, who toppled over backwards. The *Chaver* landed on his right leg and on the open palm of his right hand. Before the defenders could attack him, he had in one blinding move, crouched on both feet and somersaulted backwards. He landed, this time on both feet and with one sweep of his right arm picked up the sword of one of the fallen *Chavers* and was back in the fray.

But, although he whirled the sword in swinging arcs and kept the defenders at bay, he could not make much headway thereafter. He could neither get the same kind of momentum and energy into his attacks nor could he again get the advantage of surprise. Soon he was flagging and when the defenders started pressing their collective superiority, he was finally overwhelmed, beaten to the ground and killed.

The killing was swift and incessant. Each time a Zamorin's man fell, another stepped in to take his place and closed the ranks. Once again a united forest of shields and spears presented itself to the *Chavers*. They fought on bravely as only those who know that death is inevitable, can. But slowly they began to succumb to the superior numbers of their opponents for their skill and valour alone could not overcome the defenders and one by one they were subdued and killed and the road littered with the bodies of the dead. All was quiet once more. The day's challenge was over and the Zamorin still supreme.

But the defenders had paid a high price, too, for those killed from among their numbers were far in excess of the *Chavers* who had died that day. Although all the *Chavers* were killed, many of the Zamorin's men were badly wounded, while about twenty lay dead.

There was, however, no cheering from anybody for there was neither victory nor defeat. It was a time-honoured, though macabre and cruel, ritual of valour, honour and death.

The Zamorin, who had stood there all through the *Chavers*' assault, lifted his sword once more in salutation to the dead and then walked back to his camp. His men moved away from the road, climbed the steps and withdrew into the sheds behind the *manittara*.

"What happens now?" I asked.

"Nothing more today other than some fireworks," Odeynan replied.

"So it's all over?"

"No. It will start all over again tomorrow and continue for ten days."

"Ten days! Surely there's no point in continuing with this. I should imagine that the best fighters among the *Chavers* would have been chosen for the first days' assault."

"There's no best and worst. They are all good."

"Then who decides who will attack on the first day?"

"Oh, that's decided by lots. Lots also decide the defenders. Today it was the turn of Elaya Vakkayil Vellodi and his men. Tomorrow it will be the Netiyiruppu's turn."

The rest of the day wore on, little different from the one before. In the evening the Zamorin's men put on a splendid fireworks display. Crackers on long strings suspended all across the plain, that went on exploding incessantly for several minutes at a time; little mud pots that sent showers of sparks shooting into the air and rockets that whooshed into the night sky and exploded in a spray of brilliant light.

That night, however, I lay in uncertain sleep with searing memories from which I would toss and twist away. The sky turned red and I dreamed that I was floating in that red sky among weird faces. I woke up with a start and sat up. I could not make anything of my dream and I went back to sleep, but there was no respite for the sky then changed to purple. The Zamorin and his hordes of soldiers harried me in my sleep. They shrieked in my brain. Specters of the dead *Chavers* joined them and they started a banshee wail, which was taken up by the others. I sat up holding my palms over my ears. I went back to sleep again but each time I drifted back to sleep, I got no rest for those phantoms haunted me all through the night. Men I had never ever seen before floated before me, all twisted in agony, with tortured faces and sightless eyes.

"I don't want to go through that again," I told Odeynan the next day. "It's giving me nightmares. I'm used to frightening dreams, but nothing that I have seen so far ever came close to the ones I dreamed last night."

"Tonight will not be so bad. You will get over it soon."

“I cannot just stand by and watch good blood being spilt for nothing,” I said.

“It is not for nothing. Yes it is a ritual, but it has its purpose”

“Tell me this. How could such a gory ritual be of any benefit to anyone?”

“When these ten days are over, at the most a couple of hundred men would have died - just a few hundred men in twelve years. Think about that.”

“But it is such a waste of life.”

“Life is never wasted, there is always a purpose. Fulfillment of *karma* is what matters.”

“But then you lose so many of your best fighting men; men who would have been better employed defending your land from marauders.”

“Ah, but don’t you see, in the intervening years there is no war. No struggle for supremacy. The proud Rajahs are vassals of the Zamorin, no doubt, but once every twelve years they can, if they want, challenge their suzerain without fear of losing their lives. More importantly, it is performed with honour. A rajah does not lose his head because his men tried to kill the Zamorin, nor does he lose face when his men fail in the attempt.”

“But I can’t just stand around watching this.”

“The Zamorin wishes that you do; that’s what the *Mangat Acchan* says.”

“He did not insist on Maurice being present here.”

“Maurice may be your brother, but as far as the *Mangat Acchan* is concerned, he has no role to play in his plans.”

“Why does the Zamorin insist that I watch?” I asked, not understanding why that monarch would wish me to do so.

“The *Mangat Acchan* did not say, but I suspect that the Zamorin wants you to know everything about life in this land so that you will be able to guide us better in dealing with and fighting the *Parangee*.”

“How will this help?”

“Unless you understand what we are capable of, you will not be of much help to us. You have to know our strengths and perhaps even our weaknesses, too, to advise us.”

“Is the *Mangat Acchan* not concerned that I might go over to the enemy?”

“What can you possibly gain by doing that? He now knows all about the quarrels between your king and the *Parangee* and other Christian countries. He knows what the *Parangee* will do to you if they get their hands on you. They are a cruel race.”

“Cruelty you will find everywhere. Nobody has a monopoly on it.”

Suddenly I recalled the cruelty that I had witnessed at Tyburn almost three years ago when those saintly Carthusian monks were hung, drawn and quartered on the orders of a heartless and despotic king. It seemed so long ago.

The ten days went by with the same scene being enacted over and over again; the same magnificent display of gallantry and the same futile sacrifice of life. By the second day, however, I lost whatever sense of horror I had originally felt about the wanton shedding of blood and although my dreams haunted me every night with the hideous sight of numberless limbs detached from bodies, their intensity diminished and, by the end of the ten days, they no longer troubled me as much as they did that first night.

At last, the final day of the festival arrived and the Zamorin took his final stand on the *manittara* and shook the Emperor’s sword as he had done every day for the past ten days.

There were only ten *Chavers* left for the final assault. A tall athletic man, with a young fellow of perhaps fourteen or fifteen by his side, led them out of the temple.

“Who is the warrior in the lead?”

“That is Chandrattil Panikker. He is the Raja’s captain.”

“Who is that by his side?” asked Hugh, pointing to the young fellow.

“That, I am told, is his sister’s son.”

“He’s a little pup.”

“Age is no bar. Anyone may try.”

Chandrattil was armed, like most of the others, with sword and buckler and as he charged down the road, with his young nephew like a shadow by his side, he whirled the sword over his head. When he neared the defenders he kicked his legs off the ground and leaped high into the air, scissoring his legs as he rose, his sword, gripped in his right hand, still twirling. The defenders near him raised their spears and shields to ward off the attack they thought would come from above. Chandrattil, however had other ideas. He swerved as he dropped down and landed a couple of feet in front of them. Before any of them had any idea what he was up to, he rolled on the ground and struck at their unprotected legs. With one swipe of his sword he brought down two men and in what appeared to be one continuous motion, he spun away from them and continued the assault, charging through the gauntlet as the defenders tried to get at him. His nephew kept by his side, warding off, with his buckler, the blows that rained on them. By then quite a few of the defenders were down and out of the fray and all the ten *Chavers* were still on their feet, still fighting fiercely.

A defender standing to the right of the fallen man struck out with his spear, but that was parried by Chandrattil with his buckler. He then sliced his sword like the scything claw of a leopard and the defenders drew back momentarily. All around him the other *Chavers* were pressing hard. One of these was alongside Chandrattil and his nephew, moving shoulder to shoulder, and they began a joint onslaught. Chandrattil advanced, whirling his sword and at the same time protecting himself with his

buckler while his young companion stabbed at the defenders with his spear. That ploy worked for a while and they brought down quite a few men. But what could they do against such odds? Eventually when they were almost at the end of the line, one spear point found its mark. Chandrattil could not parry that one. It caught him low on his chest and though he swerved and let the point slide past him, he was wounded. But he pressed on all the same, his nephew still hanging in there, and charged towards the last line of defenders near the steps. These fell back under that furious assault, but Chandrattil could not sustain the charge and he went down on one knee, still fighting. As he fell, the defenders stabbed him repeatedly and he lay there in a pool of blood, which slowly seeped into the brown dust of the road.

The Zamorin's guards however were so caught up in the heat of the furious battle with Chandrattil that in the melee they did not spot the young fellow as he slipped past them and charged up the steps of the *manittara* towards the Zamorin.

There was a split second of awful silence and then the collective gasp of thousands of people watching—spell bound, their mouths agape at the impossible that was about to take place on the *manittara*.

With all the vigour of youth and young blood, the youngster flashed up the stairs and charged. He swerved past one of the guards and, with a skill unbelievable in one so young, knocked down the two guards who stood as the last defence for their master.

In one bound he reached the top of the *manittara* and thrust his spear at the Zamorin, who somehow managed to parry the blow with Cheraman Perumal's sword, but lost his frontlet in the process. The Zamorin drew back a pace, the great sword clasped in both hands, waiting for the assault that would come once the youth had regained his balance.

For one apocalyptic moment, time stood still. Then the crowd exploded in the noise of wind long pent in many lungs as the Zamorin's guards pounced upon the young intruder and quickly brought him down. With that his glorious, though short-lived, charge was over.

That was the end of the heroics. The remaining *Chavers*, like their predecessors fought with all the skill and valour they could summon. But like the others before them, they too met their inevitable end, taking with them a dozen soldiers of the Zamorin. And then it was all over and there was that utter silence that only a moment such as that could evoke.

The Zamorin, however, did not turn and walk away from the scene as he had done on the other days. He picked up his frontlet from the dust of the *manittara*, put it on his head and continued to stand there long after the final assault had been delivered and the assailants vanquished, staring across the fields towards the temple while everyone waited silently.

Odeynan pointed to the end of the narrow road that had witnessed all the fighting of the previous ten days. I could see two gilded palanquins, borne by muscular bare-bodied men, approaching the eastern end of the road. When they were at the end of the road, the bearers stopped and placed their burdens on the ground and two men got out of those gilded litters.

“The one in front is Nambiyatiri Tirumalpad, the next in line to the throne,” Odeynan informed us, pointing to the newcomers. “The other is Tirumanisseri Nambuthiri.”

The two nobles faced the Zamorin and cast themselves down on the ground at the end of the lane, their

arms spread out in front of them. A few moments later, they got up and walked up the lane and when they reached about halfway they prostrated again in the same manner, then got up and with measured steps strode to the foot of the *manittara*, where they made their obeisance again to the Zamorin who in turn raised his right hand, took two steps forward, and stretched it out towards them. On that signal the two nobles climbed the steps and took their places at the Zamorin's right.

The guards who had survived the *Chaver* onslaught then gathered at the steps of the temple. The drummers took up their drums and began to beat a slow rhythm. Soon the beat became louder and more urgent as their snapping fingers flew and then louder and faster still until their pulsating beat filled the air. I wondered at the mastery of the drummers for they kept up the ever-increasing tempo as if it were just one instrument instead of the several dozens that were being struck.

After that flutes, cymbals, tambourines, trumpets and some other wind instruments I had not seen before, joined in the chorus of harmonious noises as the musicians approached the guards. The Zamorin's guards then faced their master and in one body marched to the foot of the *manittara* where they knelt down. The Zamorin raised his sword once more, this time in grateful acknowledgement of the loyalty and valour of his men.

"Odeynan, what a terrible waste of the finest soldiers in your land," I said.

"James, remember this; they did not fight for the shadow of a crown, but to prove their valour and skill. No sacrifice is wholly useless which proves that there are men who prefer honour to life," he replied.

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# Two Leaves, a Bud and a Camera

*The trouble with tea is that originally it was a good drink.*

**Ludwig Meis van der Rohe**

## **May 2001**

The High Ranges are part of the Sahyadris, a chain of mountains that run for sixteen hundred kilometres down the western flank of India to the southernmost tip of the country. Its highest point is Anaimudi or Elephant Mountain, the highest peak in India south of the Himalayas.

One of first Europeans to venture here was Colonel Arthur Wellesley - later to become the Duke of Wellington - when he marched across the ghats to defeat Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore. He was followed, a few years later, by his fellow countrymen who after experimenting with rubber and cinchona finally settled for tea, turning several thousands of acres in these hills into manicured tea gardens that for long had been among the major foreign exchange earners in that part of the world.

I had always enjoyed driving up the ghat road as it snaked through some of South India's most dramatic mountain scenery- craggy mountains and lush tea plantations - to Munnar, nestled in the High Ranges.

Munnar, which in Malayalam and Tamil means three rivers, is a little town nestled around the confluence of the Muthirapuzha, the Nallathanni and the Kundala, rivulets that flow down the Kannan Devan Hills and on towards the coastal backwaters to eventually join the waters of the Arabian Sea. At well over five thousand feet, it is the highest full-fledged town in Kerala; it is also the commercial centre of some of the world's highest tea-growing estates.

As I gunned the Baleno around the *ghat* roads I wondered what it must have been like to reach Munnar before they opened the Alwaye-Munnar road in 1931. Until that year the place was approachable only from the Tamil Nadu side and that had resulted in Tamil, instead of Malayalee labour being brought up to work the estates. There was also a rope-way for transporting tea from Top Station just outside Munnar, to Bottom Station on the plains of Tamil Nadu. In 1908, a light railway, which was destroyed by floods in 1924, was opened to take tea from Munnar to Top Station.

Still steadily rising, we passed over a narrow granite culvert, skirting a noisy stream, which gushed swiftly down, foaming and roaring amid the grey boulders. Both road and stream wound up through a steep valley dense with teak, rosewood and eucalyptus.

Sashi, my friend whose interest in birds had occasioned this visit to Munnar, was thrilled. A professional photographer in the making, he kept a sharp look out, through his camera lens for birds, particularly the rare ones that were to be found in the High Ranges. Every now and then, practically at every turning, he gave an exclamation of delight, eagerly looking around, asking countless questions and asking me to stop or slow down every now and then.

“Slow down, there's a Fairy Bluebird”, Sashi urged, pointing to a rather plain looking bird.

“What's so great about it?” I asked as I eased off the accelerator, almost immediately slowing the car to a crawl.

“At a distance they seem plain enough, but when you get up close you notice the metallic blue of the back and crown of the male bird, contrasting with the black of the other parts. It shows a scheme of

colouring that cannot be surpassed,” he said enthusiastically.

We were by then almost alongside the tree on which the Fairy Bluebird sat and I had to agree with him. It was truly a beautiful bird.

Having got my interest going he began to point out the birds. I recall him drawing my attention to the Southern Grackle, a black bird with yellow beak, yellow legs and yellow wattles on the back of its head, the Nilgiri Quaker Warbler, so named because of its lack of brilliant plumage and the Red headed Fantail Warbler and the Southern Grey Tit.

Less than an hour later we reached the outskirts of Munnar and the first of the tea estates. But as we neared the town, the sight that lay before me was depressing. I had been away from the country for some time and it had been quite a few years since I had last visited this delightful combination of rocky mountains and carpeted tea estates and enjoyed the crisp mountain air.

Had I had been away too long, I wondered. The place was not like I remembered. In the old days the tea fields looked as if they had been manicured. Now they had an unkempt look. Not that the fields were tangled and overgrown. There was, however, an air of dejection, the kind of look a place takes before it goes to seed.

To Sashi’s eyes, however, all seemed beautiful, and he was enthralled as any first time visitor to Munnar would be. But to me it was as if a tinge of melancholy lay upon the countryside; it bore so clearly the mark of the waning years.

In a couple of months the monsoon mists would roll down over the High Ranges and turn the beautiful mountain scenery into a gloomy, damp and depressing one where the sun would not be visible for several days at a time. The birds would not sing or the bees buzz. But it was yet early May, a time when Munnar should have been at its scenic best, without even a hint of depressiveness.

We passed through the town and within half an hour, the estate to which we were headed drew near. I drove over the cattle-trap in the gateway and passed on into the pot-holed drive where the old trees intertwined their branches to form a sombre tunnel over our heads.

The bungalow was like I remembered, with the whole front porch and the front wall draped in ivy, with patches clipped bare here and there where a window or door broke through the dark veil.

As I braked to a halt, Timmy and his wife Kaveri came out of the bungalow and greeted us in the manner of old friends, as indeed they were.

“How was the trip?” Timmy asked.

“Good, until we reached here. I have never seen the estate roads so badly pitted. The pot holes were acting on my shock absorbers like a factory test,” I said.

“Well, there’s no money for that these days. But come in,” he said leading the way into his sitting room.

It was as I remembered it, a large room with a wooden floor and full of typically British furniture, the legacy of a long succession of English and Scottish planters who had lived in the bungalow. On the walls were a great many framed photographs.

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Timmy and Kaveri were Kodavas, a tiny community of some half a million people, who hailed from Kodagu, the coffee district of the neighbouring state of Karnataka. They were better known as Coorgs, the anglicized version of their true name.

I could never fathom why the British turned perfectly straightforward names like Kodagu into Coorg, or Aluva into Alwaye. Surely they could have pronounced one just as well as the other! Was that why the Malayalee insisted on mispronouncing English words in that quaintly amusing way of interchanging the pronunciation of one word for that of another similar word, as for instance *bought* for *boat* and *boat* for *bought*, making a sentence sound like 'I boat a bought'!

The Kodavas, according to legend, are descended from a Rajput father and a Malayalee mother and like the Nairs of Kerala are a martial race. Although highly independent, they had ever since the fall of the Vijayanagar Empire, in 1565, been under the suzerainty of the Lingayat Rajas of the Haleri dynasty. After Vira Raja II of the Haleri dynasty, the ruler of all of Kodagu, was defeated by the British in 1834, the Kodava leaders were summoned for a meeting. At that meeting it was suggested that they should express their wishes as to the kind of government they wanted. The Kodava leaders opted for governance by the laws that applied elsewhere in the British East India Company.

From then on the Kodavas maintained an excellent relationship with the British and in turn were given benefits, the most amazing one being the right to own firearms without a licence, a right they zealously guard, even to this day!

Most of them own at least an acre or two of coffee and they are natural planters. The other profession they were eminently suited to was the military. It speaks a lot for the community's abilities in this field that the first two commanders of the Indian Army after independence - General Cariappa and General Thimmiah - were Kodavas.

I have digressed quite a bit, but perhaps I should, because unless you know the background of people you don't understand why they comport themselves the way they do. The forgoing may explain why the Kodavas were, at about the time that India got her independence, among the most westernized communities in South India and why Timmy's official name C.M Thimmiah had been so easily anglicized to Timmy among all his friends.

I recall Timmy describing himself and others like him, when I first met him many years ago, as coconuts.

"Coconut?" I had then asked in amusement.

"Yes, a coconut. And like the coconut, brown on the outside, but white on the inside," he had chuckled.

\*

"This rain must be a blessing. It looks like you've not had rain for some time," I said after I had settled into a large basket armchair and gazed out through the large French windows at the Kannan Devan Hills veiled in cloud and the rain that fell steadily.

"It's not that. We have had to cut back on most of our inputs."

I remembered tea planters telling me how important it was to ensure timely application of fertilizers,

fungicides and weedicides and I was surprised that a company with such a long planting tradition behind it had allow this to happen.

“But why?” I asked

“There’s no money.”

“No money! Tea companies have always been flush with funds.”

“Not anymore. Practically all the South Indian plantations are losing money.”

“Why?” I asked, not understanding how with the price for tea in the market being as high as it had ever been, a company that produced tea could lose money.

“World production is up and growing at a much faster rate than demand. As a result prices are down.”

“Prices are the same as ever. Tea is no cheaper in the market.”

“That may be so, but the producer gets very little of that. The middlemen gobble up most of it. Most estates in South India sell tea below cost of production.”

“I guess you must be managing on your reserves,” I suggested.

“There are no reserves.”

“No reserves! Tea has had many good years, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, but the money has been invested elsewhere.”

“What do you think will happen to the industry?” I asked.

“I really don’t know. North Indian tea still makes money, but I have very little hope for the South Indian estates.”

“Why?”

“North Indian tea fetches better prices and the cost of production there is lower.”

“How do they manage to keep costs down?”

“Well, they pay slightly lower wages and their teas usually fetch better prices.”

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After tea, which was served on the large veranda, we continued to sit there. I looked into the distance and wondered, not for the first time, whether it was about the most enchanting view that it had been my fortune to see. Like all bungalows on the estates, it was built on top of a hill. If you ignored the pot holed road that wound its way around the hill to the bungalow, the large and well kept lawns and the huge trees, gave it almost the look of an English park. Beyond and below, the land sloped down over the emerald green of the tea fields to the banks of a serene lake.

The rain had petered off and Sashi, keen to get going, pulled out his camera, peered through its range finder and began fiddling around with the controls.

After a few minutes, Timmy got up and, after telling us over his shoulder, “I’ve something to show you,” disappeared into the house.

He returned a while later with a nondescript camera, which he placed on the table.

“The story of this camera will perhaps explain the fate of South Indian tea,” he announced as he sat down.

I looked at Sashi, who stared at me with a quizzical look.

“It doesn’t have much of a finish, but it’s very a good camera – a Zenit SLR 11 with a focal length of 58 mm.”

“Ah, Russian,” Sashi said as he picked up the camera and examined it..

“Yes. What would you be prepared to pay for it?”

“A couple of thousand rupees.”

“What would you say if I told you that it cost me less than forty cents?”

“Impossible!” we exclaimed in unison.

“But that’s the truth.”

“That’s less than twenty rupees! Even a crude case like that should cost more,” I said.

“I agree and it was even less than that - just about ten rupees - when I bought it. That’s what makes it a good story,” he said.

We sat back to listen to what the planter had to say.

“In 1989 I was part of a tea delegation to Russia. That was about the time that the ruble had been freed of exchange controls and was being quoted at its true value in the international market, instead of the artificial rate which as you may remember was thirty rupees to the ruble.”

I nodded in agreement.

“One afternoon, when I was wandering around Sokolnichesky Square in Moscow, I came across the Zenit factory outlet and went in and took a look around. I could not believe my eyes. This camera, together with all its accessories, was priced at two hundred and sixty five rubles; the camera itself at one hundred and ten rubles.”

“How much was that?” I asked.

“At the artificial rate the camera alone would have cost three thousand three hundred rupees and with its accessories, almost eight thousand rupees. But by then the US dollar was quoting at about seven hundred rubles and I had just changed a few dollars at that rate. I paid two hundred sixty five rubles, but it cost me effectively only thirty seven cents! Evidently they had not got around to marking the prices to reflect the currency changes. You know how it is with bureaucracy anywhere in the world! The Russians are no different.”

“Thirty seven cents for a brand new camera!” Sashi exclaimed.

“Amazing!” I chimed in. “But what has that got to do with the South Indian tea industry?”

“Everything. In the old days and until the late seventies, South India produced largely orthodox tea and catered mainly to the UK and European markets. Somewhere along the way producers realised that the Russians wanted a lot of tea and that they were prepared to pay as much as two rubles for a kilo. At the artificial rate of thirty rupees for a ruble, that was a lot of money. You know what it was like, the bilateral trade with the Soviets, don’t you?” he asked me.

“Yes. They bought our products at the cheapest possible prices and gave us MiG fighters and tanks. And they made a killing on the sale of spares and ammunition,” I murmured.

“Well, the cost of production of tea in those days was way below the sixty rupees that the Russians were prepared to pay. Practically all South Indian producers jumped on the bandwagon. The Russians wanted CTC tea and we obliged by converting our orthodox tea factories to CTC factories.”

“CTC. What is that?” Sashi asked.

“Crush, tear and curl. It’s a form of manufacture that is different from the orthodox type of manufacture. And it gives more cuppage.”

“But the Russians still drink tea, don’t they?” Sashi asked.

“Well they do, but they are not prepared to pay very much for it. They can’t get very much for two rubles these days. Also it is no longer one market but a host of them – all the CIS countries, Kazakhstan, Khirgistan and the like – and it is almost impossible to collect from them. They use every trick in the bag to avoid or delay payment. I know of a case where the agreement to buy the tea had been signed by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade of one of these CIS countries. When it came to payment, the concerned government stated that the minister did not have the authority to sign!”

“But what about the other markets?”

“The European markets want orthodox tea but most South Indian producers have lost their expertise in that area.”

“There must be many who know the techniques. They could perhaps recall retired hands.”

“Yes, they could. But they would also have to convert their CTC factories back to orthodox ones.”

“They should do that, shouldn’t they?”

“Well, some have dual facilities, but most don’t have the money for that now,” he said, staring at the darkening shadows and the lights of the labour lines that undulated across the hills, tracing the terrain like a contour map.

\*

As we drove back the next day I could not help wondering, “Was not the collapse of communism supposed to set things right for the capitalist?”

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## Always a Winner

*A baby may suck at a Jujube,  
But, Lad, 'ere thy whiskers are grown,  
Remember thy call is for Cricket,  
Go forth and get runs of thine own.  
Go slow from the Tent to the Wicket;  
Be-padded and gauntleted go;  
Though the Man with the Ball is a Fellow,  
the Man with the Ball is a Foe.*

**Norman Gale**

### Saturday 14th July 2002

As on every occasion when there was an international cricket match featuring the Indian team and on the seventeen Sundays each year on which the Formula 1 races were run, the trio had closeted themselves in Rajesh's one-bedroom apartment in Bandra, their eyes glued to the television screen. The three friends had two passions - motor racing and cricket matches, especially the one-day games that pitted the Indian team against an international side. They tried to be together to watch these events. Until a few months ago they used to go to the *Barista* outlet on Linking Road and watch the matches there. However, when the place began to become crowded with the young girls who flocked to such places to watch cricket, it became impossible to enjoy the game.

The girls, they agreed, took the sport away from the game and made the commentary sound like a soap opera. Imagine Rahul Dravid stroking a ball to the boundary and instead of marveling at the exquisite timing, a giggly girl screams, "Ooh, he's sooo cute!" while another squeals, "Aw, don't you just want to cuddle him?" after Sachin Tendulkar had hit a thumping six over the bowler's head. It was true that *Barista* and others like that were places where one could meet girls, but who wanted to be around them when they were preoccupied with admiring Zaheer Khan's physique or Saurav Ganguly's intense attitude rather than their cricketing prowess.

It was no better at home, where mothers and even grandmothers were glued to the television particularly when India was playing. A survey claimed that there were almost as many women following the fortunes of the Indian cricket team, as there were men.

That was why the quartet decided to assemble at Rajesh's flat for matches such as the one they were watching that day - the final of the triangular Nat West series at Lord's, the Mecca of international cricket. Aman was the only one of the quartet who had no interest in cricket. Having spent his schooldays in the USA, he barely understood the nuances of the game and would often offer pithy and sometimes sarcastic comments. His friends had tried to explain the game, but he just could not make head or tail out of explanations like 'When a man goes out to go in, the men who are out try to get him out, and when he is out, he goes in and the next man in, goes out and goes in'.

Aman could not understand how a game, especially the test variety, in which spectators often burned up as many calories as the players and where bowlers could score centuries could be of interest to anyone who played any kind of outdoor game! He enjoyed their company and that was why he sat through many hours watching a game he did not care for.

\*

Lord's is home to the Marylebone Cricket Club, better known all over the Commonwealth by its initials MCC and is cricket's most hallowed ground. There had been an uproar from cricket fans the world over, when it was reported in the newspapers that the grounds were to be sold. It later turned out that because the grounds did not drain well, the club had decided to remove the turf so that it could install a proper drainage system and that it was only the turf on the grounds that the MCC had decided to sell! It was to be sold on a first come first served basis to MCC members and then to others at £10 per square foot. Lord's was also home to the oldest sporting museum in the world.

So there it was, a final at Lords between England, the host nation and India, which had won the Prudential World Cup at that very same venue way back in 1983 after beating the reigning World Champions, the mighty West Indies comprising Viv Richards, Clive Lloyd, Gordon Greenidge, Malcolm Marshall, Joel Garner, Andy Roberts and Michael Holding. Although the match they were watching was not a World Cup final, and in spite of the current England team not being a patch on the West Indies of the early eighties, a cricket fan could not have asked for a better match.

England captain Nasser Hussain, who thanks to a couple of dropped catches and quite a few chancy shots – Geoffrey Boycott, former England test batsman now turned TV commentator counted 7 in all - scored his first ever century in the one day version of the game. Between them Marcus Trescothick and Nasser Hussain chalked up a superb 185 run partnership. Although other than Andrew Flintoff, the other batsmen did not contribute very much, with the Indians conceding an embarrassingly high 31 extras, the home side was able to amass an imposing total of 325 runs from 50 overs. It was the second highest score ever in a 50 over innings at the international level, the highest having been the 330 that had been achieved by South Africa against Australia at Port Elizabeth earlier in the year.

"I keep telling you guys, this is a stupid game. Is there any game, other than chess, where you take meal breaks?" Aman muttered.

"Aw man, no way we can win this," Kartik muttered. "Nobody has ever done it before and we never could finish to save our lives."

In spite of his athletic build and seemingly calm demeanour, Kartik could always be counted on to worry.

"Yeah, it's a huge task, but if they do make it now, this match is going to go straight into the history books. And you know what? I think we have the ammo for it," stated Rajesh, ever the confident one.

"True, that. It's a good wicket and it might not crumble in the time it takes to boil an egg."

"Seems to have been well prepared, alright. Man...did you know that in the old days, before a match, the wicket was prepared by getting sheep to come in and graze on the grass?"

"Ha ha. What BS!"

"Serious! I'm telling you, check it out if you think I'm making it up."

"OK, whatever," he said raising his hands in mock surrender. "You're supposed to be the history buff and I can't be bothered to get into an argument with you over some sheep."

“Anyway, we may have the ammo or whatever, but I don’t think we’ll win. Like Karaoke was saying, we’ve got a well-earned reputation as world-class chokers,” Manoj added, with a grin. Coming up with new nicknames for Kartik was a well-established pastime of theirs.

“Choking, my ass! All bullshit, if you ask me. Of the eight times that any team has chased more than 300 runs in one day international matches and won, it’s been an Indian side twice.”

“Ok fine, I’ll give you that. Heh, I remember the one at Kochi, when we scored 302 to beat South Africa.”

“That was sweet. And we scored, what was it...yeah, 316 to beat Pakistan at Dhaka.”

“Anyway, I hope they make a good chase of it, at least. Remember Gavaskar and his team chasing 400 odd runs here in England?”

“Yes genius, but I remember that being a test match. And hey, didn’t we eventually lose?”

“Ah...yeah. But what a glorious chase it was!”

“Yeah, right! Glorious like the charge of the Light Brigade,” chimed in Kartik.

“Oh come on, Kar-trick-or-treat! You’re comparing some battle charge to a game now?”

“Ok, maybe that was a little over the top. Still, the fact is it’ll take a miracle for India to win.”

“And they’ll have to do it with mattresses strapped to their thighs!”

“Oh, shut up, Aman. We’ve heard that before.”

India’s task was indeed daunting. No team had chased more than 325 and won. But it was not impossible. If England could score so many runs on that pitch, why could India with her superior batting line-up, considered by many pundits to be the best in the world, not match that? After all the side included Sachin Tendulkar rated by almost everyone who was anyone in cricket to be the best batsman in the world. Tendulkar had already notched up 33 centuries in one-day internationals and his nearest rival in that chase was the Indian captain Saurav Ganguly with 18. Together they had formed one of the most devastating opening pairs in international cricket. That opening partnership had since been discarded by the Indian team’s think tank, which felt that India’s interests would be better served if Tendulkar were to bat three down in one-day internationals. Yet the pair was still there and even if they did not open together they could always be counted upon to tear apart almost any bowling attack. Saurav Ganguly also had the distinction of having a scored a test century on debut at Lords.

Then there was Rahul Dravid, nicknamed ‘The Wall’ for his amazing ability to counter almost any kind of bowling with the soundest defence and yet score at a brisk rate, particularly on overseas pitches. There was also Virender Shewag, who when padded up and helmeted, was often mistaken for Tendulkar, not just because of an almost identical frame, but also for a remarkably similar array of shots. Also in the reckoning were the *Punjab da Puttars*, Yuvaraj Singh, Dinesh Mongia, and Mohammed Khaif, all acknowledged world class batsmen in the one-day variant of the game. Khaif had in fact played at Lords, but that was in 1997 with the under-15 team. To further bolster the batting line up were the bowlers Zahir Khan, Anil Kumble, Ajit Agarkar and Harbhajan (The Turbantor) Singh,

all of whom could be called upon to wield the willow and score some valuable runs at a rapid pace. On paper at least, the position was not as bad as it seemed, in spite of the huge total they had to chase.

“We're gonna win! I know it! We've got the best batting line up in the world, so even if one guy fails, there are a bunch of others, each capable of scoring a century. It's also a great batting pitch, which suits us just fine, and the outfield looks fast as hell,” Rajesh declared.

“Chill, man. It's not like playing in Calcutta. At least there they'd have a hundred thousand people screaming for them,” Kartik observed.

“You know, it's almost like that. Take a look at the stands. There are more Indians than *firangs* there. And no prizes for guessing which ones cheer louder!”

That had been the pattern for all the matches in the series. At Edgbaston, Bob Willis, a former England captain had commented that the venue appeared more like Bombay or Calcutta. It was almost as if the Indians were playing at home. Their supporters, all men, women and children of Indian origin, were out in strength at all the venues, waving the Indian tricolour and giving vocal support to the country of their origin. At times the brown faces seemed to outnumber the white ones!

It was at this stage that the betting began, and in right earnest, too. Before the Indian opening pair entered the field, the odds offered by the bookies were 60:40 in favour of England. Kartik was the first to place bets and he did so immediately after Ganguly and his opening partner Shewag had reached the pitch. He called up his bookie on his cell phone; the others heard him ask the bookmaker to lay the usual on England winning the match.

“Come on, Kar-tikka masala! Where's your patriotic spirit?! Ditch the Brits and put your money on India!” Manoj shouted across the room.

Kartik grinned back at him but made no reply; just a shake of his head.

As the innings progressed and Ganguly began to unleash his shots, it began to look as if India would easily surpass the English total - Ganguly's 50 came off just 31 balls. Maintaining a run rate of over 7.5 runs per over they were soon well ahead of the English score for the same period. They also had all their wickets intact. Soon the odds started tumbling; first to evens and then in favour of India. When Shewag greeted Ashley Giles with four spanking boundaries in his very first spell, the others called up their bookies and placed bets on an Indian victory.

“Kar-trek, at this rate, you'll be broke and mooching off me for the rest of the month. Play safe and put something on India before the odds get less favourable,” Manoj advised.

“Ah don't worry, I never bet more than I can afford to lose anyway,” he replied.

“Dai! You wuss, what's the point gambling unless you stick your neck out?” Manoj insisted.

“That reminds me, have you heard this one about gamblers?” Rajesh interjected and then without waiting for their answer, chortled, “They're like toilets – broke one day and flush the next.”

Although Kartik joined in the laughter, he made no rejoinder and after the laughter subsided, he continued to smile quietly.

Having placed their bets the friends sat back to enjoy the sight of Saurav Ganguly and Virender Shewag tearing the England bowling apart and for the next few overs were treated to one of the most destructive spells of batting they had ever seen, as the opening pair rattled up 106 runs off just 92 balls. They were at that stage well ahead of England's run rate with their first 100 runs having taken only 13.1 overs against England's 16.3 overs. By the 15th over India had notched up 112 runs and with Tendulkar and others to follow it looked as if they would reach the English total easily.

But then tragedy struck. Ganguly was clean bowled by Alex Tudor. That seemed to have a visible impact on the team and viewers were soon treated to the familiar spectacle of a steady procession of Indian batsmen returning to the dressing room.

Sehwag followed Ganguly, cleaned bowled by the spinner, Ashley Giles. Dinesh Mongia was out to a dubious decision, which prompted Rajesh to exclaim, "Damn! Umpires are like women; they make snap decisions and they never ever reverse them!"

"Where do you get all this crap?" Kartik asked.

"Hehe...email forwards, mostly. That one came in this morning, actually," he snickered.

There was no doubt, however, about the other decisions and by the last ball of the 24th over, when Ashley Giles bowled Tendulkar out for a paltry 14, the Indians had their backs to the wall having scored 146 runs but losing 5 of their top order batsmen.

"Told you. Even if we start off alright, when it comes to the crunch, we choke," Manoj said, shaking his head, rueing the money he knew he would lose.

"Oof! Looks like Kartik is the only who's going to be rolling in it today," Rajesh complained.

"What'd you just say?" said Manoj, looking disapprovingly in Rajesh's direction.

"Ah, damn. Sorry. Let's see...Kartick-tock?"

"That's more like it!"

"Hmm...don't close shop yet. I think India can win," Kartik announced, after the chuckles had subsided.

"Hmm, let's see. Another 180 runs to score. Only 26 overs left. Only 5 wickets in hand. God's going to come down and bat for us or what?" Manoj scoffed.

"Well, probably not, but there's Yuvraj Singh and Mohamed Kaif," he replied.

"Bull! They've never faced such a big test before. The Punjab da Puttars will crumble, just wait and see," Manoj declared.

"Hey, Yuvi is in great form, and a big stage just doesn't seem to bother him. I don't know about Kaif's temperament but he looks like he could pack a punch too."

"Bugger, all big talk only! How come you're so confident about these fellows when your only bet

today was on India losing?!” Manoj fumed.

“What's that got to do with anything?”

“Well, duh! If you think they can bat well enough to get to 326, then why didn't you bet on them?”

“Man, you've got to keep those two things separate. Anyway, doesn't matter now, does it Manoj?”

“Guess not. Let's see if this dynamic duo live up to your expectations.”

And so they did. The trio sat back and watched as the duo put on what must surely rank as the greatest comeback in one-day cricket. With the asking rate having gone up to over 8 runs per over, they began cautiously enough. But as they grew in confidence they began to go for the big ones. Yuvraj was the first to cut loose and Kaif joined in the merrymaking a few overs later. By the time they had taken the score to 250 runs they had overtaken England's strike rate. In the space of 19 overs their 6th wicket partnership had notched up 121 runs.

It was perhaps in the 39th over that the TV commentators began to think of an Indian victory with Harsha Bhogle asking repeatedly, “Are we seeing something here?”

Finally, when Yuvraj skewed a hook off Paul Collingwood into Alan Tudor's waiting hands, he had scored 69 off just 63 balls and had taken the team's tally to 267 runs, well within striking distance of England's imposing total. India at that stage required 59 from 50 balls. With Yuveraj's departure Harbhajan Singh, joined in the festivities and added 15 runs off just 12 balls, which included one towering 6, bringing the required run rate down to less than a run a ball.

Then came the inexplicable but usual hiccups. Harbhajan, instead of trying to score a single tried to loft Andrew Flintoff and had to suffer the ignominy of being castled. Two balls later Anil Kumble who just a couple of months ago in the West Indies, had come back to bowl the very next day after having had his jaw broken by a ball that pierced through his helmet guard and who had been an integral part of many Indian victories, swished at a ball from Flintoff that rose rather high and was caught by the England wicket keeper, Alex Stewart. He was given out. That the replay showed that there was no deviation in the line of the ball and that it was perhaps not a catch, did not make any difference to the umpire's verdict. Kumble went back to the Indian dressing room a crestfallen man.

“Hey Kar-thick! Looks like you could still win quite a bit of money, man,” Manoj jibed.

“What are you saying, man? I've already told you that I won't!” Kartik protested.

“Mad or what? India has to score 12 runs off 13 balls with just 2 wickets in hand. If England manages to take another wicket, then India can pack their bags early.”

“Well, as the Flowering Sikh keeps saying ‘If wishes were horses .....’.”

“Ha ha ha! At least today he didn't rewrite the Wren & Martin chapter on idiomatic English!”

“Guess he must have been caught up in the excitement as well. Also, with both sides whacking the ball nonstop, Sidhu didn't have the opportunity to spout out ‘it's with patience that the mulberry tree turns into silk’ or something like that!”

They all laughed at the reference to what had become known all over the cricketing world as Sidhuism, after Navjot Singh Sidhu, a former Indian opening batsman turned TV commentator, who had regaled viewers with his flowery and often absurd but amusing similes.

“Maybe not, but he was trying to take Geoffrey Boycott's case, saying that he knew all along that India would win! Did you see Boycott sneaking a laugh when that happened?”

“Heh, yeah.”

As they spoke Khaif smacked a shot that fetched him 2 runs. A couple of singles followed and then on the last ball of Gough's last over with 6 runs to score off 7 balls he flicked the fast bowler to the boundary. That was the end. All that India required were 2 runs from 6 balls and although there was some nervous tension when the first two balls of the last over were dot balls, they knew that India would win the match. Zaheer Khan's 2 runs of the 3rd ball that nailed India's victory, therefore came almost as an anticlimax.

It was India's most stupendous win in one-day cricket and as they watched Mohammed Khaif leaping into the air to celebrate his greatest moment on a cricket field, they realised that they had witnessed what was certainly one of the most triumphant moments in Indian sport. Though they did not realise it then, there was yet another milestone that India had crossed; it had become the only team in the world to have successfully chased more than 300 runs three times.

The three friends hooted with delight and danced around the tiny room, a reaction that must have been replicated in many Indian homes all over the world.

When they sat back, drained after the heady rush of adrenalin, Rajesh turned to Kartik and said, “Hey Karate-kid, how come you always bet on teams you don't give a damn about? Remember Sepang? You were the only one who bet on a Williams 1-2 even though you've always been a Ferrari fan. Also, Brazil's your favourite football team, but you didn't back it for the World Cup.”

“Got me there.”

“Yeah, so...why?”

“Because that way I rarely lose,” he replied, with a wry smile.

“Eh? Ok, you made quite a bit of money at Sepang, but you lost on the World Cup and then again today.”

I didn't mean losing money, man. At Sepang, Schumi was shunted by Montoya on the very first corner and lost the car's nose cone. Barrichello led the race for quite a while, but then blew his damn engine. If it wasn't for Schumi's all-out performance, Ferrari wouldn't even have got that third place. Anyway, it was a Williams 1-2, not a result that I wanted, but I made quite a bit of money. Like you said, at the World Cup I lost money, but then my favourite team, Brazil, won. It's the same today. So you see, whatever the result, I always come out a winner.”

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**England - batting**

Marcus Trescothick	b Anil Kumble	109 (100)
Nick Knight	b Zaheer Khan	14 ( 29)
Nasser Hussain	b Ashish Nehra	115 (128)
Andrew Flintoff	b Zaheer Khan	40 ( 32)
Michael Vaughan	c Dinesh Mongia b Zaheer Khan	3 ( 5)
Paul Collingwood	not out	3 ( 4)
Ronnie Irani	not out	10 ( 7)
Extras	b-2, lb-16, nb-6, w-7	31
Total	for 5 wickets in 50 overs	325

Fall of wickets 1-42, 2-227, 3-307, 4-312, 5-312

**India - bowling**

Ashish Nehra	10-0-66-1	Zaheer Khan	10-1-62-3
Anil Kumble	10-0-54-1	Harbhajan Singh	10-0-53-0
Saurav Ganguly	3-0-28-0	Virender Shewag	4-0-26-0
Yuveraj Singh	3-0-18-0		

**India - batting**

Saurav Ganguly	b Alan Tudor	60 ( 43)
Virender Shewag	b Ashley Giles	45 ( 49)
Dinesh Mongia	c Alex Stewart b Ronnie Irani	9 ( 15)
Sachin Tendulkar	b Ashley Giles	14 ( 19)
Rahul Dravid	c Nick Knight b Ronnie Irani	5 ( 12)
Yuveraj Singh	c Alan Tudor b Collingwood	69 ( 63)
Mohammed Khaif	not out	87 ( 75)
Harbhajan Singh	b Andrew Flintoff	15 ( 13)
Anil Kumble	c Alex Stewart b Andrew Flintoff	0 ( 2)
Zaheer Khan	not out	4 ( 7)
Extras	b-3, lb-8, nb-1, w-6	18
Total	for 8 wickets in 49.3 overs	326

Fall of wickets 1-106, 2-114, 3-126, 4-132, 5-146, 6-267, 7-314, 8-314

**England – bowling**

Darren Gough	10-1-63-0
Alan Tudor	9-0-62-1
Andrew Flintoff	7.3-0-55-2
Ronnie Irani	10-0-64-2
Ashley Giles	10-0-47-2
Paul Collingwood	3-0-24-1

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# A \Bridge to Another World

*The grave itself is but a covered bridge, leading from light to light, through a brief darkness*

*Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

**2<sup>nd</sup> July 2000**

The pulsating rhythm of the electric guitars and the flash of the strobe lights should have obscured everything else. Even the young couple, whose wedding was being celebrated, had long since faded into the background. But all eyes were riveted on the young woman who had been on the floor ever since the band had begun to play dance numbers.

They watched as her long hair, hair that would have done a shampoo advertisement proud, swished in the flash of the lights with a gleam all of its own.

“Where does Bina get all that energy?” wondered her cousin Geetha, echoing the sentiments of practically all the friends and relations gathered there.

Who knew that a few months later it would once again be her name on everyone’s lips, but that it would be in sorrow at the hand which fate had dealt her and wonder at the fortitude and grace with which she had played it.

When I recall what it was like on the night of Sajay and Sitara’s wedding, it is her that I remember, a firefly caught in the shadows thrown by the bright lights, a firefly destined to live a brilliant but oh so short a life.

A couple of weeks later, Bina was back in Muscat where she and her husband Joji had made their home for over twenty-three years. Thereafter it was back to the routine of children’s schooling, church, choir practices and the occasional get-together.

A few weeks later, however, Joji sensed that there was something seriously wrong with his wife. A routine check up revealed that Bina had in a space of three weeks, lost ten kilos! A thorough check up a few days later confirmed Joji’s worst fears. Bina had non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a cancer involving the lymph nodes, spleen and liver. In her case the cancer had affected her liver with secondaries in the lungs.

Joji was shattered. His life thus far had not prepared him for anything remotely like this. Theirs had always been a carefree life in which neither had given much thought about future security and mundane matters like that. Now confronted by this calamity, he just did not know what to do. Had it not been for the grave certainty of the doctors, doctors who were also personal friends, he would have handled it with the cheerful optimism that was almost second nature for him.

How would he break the terrible news to her, he wondered. Almost immediately the answer seemed to come to him and he knew what he should do. He called up all their close friends and, after telling them the shocking news, suggested that they come over in the evening, but that they were not to mention anything to Bina. Later, at the suggestion of friends, the venue was shifted to Leela and Babu’s residence.

Their circle of friends was well known for throwing parties and Bina did not ponder over the issue,

although she could find no reason for Babu and Leela having a party that day. She and their children were the only ones who did not know what was afoot.

The party was a great success and Leela and Babu played the part of genial hosts. Joji tried to look calm and satisfied, his cheerful demeanour hiding his anguish. Bina, oblivious to everything enjoyed herself thoroughly. She danced with each and every man there and sang the sing-along numbers with great gusto. Towards the end of the evening, however, she felt strangely tired and could not fathom the reason.

That night after they got back home and the children had gone to bed, Joji held her tenderly in his arms and told her that the reports had not been very encouraging and that the X-rays had revealed patches around her lungs. He told her then that tuberculosis was a possibility.

She was devastated. “What are we going to do?” she moaned as the tears came tumbling down.

“We will get the best treatment possible.”

“Where?”

“We’ll go home and check it out there.”

“You know how they look on tuberculosis in India!” she wailed.

“Don’t worry *mol*, we’ll keep it quiet,” he told her. “You’re very tired. Try and get some sleep. You’ll need all your energy tomorrow to shop for whatever we have to take back to India.”

The next day she woke up late, as had been the case for the past few weeks, and went shopping with her close friend Shoba, who managed to see the day through, though she felt terrible that she was not able to breathe even a word of comfort to Bina.

That night Joji told Bina the devastating news that the doctors suspected cancer. It was heart rending for him to watch as her face crumpled and the tears streamed down her face.

She was shattered. “Is there then no hope for me?” she sobbed in fear and anguish.

Joji did not know what to say, though he had tried to prepare himself for this inevitable question. Realizing that Bina would detect pity a mile away, he gave her an uncertain smile, and then looked away. He met her eyes again and wondered whether he had hesitated too long and if it was already too late to answer her.

“Of course there is! And we are going to give it every last shot,” he assured her as he held her close and pressed his cheek against her tear streaked face.

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Over the next couple of days Joji discussed the options with their friends in the medical fraternity and finally narrowed the choice down to taking Bina to the Regional Cancer Centre at Thiruvananthapuram or to go down to Cochin where her mother lived and to have her treated there. The RCC had the reputation of being the best hospital in South India for the treatment of cancer. Yet, with her mother

living in Cochin, he knew that Bina would be more comfortable there and with many close cousins there, they would receive all the help they needed in that city.

He therefore decided to fly down to Cochin and make his final decisions there. The previous evening, called up Bina's sisters Meera and Shema who were in Cochin on vacation, and told them the shocking news and of his plans to bring Bina there.

When he told her of the plans that he had made, Bina's thoughts went out to her children. Who would look after them? Musically talented Uday had always needed her reassuring presence and young Sandhya, although quite capable of looking after herself, was yet not old enough to be left on her own.

"Don't worry on that score, *mol*; they will be looked after. All our friends have promised to help out when we are away. They will see to everything; you know they will!" he told her, trying to assuage her doubts and fears.

The next few days went by in a flurry as they tried to put their affairs in order. Joji's employers, Kinnarps of Sweden, had told him to take off for as long as was necessary. However, as Country Manager for Oman, he had to ensure that there was nothing pending and that his subordinates would be able to handle everything in his absence.

Finally, on 27<sup>th</sup> August, after putting their affairs into some sort of order, they flew down to Cochin. There, as was only to be expected, it was a tearful and heart wrenching reunion with her sisters and mother. Listening to their murmured words of welcome and comfort she felt the beginning of healing, of becoming whole again. That enabled her to keep her chin up and she held out bravely. It was Joji, after having bravely held back his tears for almost a week, who broke down. By evening, however, when all the close relatives dropped in, they had composed themselves.

They discussed the alternatives with the cousins and finally decided to proceed to Thiruvananthapuram. They left for that city the very next day in the company of their close friend Dr. Mathew Koshy. There at the RCC, after a few days of checks and counseling, the treatment began.

Chemotherapy, the standard treatment for cases such as this, uses chemical agents that try to eliminate the causative organisms without harming the patient. Its effectiveness depends on the highest possible concentration of the drug being at the site of the tumor long enough to kill the cancerous cells. The larger or more disseminated the tumor, the more difficult it is to eradicate.

Although the cancerous cells undergo genetic changes and, unlike normal cells, divide at a fast and uncontrollable rate, they are yet human cells. Therefore the chemical agents, which are targeted at the cancer cells, also affect the normal cells and they often have a toxic effect on the latter. As a result there are often numerous side effects, some of which are life threatening. Others such as hair loss, severe nausea and vomiting and sores in the mouth and other mucous membranes, are very tiring and debilitating.

However, with the use of multiple chemical agents, it is possible to lower the dosage of each drug and thereby reduce the side effects caused by each. It may have been because of the multiplicity of the drugs that were administered, or it may have been the Grace of God, but we never ever found out why it was that Bina, in spite of chemotherapy, did not lose her long and lovely head of silken hair, and we were thankful for that.

Yet, the drugs drained her of energy. Although T.K. John and Prabha, close friends who had opened their large home and their hearts to them and to those who were looking after Bina, did everything to make her stay there comfortable, she found it very taxing and for days after each visit to the RCC, would be drawn and tired. There was invariably an air of pain and suffering around her and although she tried bravely to join the others who chattered and joked in an effort to forget their anguish, most of the time she had neither the energy nor even the desire to get up.

The first session of chemotherapy over, Bina and Joji returned to her mother's apartment in Cochin.

Back at her mother's home, on the advice of a close relative, she began a course of ayurvedic medicines. Chemotherapy makes a patient lose the sense of taste and with ayurvedic medicines often tasting horrible, Bina found it difficult to take these potions. A lover of good food, she also found it very demanding to adhere to the strictly vegetarian diet prescribed by ayurveda. Joji did not want her to either, but the opinion of others in the family prevailed.

\*

Often the thought of the illness that had been creeping up on her steadily, baiting her, keeping watch over her, chilling her and sucking her dry, would flash across her mind and she would wonder why it was she who had been singled out. Why was she vulnerable, the one with the cancer. She hated feeling like this. Even the very thought of the medicines, the pain and the irritation wore her out. They were nothing new, but on many nights her mood darkened even as the sky outside grew light.

She often cried out with pain and sometimes the shame of it swept over her. She was ashamed of what the disease was doing to her, of what it was doing to her body. Now and then an old longing came over her – the longing to be an ordinary woman, happy in a child's caresses and a man's love. She would then invariably fling herself into bed and sob for a long time.

One evening, after all the visitors had gone, Joji found her lying silent with her face to the wall and when he laid his hand on her shoulder she was shaken by a paroxysm of weeping. He turned her around and for the first time since he had told her the dreadful news, he saw a ravaged bitter line around her mouth and hopelessness in her eyes. It was not unexpected and did not in itself cause any sense of catastrophe. But together with her tiredness and renewed pain in her liver, kidneys, skin and breasts, it turned everything in Joji's mind to a dark gray.

"I have this creeping, itchy sensation all over my body," she whimpered.

In the awkward silence that followed Joji struggled within himself and then sighed as he caught her hand. He had by then learned to live with his fate, but tenderness was a powerful aspect of his nature and as he stood there, he found himself trembling. He tightened his grip on her hand and bent down to kiss her cheek without looking into her eyes, afraid to see the hopelessness that he knew he would see in them.

Then fear struck him. Suddenly he was appalled by the awesome responsibility he would have to hold. There would be no one to relieve him of decisions and responsibilities; they would be his alone. Was he ready? Then he knew there was no escaping, that this moment had been moving him ever since he knew of her illness.

That night he tossed and thrashed while sleep eluded him. One after another his worries writhed their way to the surface of his mind like ugly snakes demanding his attention.

### **15<sup>th</sup> September 2000**

On the way home, after the second session of chemotherapy at Thiruvananthapuram, at Bina's insistence they visited her ninety-eight year old aunt who lived on the 3rd floor of an apartment house in Cochin. When they reached there they were told that the lift was being repaired. Joji did not want her to climb the three floors, and suggested that they should visit later, but Bina was adamant and got out of the car and climbed the stairs without any assistance.

That night they talked long into the night; about their years together, the children, the future, about faith and prayer, and when she told him that he must try and get on with his life, he realised that she had accepted the inevitability of the situation and that she was ready to meet her fate. She told him that he should heed the sentiments of their near and dear ones, provided no one suggested that their lifestyle was even remotely responsible for their present circumstances. The last he could understand for there were suggestions from some quarters that theirs had been a hedonist lifestyle. How they could have led such a life in dry and arid Muscat was of course anyone's guess!

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It must have been a few days after that that we began to see a change in Bina. It was not a visual one and I don't think anyone, even those who knew her very well, could pin point exactly what it was. But we could see a brighter look on her face. She began to greet her many visitors with a cheeriness they just could not understand. At first they thought it was because she had not been told of the gravity of her situation, but they soon realised that it was not so and that she well knew what her plight truly was.

Her extended family comprising uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces, numbering well over a hundred, was for such a large one, very close knit. Almost all of them had seen near relations and friends undergoing severe mental suffering on account of physical illness. They had seen patients who thought of nothing but their ailments and had entered their final days in a shrunken and distorted state.

The opposite however seemed to have happened to Bina. The awareness of impending death seemed to enlarge her world and made her more spiritually alive. It was as if her illness had made her better, not bitter and that her faith was daring her soul to go farther than it could see.

We accept reality as it is presented to us. All of us knew that she was aware that she had not very long to live, but she behaved as if she was not thinking of death itself, or of all that was lying in wait for her on the way. How could she keep smiling, we wondered, with that terrible knowledge of the approaching end always inside her? Was it because she had never been afraid of life? People who are afraid of death are usually afraid of life. Very few realise that birth, after all, is the beginning of death, which is the penalty for the privilege of life

Yet all the talk about death did not seem at all terrifying to her. On the contrary, she had made Joji feel that he could peacefully accept the fact of her dying if only he had some assurance that her death would be painless and easy.

She had felt death's chill, so she no longer threw away a moment of her life. She had her moments of happiness, and moments when she felt full of strength and truth. But she had rid herself of trivial

emotions and had started living inwardly. Is that not where all great life is truly lived?

Yet there were days when she withdrew into herself and lay almost insensate. She did not hide herself – we could all be in the room - but her words and gestures showed that she wanted to be left alone. We respected her wishes. Something told us that she needed those times, that it was somehow good for her to abandon herself completely to hopelessness for an hour or even a day.

It may seem strange that Joji should have allowed her to feel that way and he could never explain it to anyone except that he felt that it was for the best.

There are some flowers, they say, that will not yield their best fragrance until they are bruised. I like to think that Bina was like that, a bruised flower that exuded a most wonderful redolence and brightened all those around her.

And then there was her faith. Faith, it is said, gives us the courage to face the present with confidence, and the future with expectancy. But what future was there in store for Bina here on earth? Perhaps it was not this world that she was looking at with expectancy, but the next and it was her faith that was building a bridge from this world to the next

Although she had been a believer and active in church affairs, particularly those involving the choir, she had never been overtly spiritual. Now with each passing day her faith seemed to grow stronger and she began to advise those around her and remind them that faith should never be viewed as a mere insurance policy from which one benefits only when one dies.

Every evening the cousins would gather around Bina and sing hymns and pray. A talented singer, she would invariably provide the strongest voice in the ‘family choir’, although the medical reports had confirmed that over sixty per cent of her lungs had been affected by cancer! Somehow, when transported to the world of music, her pain and weakness just seemed to drop away and a wonderful smile would light up her face.

On 4<sup>th</sup> October Joji received news that T.K.John, the friend at whose home they had stayed while Bina was undergoing treatment at the RCC, had died. He had been ailing for some time, but Joji did not tell Bina the sad news then. He found some excuse to go to Thiruvananthapuram and left early the next morning to attend the funeral.

He returned late in the evening and, although by then she was physically in a very low state, he told Bina the painful news. She became visibly distressed and suddenly looked gaunt and years older. She tried desperately to talk brightly and cheerfully but then gave up and her voice went dead, the way it sometimes did when she wanted to break off communication with those around her. She just sat on the bed with an empty expression in her eyes and her head drooping wearily.

That night when her sister Meera entered the room, there was only the dim light from the solitary table lamp, but even in the gloom she could see that Bina was in a bad way. She quickly walked round the bed to her side and stood rigid, terrified at the change in her sister. Bina lay on her side, her face ghastly, her eyes wide open but sunken. Her legs were drawn up beneath the bedclothes, and her hands looked like claws picking spasmodically at the sheet. Suddenly she let out a blood-curdling scream; Meera knew immediately that a tumor had burst inside her. Joji charged into the room, their children close behind.

Bina was silent and then came another jerk in her stomach. She sat with half-closed eyes, her being filled with something that only she knew about.

“We have to take her to the hospital,” Joji said as he picked up the cordless telephone and began punching numbers furiously.

Within the hour, all her cousins in Cochin were by her side, ready to do whatever they could. They debated on where to take her and finally decided that there was no point in taking her to some place where she would be treated for her illness. What she required was a place where they would make her comfortable and see her through her last days in peace.

The Saraf Hospital, just a couple of kilometres from her mother’s apartment, was a relatively new but well-equipped hospital. Although it specialized in gynæcology, it had a well-equipped Intensive Care Centre. Dr. Oommen Mani, a cousin’s husband had worked there for a while and knew most of the doctors in the hospital. He immediately called the hospital and was told that Bina could be taken there right away.

Within half an hour she was taken by ambulance to the Saraf Hospital and was installed in the intensive care centre where, as it turned out, she was the only patient. It was perhaps that, more than anything else, which made all the difference.

However, although the hospital was able to provide her all the comfort and facilities possible, Bina had a difficult time. At first the pains came on quickly and after a long struggle and the effect of the painkillers she fell asleep. When she woke up she was given some more medicines to ease the pain. But that did not give her enough respite and pain was written clearly on her face.

Yet the next three days were the most amazing ones for all of us who were gathered there. We watched through the glass window, as she lay on the bed, her face flushed and her eyes open but dull. Her breathing was heavy and her lips twitched strangely. Her breath was laboured and her chest rose and fell as though each inward breath brought her pain.

The monitors provided second by second reports of her physical condition. But we did not need monitors to tell us of her mental state. Although in evident pain, in spite of the painkillers, she greeted visitors with a tired but determined smile. She spoke on long distance to her mother-in-law and told her that although she may not have been the perfect daughter-in-law, she had always loved her and cared for her. Through her pain she thanked each and every one of the friends and relations gathered there.

Because she was the only patient in the ICC, the hospital, at the request of the family permitted a communion service in which the entire group of about thirty friends and relatives who had been maintaining vigil at the hospital took part, to be held within the ICC! I wonder whether such an event has ever taken place in a hospital anywhere in the world and I wonder whether it will ever be repeated. The hospital belonged a Hindu family. That perhaps made the event most remarkable and explains the harmony in diversity that is perhaps unique to Kerala, which has not had in its recorded history any instance of inter communal discord involving Malayalees.

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**8th October 2000**

A few months prior to Bina’s illness it had been confirmed that Kitchu, Bina’s eldest sister Shema’s

husband had lymphoma. The cancer had not regressed in spite of subjecting him to a series of chemotherapy treatments. Kitchu and Shema had left for medical treatment in the USA in September and were to return to Bangalore on 7th October. Without their knowledge their tickets were re-routed so that they would arrive directly in Cochin.

It was only when they reached Hong Kong that they were told of the change in their schedule. Kitchu, however, was far too drained to make it directly to Cochin. He and Shema managed to revert to their original schedule and flew on to their home in Bangalore. It was only the next morning that he was able to summon up enough energy to fly to Cochin.

Bina had met and bid farewell to everyone in her immediate family other than Shema and Kitchu and when she was told that they would not be reaching Cochin early morning her face fell, realizing perhaps that she may not be able to see them.

To this day we don't know where she found the strength to hold out so long, but somehow she did until early afternoon the next day and when Shema and Kitchu entered the ICC, after a hair-raising, high-speed drive from the airport through the streets of Cochin, her face lit up briefly. But all that she could manage was a whisper, "Shema, Shema ...."

Soon thereafter her eyes closed and she was still. The monitors provided the only indication that she was yet alive. We stood there watching through the glass window as her life ebbed away.

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It took us a while to truly start feeling the loss. It did not feel like we were quite there. It was dreamlike and unreal, as if we were looking at everything from a great distance and could not be really sure that what we were seeing had actually happened. It was as if Bina had got up and left and that she would be coming back through door, smiling and healthy again.

Through the grief, shock and disbelief, the truth suddenly kicked us in the stomach, and with it a lucid sense of relief and release. Bina's sufferings were over. I know we all had that feeling, however hard it was to let her go. We had coped together like a family, in a private sort of way.

Were we in denial? Did we think that with massive amounts of love, the best medical care that was available and the promise of miracles, we could deny what was happening?

Could we lie to ourselves because the truth is too painful or, too inconceivable to deal with?

A blessed numbness, like an anaesthetic, carried us through Bina's funeral, enabled us to get through the days, to speak words of comfort to her children and Joji.

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Then, about a week after the funeral, the world came back into focus and a wild searing pain bore into Joji. His faith had been tried and tested and he knew that he too, like Bina, had come through. But he could still not understand why Bina had been taken away. Why was it that the good and beautiful were so ruthlessly plucked? He thought of the soaring bird felled by the hunter's arrow, its unfinished song still in its throat, its tiny body yet warm in death, its heartbeat stilled so easily. He thought of the stem of a beautiful flower, casually broken by some passer by.

And then he thought of the courage with which Bina had faced her death – like an eagle that looks directly at the life-giving sun when it knows that its end is near.

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# Mother's Net

*Any significantly advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic*

Arthur C Clarke *The Lost Worlds of 2001*

## November 2000

"I was thinking of buying a computer for the house," I heard Appa mention to Amma one evening as they sat at the dining table.

There are times in a boy's life when time seems to slow to a crawl, and every word or sound, no matter how subtle, stands out in memory. Appa's words, uttered so casually, catapulted me into a realm I had only dreamed about. I don't know about you, but my world has been for some time now largely the cyber world. All my close pals had computers of their own and a PC was everything I had hoped and prayed for – I even lit a couple of incense sticks to the powers that be to hurry it on. Yet the way things had gone so far I used to wonder whether by the time we got one, technology would be so advanced that PCs could be hardwired to my brain! That is, until now. It now looked like I was going to hit the jackpot.

It was no offhand remark, I knew. It was Appa's way of letting Amma know what was on his mind. Appa and Amma led a fairly spartan life, always living within their means and never investing in anything that did not have a clear utilitarian value. I could see merit in that philosophy, but I couldn't understand why they, particularly Amma, could not see any use in a computer. Did they not know that for the past couple of years I had spent most of my pocket money surfing the Internet in cyber cafes, and most of my leisure time running off to Samir's place to use his PC? I was the one most qualified to make that decision, but I had little or no say in how money was spent in our house.

"We don't need one," Amma said dismissively, rolling her eyes up toward the ceiling.

Although I was expecting that defensive salvo, it still hit me square in the chest. Amma was a greater believer in economy and discipline than Appa, who I could cajole into an occasional indulgence. However, even he would never buy anything that cost more than five hundred rupees without Amma's tacit approval. I knew therefore that Appa's statement by itself didn't amount to much.

"Well, everyone seems to have one these days and I think it's time we got ourselves one, too."

"There are so many other things that we need. The computer can wait," Amma declared, as she cleared the dishes from the table.

"Why, Shanta, what have you got against it?"

"I'm not against anything," she replied, "as long as we don't have to have one."

"It's not a luxury. It is now practically a necessity,"

"A luxury, they say, is something that you don't really need, and yet you can't do without it. That's what a computer is. In any case, the best computer is the one between your ears."

“But, Shanta,” Appa went on and, without looking at me, added, “Ranjit’s growing up, you know. All his friends, I’m sure, have computers. Samir has one and that’s why Ranjit’s there almost all the time.”

I could not put a finger on it. Both my parents seemed to suffer from some kind of nervous disorder whenever Samir and I were together. Appa’s face would begin to twitch every time he saw us and Amma would invariably wring her hands and sometimes even chew on a fingernail.

“Has he been demanding one?”

“Not in so many words; but I know that he’s been hoping for one,” I heard Appa say quietly.

“Ravi, you’ve always been the indulgent father. You’re the one who’s always spoiling them.”

Appa indulgent? No he wasn’t indulgent. He was the one who had put his foot down when I wanted a puppy. Would you believe I? His excuse was that he would wind up giving it a bath when I lost interest in the dog! He would later claim that the ability to say no is the greatest gift a parent has, or words to that effect.

“You know that I’ve never spoiled them with toys and things like that. It’s always been something that’s useful, something that they can learn from. A computer is the tool of modern man and something Ranjit will soon have to become very familiar with. I don’t want to let him down. If you don’t want to have anything to do with the computer, you don’t have to have anything to do about it; it can just be Ranjit’s and mine.”

“That’s the way to go, Appa!” I breathed silently. I could never fathom why Appa who was the sole bread winner and who was far and away the more educated, and an economist to boot, always deferred to Amma, even about stuff that she hardly understood. Is that the way it is in most families?

“We don’t need a computer. Reena was telling me only the other day that they’ve installed a few at her office. Do you know what the chaps there have to say about it? They say it’s a great invention all right, but there are as many mistakes as ever before, but now they are nobody’s fault!”

Appa laughed but then said, “Talk, talk, talk! That’s all that your sister and her friends do during the tea break. Science has yet to come up with a better system of office communication than the tea break.”

I silently agreed with that. But that’s the problem with parents; just when they reach an age when they should be agreeing with each other, they start to argue!

“Gossip invariably turns out to be correct.”

“Perhaps, but look at the positive side of it all. A computer can save money.”

“Save money? I thought it was going to cost money?”

“There is so much you can do these days over the computer. Paying your telephone bills for instance.”

“What do you spend on going to the post office and remitting or withdrawing money there? It can’t be more than a few rupees.”

“There’s the convenience of course and we won’t be spending so much money on petrol.”

“You’re going to get an Internet connection. That’s so, isn’t it?”

“Yes, of course. What’s the point getting of a computer if you’re not going to use the Internet?”

“But the telephone bills will go up, won’t they?”

“Not necessarily. It might keep you and Ranjit off the phone,” Ravi chuckled.

I could see that Amma did not like that crack one bit. I glanced at Amma to determine her degree of irritation..

“Do you grudge me the few minutes that I spend on the phone?” she asked.

“I don’t grudge you anything and you know that! It’s just that Ranjit will spend his time more usefully and learn a lot more than he would by just chatting with his friends, especially that Samir.”

“What about all that stuff you get over the Internet? I am told that there are a lot of pornographic sites on the web. You won’t want Ranjit checking them out, do you?”

“We can always monitor it if we want, but I think we can trust Ranjit enough not to do that, can’t we?”

That last bit was purely for my benefit, but I refused to get drawn into the discussion. I knew that it was better to let them sort out the issue themselves. In any case, I wasn’t about to say anything that could hurt my cause and I knew from past experience that that could happen.

“Shanta, we can keep track of our expenses on the computer.”

I knew that Amma had on many occasions asked Appa to keep track of the household expenses. She had in fact volunteered to keep it, provided he kept her posted of all his transactions, however small. I remember her mentioning to me one day that before their marriage Appa had maintained a meticulous set of account books, with everything itemised and to the last paisa. Amma could not understand why he stopped keeping these records after marriage.

Of course, Appa was dangling a carrot but to her credit and my dismay, Amma did not rise to the bait. She kept silent and made no response. They continued sitting at the dining table long after the dishes had been cleared, without speaking a word. Finally, when he got up to leave Amma muttered, “Buy a computer if you want, but let me tell you this once and for all, we don’t need one and I for one know that I will have no use for it.”

I clenched my hands into victorious fists under the table, and momentarily dipped my head. The incense sticks had done their job. As I lifted my head I caught my father's eye and saw the knowing smile come my way under Amma's radar. The message was clear – we were both getting a new toy.

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Two days later the new computer was installed. I had hoped for a Pentium 4 but Appa had checked with the head of the IT department in his office and on his advice had gone in for a locally assembled

Pentium III. Appa should have known better, I thought. That guy was on the verge of retirement. Samir couldn't believe that there were guys that old in an IT function! Whatever, the fellow was clearly out of touch with what people were doing with computers these days. All the same, I regretted it only briefly for when the machine had been extracted from its cardboard and thermocol straight-jacket, I felt a quiet thrill. And once I saw the microphone-equipped headset, modem, UPS and a table designed to take all these pieces of equipment without cluttering the study, I forgot everything else. As for Amma, she stayed away from the proceedings, except to make some suggestion as to where the table should be placed. Appa and I heard her muttering about the extravagance of it all, though.

Appa had always been meticulous in everything that he did. He used the computer only once every day and that was to access his e-mail; you could almost set your watch by his schedule. I, on the other hand, was in a quandary. I itched to have a long leash on my new toy, but I also knew that Amma would throw a fit if the telephone bill was substantially more than it had been. I resolved not to spend more than half an hour each day on the Internet.

Time on the computer soon became a regular feature of my life. As soon as I came home from school, I switched on the machine and spent exactly half an hour surfing the World Wide Web, delighting in the wonderful realms to which I was granted access to during that precious half hour. To compensate for the half hour when I hogged the telephone line, I cut down on the calls that I made to friends. It wasn't all that difficult, for I preferred to meet my friends face to face, rather than call them on the telephone.

A month or so later when the telephone bill arrived we were all pleasantly surprised to note that it was only about fifty rupees more than the previous one. Amma, however, appeared to be peeved. "I told you, it was going to cost us money," she complained, but we knew from the tone of her voice that her indignation was only half-hearted and therefore a pretense.

"Shanta, we have saved money on postage, haven't we? Over the past few weeks I have sent out at least a dozen letters by e-mail. That alone will cover the extra cost," Appa said in his quiet, placating manner.

"You never wrote that many letters before! After a while you will stop sending out e-mails. I know you!"

"But then we will be able to keep in touch with all our people, especially Rajini."

That should have put paid to all of Amma's arguments, for her only concern these days seemed to be about my sister Rajini, who had been married a little over a year ago to Deepak, a doctor working in San Francisco. Amma, otherwise a poor correspondent, wrote to her regularly, particularly now that she was expecting her first baby.

"E-mail is so impersonal. It's like office correspondence. I prefer ink-on-paper letters, with real stamps on them!"

"The texture of the paper, the colour of the ink and the stamps; what do these things matter? What matters is the ease and speed with which you can send and receive letters. It's almost instantaneous on email."

Amma made no rejoinder to that and Appa left it at that. For days afterward she made no mention of

the computer until Rajini's delivery date drew near. Although she stayed away from the offending machine and continued to write handwritten letters to Rajini, Amma would ask me everyday whether there were any messages from San Francisco, even though I always told her whenever there was mail from San Francisco.

When, finally Deepak called to inform us that Rajini had given birth to a baby boy, Amma's joy knew no bounds.

“That's the way to communicate. The good old fashioned way – by letter or over the telephone. What is the point getting something over a machine that you can read only if you get to it?” she said.

Although we were all thrilled at the news, this remarkable non sequitur practically put an end to the conversation.

The next day we received Deepak's e-mail in which he provided what could only be described as a push-by-push account of Rajini's labour and a glowing description of the baby. Amma read the message and although it was evident that the account pleased her no end, she said nothing to signify her pleasure.

A week later Deepak sent a few of photographs of their little son Ashok as a file attachment.

This time Amma was impressed and although she commented that it was not quite like receiving a real photograph, Appa and I knew from her happy squeal of delight when I led her to the computer screen and she saw her grandson's little face peering at her through squinted eyes, that she was indeed pleased. A quiet smile remained with her for most of the day. Yet she never evinced any interest in trying to use the computer.

Thereafter, whenever either Appa or I were at the computer, she would come and peer over our shoulders inquiring whether there was any mail from Dilip. Quite often she would ask us to check the mail and I used that excuse to up my use of the Internet, knowing that I could always lay the blame for the higher telephone bills at her door. Very often we overheard her talking to her friends on the phone. Her most popular topic of conversation was little Ashok; how well he was growing up, how she could see his progress almost daily. It was, she would often say, almost as if they were both living in the same city, not almost a whole world away.

She was not entirely uncritical however, and after seeing a lot of junk mail, would now and then mutter, “Garbage in, garbage out.”

Then came the announcement that with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2002, the government would permit Internet telephony. When, as was his wont, Appa read out the news to Amma, she could not believe it.

“You mean to say that we can talk to Rajini through our computer?”

“Yes. We can talk to her by linking our computer with hers through the Internet. That is what the government has permitted for the time being. In time it may allow us to connect our phone with her computer and perhaps our phone directly to her phone.”

“What about the cost?”

“Shanta. It will be unbelievably cheap. Today a call to the US through the telephone costs forty rupees per minute. I hear that Internet providers will be offering call rates from as low as two rupees forty paise to ten rupees per minute. They say that it could come down even further.”

“Impossible!” Shanta exclaimed

“When the systems are in place we can talk to Rajini whenever we please,” he observed.

“If it’s going to cost only a few rupees per minute, we can talk to her every day. Can I operate this computer on my own?”

"Of course you can! You just have to punch a couple of buttons."

"The Internet is indeed amazing!"

“That is what I have been saying all along, Shanta.”

“It is a remarkable invention. I never said it wasn’t!”

Appa winked at me and smiled.

“Of course, what effect it’s going to have on the next generation, with all the garbage - those pornographic sites and what not - still remains to be seen.”

Amma always had to have the last word - on everything!

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# Advice

*Good but rarely came from good advice*

**Lord Byron, *Don Juan***

**23<sup>rd</sup> December 2001**

The Holy Trinity Cathedral in Kottayam is one of the oldest European churches in Kerala. Set on a hill, it once commanded a view of practically the entire town. It has, however, lost that commanding position thanks to the many buildings that have come up since it was built well over a century ago. It also boasted one of the best church choirs in Kerala and in its heyday, its annual Christmas Carol service was perhaps the most popular one in the state.

The church was crowded and the choir had just finished singing the third carol when I heard the rumble of the jeep, its diesel engine churning noisily as it climbed the slope that led to the cathedral.

‘A bit late; they’ll never get a seat,’ I thought to myself as the vehicle flashed past the side of the church and stopped short of the vestry.

A while later a uniformed policeman entered the church and, led by the verger, walked up the aisle to the fourth row where he bent down and whispered a few words to Korah Varkey who was seated next to the aisle.

I saw a look of consternation pass across Korah’s face. He got up, signaled his wife Chinnamma who sat across the aisle from him and they followed the policeman out of the church.

Some members of the congregation also got up and went outside, but I stayed where I was. The choir, after a bit of anxiety, began singing and the carol service continued thereafter without any further interruptions.

When it was over, I went out and inquired of the others as to what had happened and was told that there had been an accident involving Korah’s grandson. It had taken place on the highway, but nobody present there could provide any more details.

I did not know Korah intimately, but I saw him often enough in the club where he had the reputation of being a decent and caring family man of the old school. Tall and distinguished he had always carried himself with dignity and grace. Everyone agreed that he had two rare and engaging qualities: he was a good listener and he was modest.

Although born and brought up in Kottayam he had, like thousands of his fellow Malayalees, worked for many years in Kuwait. Like all the others, he had married a Malayalee girl and like them he had to leave her with his parents while he went back to work, a couple of weeks after his wedding.

In the fifties and the early sixties, although it was the El Dorado for many Malayalees, Kuwait was not much of a place and most of the men who worked there, were forced to leave their families behind while they lived in the bachelor quarters provided by their employers. This arrangement, however, enabled them to save a great deal and keep their families in comfort and sometimes in luxury in the huge houses that they built back home in Kerala. But that was it. It was just a place where one could make a lot of money; it was not a place where one could lead a ‘family life’.

Later, when a daughter was born to Korah and Chinnamma, he came home and spent his annual vacation enjoying life briefly as a new father. However, when his leave of six weeks was over, he had to go back to work and leave his little family behind. It was hard for him, those lonely months away from home; it was just as hard on his wife and his only daughter Leena. Over the next few years, his annual holidays, those intervals between long periods of loneliness, became his happiest moments.

Like every Malayalee in Kuwait, Korah was saving a great deal and in time built a large and rather ostentatious house on the banks of the Meenachil River. A car and driver, a well tended garden, a pet dog and a dovecote completed the picture of upper middle class achievement. Leena's friends in school envied her clothes and the fancy pens, watches, toys and other gifts that her father brought her each year.

In time, however, life in Kuwait and the other countries that bordered the Persian Gulf improved and by the seventies with Indian schools having sprung up in these places most Malayalees began to take their families with them to the Gulf countries. It was, however, too late for Korah. Leena was by then in high school and both Korah and Chinnamma felt that the change of scene and curriculum at that stage would have been too much of a distraction for her. In any case in a couple of years Leena would enter the university and that would mean mother and daughter having to return to Kerala.

It was at that juncture that Leena sent a letter to her father in which she wrote that they did not need any more money, that they needed to be together as a family and that it was time that her father came home for good.

That letter moved Korah to tears. Leena was right, he thought to himself. He had saved enough money and he well knew that there was nothing other than money to be gained by staying on in Kuwait. He resigned his job, wound up his affairs and returned to Kottayam where he tried to engage himself in the community and its affairs. A generous contributor to the church, he soon became an active member of the church committee. He also joined the local rotary club and the Union Club, where he could be found on most evenings, playing a couple of hands of rummy. He had striven through life for imaginary happiness. I do not know whether he did attain that but he seemed happy enough then.

A few years later, soon after she had completed her graduation with distinction, Korah got Leena married off in style to Rajan, an engineer in the state PWD. A year later when Leena gave birth to a bouncing baby boy, Korah's joy knew no bounds.

A couple of years later when Rajan was posted to distant Wynad, Leena and Baby Sunil stayed with Korah and Chinnamma. An overjoyed Korah told himself and anyone who would listen that this was his just reward for all those difficult years in Kuwait

But life is not fair. It can trip you up just when you think everything is going well for you and rob you of your illusions. With that one stroke it can rob you of your happiness.

On one of his monthly visits to Kottayam, Rajan and Leena went to Kanjirapally to attend the wedding of a friend. They did not survive the head on collision with a private bus somewhere on the Kottayam-Kumily Road.

Little Sunil, who had been left behind with his grandparents, was now orphaned. He, however, had his devoted grandparents to look after him. Few misfortunes bring worse consequences for a boy than to

have only doting grandparents to look after him. Sunil was all that they had left in their life and Korah and Chinnamma, although they took the greatest care of him, lavished all their time, money and love on the little fellow. In short they spoiled him silly. He grew up to be a cheerful young chap who knew that he could cajole practically anything out of his grandparents. He was independent and had a mind of his own. He loved them, of course, but they often got the impression that he did not respect them in the manner their age and experience warranted.

He was, however, a good student and Korah was happy with the progress he made both in the classroom and on the playing fields. Although Sunil did well enough in his final examinations, he was not keen on taking up a professional course and joined the CMS College in Kottayam, where he pursued a degree in arts and was selected for the basketball team. Studies, however, ceased to have much interest for the young man and all his energies were devoted to basketball. By his second year he had made it to the state team and I remember him being on the team that went to Calcutta to play in a major tournament there.

After that trip, however, Sunil seemed to get into a lot of trouble and friends told me that Korah was having a lot of problems with him – late nights, drinking, gambling and riding his motorcycle at breakneck speed through Kottayam. His grandfather had little or no control over the young man.

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It is a terrible thing for a man to outlive both his child and his grandchild. I could see that a couple of weeks later when I saw Korah sitting in a corner at the Union Club.

He was by himself and I went over to offer my condolences. I have always found it difficult to proffer words of comfort and in most such situations I preferred to lay some flowers or help out with the arrangements for the funeral. Although I had attended the funeral, placed a spray of flowers and murmured a few words to Korah, I did not know him well enough to be involved beyond that.

The passage of time diminishes and softens grief and it is easier to face the bereaved. I could sense that as I sat down beside him and murmured a few words of sympathy. He smiled at me ruefully and I got the impression that he needed to talk to someone - perhaps to someone he did not know too well.

“How can good advice go so wrong?” he asked me after a while and without waiting for a reply continued. “I gave Sunil the soundest advice when he went to Calcutta for that tournament. All that I told him was that he should not gamble, lend money or go with strange women. That is the advice that anyone would have given a young man who was going away for the first time to a big city!”

“I don’t understand,” I said, feeling somewhat ashamed at not understanding someone who had always been a patient listener.

“I was pleased, of course, that he had been selected for the state team, but I was not happy at the prospect of letting him go to such a far away place to play in that tournament. And I told him so. Yes, I also advised him not to gamble, lend money or go anywhere with strange women. Wouldn’t you have given your child that kind of advice?”

“Of course. That’s what anyone would have done.”

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The basketball tournament went off very well and the Kerala team did well enough to get into the semi finals, where they lost to Bihar. Having lost in the semi-finals they had nothing to do on their last day, there being no play off for third place. It was a Saturday and Rajesh, his closest friend in the team, suggested that they should go to the races.

“No. *Appachen* made me promise not to gamble,” Sunil protested.

“You don’t have to gamble. Just being there is a great experience. Let’s go and have a good time.”

Rajesh was a most persuasive fellow and the following afternoon found the duo headed for the racecourse.

The Calcutta Racecourse, located at the south-west end of the Calcutta Maidan, that vast stretch of green that lies between the River Hooghly, the Esplanade and Chowringhee, is a bit of an anachronism. A survivor of the British Raj it has since Independence been home to both the brown sahib and the ordinary punter. On any given Saturday during the winter months you would see owners, trainers and stewards, dressed in navy blue blazers or three piece suits, strut around the place while their ladies in gorgeous silk sarees vied with the racing silks worn by the jockeys. It is indeed a colourful and happening place.

Sunil was fascinated. There was nothing even remotely as exciting as this in Kerala. He had been to Ooty where there was a racetrack, but Sunil had never seen any racing there. It was, in any case, a small track and nothing that that lovely hill station could put up would ever match this arena.

He saw people thronging the tote windows and was tempted to make his way there. He remembered that he had promised *Appachen*, that he would not gamble, but what harm was there in it, he thought to himself, if you were prepared to lose your stake. In any case he was only going to spend a hundred rupees, an amount that he would have spent in any case on something just as transient.

Sunil pored through the race book that they had picked up. There was quite a bit of information in it, but he could not make out very much from it except that each race was separately listed and that the name of each horse, its jockey, its number and its colours were clearly mentioned. There were to be eleven races that day. Perhaps it would be best to wait and see how the first race went.

Although practically everyone in the stands was cheering the runners on, he found the race boring for he had no mount to cheer for. Rajesh, as usual, had gone away in search of something and in the throng of men dressed in dark jackets he could not spot him.

It was then that he made up his mind to place a bet. He glanced through the names of the runners for the next race. He knew nothing about any of them, but he found the names Naughty Sprite and Monsoon Wind interesting and decided that he would bet on one of them. When a mentally recited *eeny meen miney mo, catch a monkey by his toe* resulted in Monsoon Wind being selected, Sunil went down to the tote window. The bookies were offering odds of 5:1 on Monsoon Wind and after placing a hundred rupees for a win, he went back to where he had been in the stands so that he could watch the race.

Sunil could not make out most of what happened and at the start of the race he had difficulty spotting his horse. However, by the time they came thundering in front of the stands, he could easily recognize

it, for Monsoon Wind was in front by more than a length over its nearest rival and stayed in front for the rest of the race. Sunil could not believe his luck. He screamed in delight and, after accepting congratulations from a pretty lady dressed in a pink and gray saree, rushed off to collect his winnings.

On the next race he placed a hundred rupees at 3:1 on Saucy Lady and went back to the stands. Saucy Lady had no sauce for the race and came in a distant fifth. Sunil's dismay was plain for all to see. The pretty lady murmured her commiseration. Sunil was grateful for that and smiled at her uncertainly. She was rather young – just a few years older than he – but, with a single strand of pearls around her neck and coiffured hair, looked rather sophisticated.

He bet on each race and although he lost a couple, he had by the fifth race won about fifteen hundred rupees. Surely it was his lucky day. Nothing could go wrong, he thought to himself as he looked at the pretty lady and smiled at her.

“You've been lucky today,” she said.

“Yes. Beginner's luck, I guess.”

“No. Today is your day. By the way I'm Oporna,” she said as she extended her hand.

“I'm Sunil,” he said as he shook the proffered hand. “How was it for you?”

“Not good. I lost a bit.”

“Oh, that's too bad,” Sunil murmured.

“Tell you what. Lend me a hundred to place a bet? I need something to change my luck. Perhaps your luck will rub off on me if I use your money.”

He looked at her, torn by a conflict between what she was asking and his grandfather's advice. *Appachen* had specifically warned him not to lend money to anyone, he told himself. But this was money that had come out of nowhere. It would not matter one bit if she did not return it. It was only a hundred rupees and it was from his winnings after all. She would not try to shaft him for such a small sum. And how could you refuse a pretty young woman?

Just as he was about to reach into his jacket pocket she said, “You think I won't return it, don't you? Why don't you keep my binoculars as security?”

His ears turned red and he protested that it was not so, but Oporna insisted that he should keep the binoculars. “You will find them useful for the rest of the races,” she said as she pulled the strap over her head and handed the small pair to him.

They were of Chinese make and it did cross his mind that they may not be worth even one hundred rupees. Sunil handed her the currency note and watched her as she headed towards the tote windows.

In the excitement of betting on and winning some of the races that followed, Sunil soon forgot about the woman and the money. By the time the tenth race was over he found that he had made a little over two thousand rupees. What a day, he thought. He could do nothing wrong - if you discounted the hundred rupees that the woman had taken. She seemed to have disappeared into thin air. It was then

that he decided to wager all his winnings on the last race. Sunil looked in the book and finding the name Mossy Bank to his liking, went down to place his bet.

The favourite was Silver Sultan and it was quoted at 4:5 while Mossy Bank was offered at 8:1. It has to be all or nothing, he decided, as he put two thousand rupees down, collected his ticket and went back to his place in the stands where he waited for the final race to begin.

Down at the post the starter held the lever and pushed. The gates crashed open and the horses roared out of the stalls.

“They’re off, and the first to show is Silver Sultan,” the commentator shouted.

The horses galloped strongly their hooves thudding into the ground, each jockey striving to get his mount clear of the pack. Even through the binoculars it looked like one wild herd until the first curve, but thereafter Sunil could see almost all the horses clearly and he spotted Mossy Bank lying fifth or sixth.

The crowd rose on tiptoes and yelled itself hoarse as the pattern of the race shifted and changed. Silver Sultan, however, stayed in front until the home stretch, with Mossy Bank running third, a length behind the leader.

A hundred yards from the finish Sunil saw Mossy Bank’s jockey dig his knees into the horse’s sides and give it a couple of taps with the whip down its shoulder. It looked as if the horse was only waiting for this signal for it immediately stretched its neck, flattened its stride and surged ahead. Five strides from the winning post Mossy Bank put its head in front of Silver Sultan and kept it there.

The stunned crowd received the rank outsider’s victory with a groan, but Sunil hooted with joy and then all but collapsed from the euphoria of his win. Sixteen thousand rupees! He just could not believe it. Fifteen thousand nine hundred rupees, a small voice told him as he threaded his way through the crowd to collect his winnings.

He collected his money and put it into the inside pocket of his blazer and waited there watching the grounds slowly emptying. There was no sign of Rajesh or the woman. The latter’s absence did not bother him much and he would not have waited there much longer had it not been for Rajesh. Where was the wretched fellow? It did not matter for he knew the way back to the hostel and they had agreed that if they got separated they would get back on their own.

Just as he was about to leave, he felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around to see Oporna.

“Bet you thought I’d gone away,” she smiled mischievously as she handed him a note.

“No! No!” he protested in embarrassment, while at the same time pulling the strap of the binoculars over his shoulder and handing it to her.

“Were you lucky?”

“Yes. I put everything I made on the last race and won sixteen thousand rupees!” he said, unconsciously tapping his jacket pocket.

“Sixteen thousand rupees! We must celebrate.”

“I have to get back to the hostel.”

“Don’t tell me!”

“No I must. I will wait a while for my friend and if he does not show up I will have to go back to the hostel. We are to leave tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow? That’s another day!”

“I will get into trouble, if I am not back at the hostel.”

“Of course you’ll get back. Just call them and tell them you’ll be late,” she said, clutching his arm.

Sunil stood there in confused indecision, while the quiet voice reminded him that his grandfather had told him not to have anything to do with women. But then he had told him not to gamble and he had won sixteen thousand rupees! He had told him not to lend money and he had got it back without even having to ask for it. Was the old man really on the ball? And there was that delicious pressure of her soft breast on his arm.

Reason gave way to the senses and he found himself being led out of the racecourse. Once outside they caught a taxi.

“Have you gone around Calcutta?”

“Not really.”

“Then let us go for a ride,” she said as she directed the taxi driver.

As they looped around the racecourse she pointed to the Victorian Memorial that lay on their left.

“It looks like a crude version of the Taj Mahal, doesn’t it?” he said.

“Yes that’s true. The VM’s bigger of course, but the marble is not such good quality and the workmanship is not as good.”

“VM?”

“Yes, the Victoria Memorial,” she said.

Their ride took them down Red Road, the broad road that seemed to bisect the *Maidan* that huge stretch of green, which he had been told by friends in Calcutta, were the lungs of the city, past Fort William, headquarters of the Indian Army’s Eastern Command. They circled the governor’s residence, the Raj Bhavan, and then paused for a while on the Strand where they got out and watched the sun set on the River Hooghly, until nothing remained of the day save for a line of molten gold slowly lowering on the river.

“Are you buying me dinner?” she asked as they walked back to the taxi.

Sunil hesitated. What was he to do? She had spent time with him and shown him around the city. What was the point making money if you did not spend it having a good time? And she had turned out to be rather good company, too. For a brief moment he looked at her. There was something about her tone that made him nervous. He knew nothing about her, except that she was a Bengali and, from what she told him, that she was divorced and now worked for a travel agency.

Flustered, he muttered, "Alright," hoping he didn't sound too churlish

She did not respond except to take his arm as she she moved across the broad sidewalk.

"Where are you going to take me?" she asked.

"I have no idea. Why don't you suggest a place?"

"Well then, let's go to Mocambo's."

"Is the food good?"

"Yes, and they have a live band," she said as she leaned forward and instructed the driver.

For one disturbing moment he almost changed his mind, something inside him telling him to get away.

\*

The restaurant was crowded, but they managed to get a table for two, tucked away in a far corner. When the waiter came to take their order, he asked her to order for the both of them and she placed the orders with a confidence that told him that she had been there many times before.

As soon as the waiter had disappeared, she said, "Let's dance," and standing up, reached out her hand and led him to the tiny dance floor.

Low lights and romantic music. He had never danced really close before and it was a delightful feeling having Oporna's sinewy body nestling against the length of his. He was transported to a new world, a world that he had only seen in the movies.

When the band took the first break, they went back to their table. Almost immediately the waiter served the cocktails she had ordered and later, when the food was served, they sat in companionable silence sipping and nibbling.

Sunil paid the bill, noting with a bit of guilt that it was the most he had ever paid for a meal. Easy come, easy go, he thought to himself, as he stepped outside and hailed a taxi. Once ensconced in the rear seat Oporna told the cabby where to go and then snuggled up to Sunil. He wrapped his hand around her, brushed her hair and kissed the side of her forehead. She responded by resting her cheek against his.

"Come up with me," she said touching her right hand to his cheek, as the taxi drew up near an apartment block.

"I don't want to leave you, but I must get back to my hostel," he said.

"Come on. You can get there in time."

Sunil had never had feelings like this before. No woman had fired his imagination like Oporna and he couldn't tear his gaze from her.

"Come on," she repeated gently as she reached across and handed the cabby a couple of currency notes.

\*

He had been conscious of her hand in his as they climbed the darkened stairway to the first floor. At the landing she quickly inserted a key, opened the door, pulled him inside and gently kicked the door shut. Sunil put his arm around her shoulders, his mouth seeking hers. Through the long kiss she ran her hands down his body and slowly by twists and turns led him to her bedroom, which overlooked the street. The touch of her lips was soft and cool on his skin, yet it made him burn. He shuddered with joy, suddenly clumsy in his eagerness.

She eased his blazer off his shoulders and threw them on the clothes horse. He slipped out of his shoes and unbuckled his belt; his trousers dropped to his feet and he stepped out of them as he watched Oporna unwinding her saree and unclasping her blouse. In the muted glow of the streetlights, Sunil saw her lying on her back, her arms reaching out, inviting him to the comfort of her naked body. He wanted her, he knew; he needed the comfort of her arms; he was hungry for her and desperate to taste her sweetness. He needed her as a man needs a woman. He saw her smile as he drew near opened her arms drew him to her and held him tenderly.

For a fleeting moment a still voice reminded him of his grandfather's advice, but then his senses took over.

\*

Suddenly he was awake. Something deep within him told him even before he opened his eyes that he should be silent. In the dim light of the streetlights that filtered through the Venetian blinds, he saw Oporna getting up and moving away from the bed. He watched as she went quietly towards the clothes horse. Sunil felt a chill go down his spine as, through his partly closed eyelids, he saw her turn and look at him. She stayed motionless for a while and when she had convinced herself that he was asleep, lifted his blazer, inserted her hand and pulled out the wad of notes.

Sunil's heart throbbed. He was suddenly at one with his grandfather, thinking about all the things he had done that day; things he should not have done. The feeling in the pit of his stomach was not unknown to him, but there was also that sensation he occasionally experienced, a peculiar detachment of mind from body, as if what was happening was not experienced, but observed. He began to breathe deeper and snore quietly, but as convincingly as he could.

He watched as she moved towards a flower pot on a stand and grasping the potted rubber plant by its stem lifted it out, earth and all. She quickly shoved the wad into the pot and lowered the rubber plant over it. She looked towards him once more and having satisfied herself that he was gently snoring, she came back to the bed and crept in under the covers.

It was going to be a long night, he knew and he would have to stay awake, but with his eyes closed. And he did just that. Every now and then he looked at Oporna lying beside him. He was disgusted; she was no sophisticated lady; she was just a common whore. He grew angry at the thought that he had

been taken in so easily by thief.

She was not getting away with it, he promised himself. It was his money that she had filched out of his blazer. Sixteen thousand rupees! He was not going to let her have it, but he would have to wait until she was fast asleep. He peered at his watch in the faint light and knew that he would have to wait a few hours longer so that when he left it would be almost dawn.

At about a quarter to six he got up quietly and, after making sure that Oporna was fast asleep, padded over to where his clothes lay and as quietly and silently as he could, he pulled on his trousers. He had his back to the bed as he approached the flower pot. Without any hesitation he gently pulled out the plant, reached inside, grabbed all that was there at the bottom of the pot and put the plant back where it had been, earth and all. He then picked up the blazer, put the wad of notes into an inside pocket and left it back on the clothes horse. He then put on his shirt and shoes. Only then did he turn and pick up the blazer.

He shut the door softly, managing to get it to catch without rousing her, and let himself out. He had to walk quite a distance before he was able to hail a taxi and he sat in silence until it deposited him at the hostel gate. He had wanted to check his pocket but did not want to risk the cabbie seeing so much money. As soon as he entered his room, he closed the door and took out the wad of notes and counted them.

Had he counted wrong, he wondered, when he counted up to sixteen thousand and found he had quite a few more notes in his hand. He began counting again and to his surprise he found that he had a little over twenty eight thousand, twenty eight thousand three hundred to be exact. That was not possible: his winnings were only sixteen thousand and he had less than five hundred rupees with him when he went to the race course. The extra money could only be Oporna's, he knew - her little nest-egg. 'Serves her right, the hussy!' he laughed silently at the thought of Oporna looking for money under the rubber plant!

What was really great was that he now had enough money to buy a motorcycle, something *Appachen* would never agree to.

\*

I've learned that silent company is often more healing than words of advice.

"I would never have bought him that wretched motorcycle," Korah said, his sorrow coming through.

"There was little that you could have done," I murmured.

"It was probably better if I had just let Sunil go to Calcutta without giving him any advice. For in the end he preferred vice to advice."

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# The Sweepstakes

*Luck is a wonderful thing. The harder a person works, the more of it he seems to have*

## Calcutta 1966

Father Antonio Doro looked down at the sea of brown faces. Young, enthusiastic and eager, they were his source of pride. Everything around him – the boys, the school buildings, the extensive grounds – these were all part of a grand creation of which he had been the driving factor; and he smiled at the thought.

But what was he doing there, his left palm outspread and pressed against a wall and his right index finger patiently poking at the spaces between!

Father Doro chuckled. It was that boy Jayant Kripalani. He had stayed on the veranda waiting to waylay him. What was he to do with the fellow - an adolescent on the verge of becoming a man, his features filling out, his body stretching? Kripalani could cajole anything out of practically anyone; he had that rare ability to be popular with his fellows and his teachers. And this was not the first time he had found something to try out on his teachers.

The initial query was innocent enough. “Father, I want to conduct a psychology test.”

“Psychology test?”

“Yes, just a few simple questions.”

“Jayant, with you there are no simple questions.”

“Simple questions, I promise, Father. All you have to do is answer without any hesitation while your hands are occupied doing something specific,” he said, grinning wickedly.

Intrigued Father Doro stared down at the expectant faces. He loved playing, discussing and even bantering with his young charges. That was what he lived for and it was his good cheer and accessibility that endeared him to everyone. It was a hard earned love and it was because of that love and accessibility that he wound up with his left hand against the wall, uncertain how long he could retain his composure.

His decision made, he flexed his fingers, placed his left hand against the wall and waited.

“What is your name?” Jayant began.

“Antonio Doro,” he replied as the memories of his youth filled his mind. He remembered when he was of that age in his native Italy

“Where were you born?”

“Iseo in Italy,” he replied, his mind sweeping over the oceans to the little town of Iseo on the Lago d'Iseo in the lower Alps in Lombardy, where he and his brothers had spent their impoverished youth

roaming the steep hillsides and the banks of that beautiful lake. In his mind's eye he could see the town as it had stood, neatly stacked on the hillside, a ripple of orange roofs and white walls; he could see the silent yet outstanding landscape and within it the intensely blue waters of that deep lake. He remembered the bare tracks that overhung the sheltered valleys and the sunsets that turned the hills to purple and left the valleys flooded with heavy shadows.

“When did you leave home?”

“1935.”

Had it been so long ago, he wondered. Unbidden memories of the almost unbelievable tales that began drifting up to their remote town in the early nineteen thirties, came to his mind. Stories that spoke of a strange stirring throughout the land; the declaration of the Mediterranean as Italy's sea and the setting aright of all the humiliation that Italy had been subject to after the first world war and the almost mythical figure of the one they called Il Duce, the man who made the trains run on time. There were the Blackshirts, of course, but scenic lakeside Iseo was hardly the place where they strutted their stuff. He remembered how like millions throughout Italy he and his brothers had been enthralled and mesmerized by what was happening. With many of Il Duce's gimmicks meant to project him as an ace pilot, violin virtuoso, chess master and motor racing driver having been shown to be fake, his popularity had dipped, and it took the almost imminent war on Abyssinia to fire every Italian's imagination. People began to see him once again as a hero.

Antonio would never forget Il Duce's visit to Iseo. He could see himself reaching Iseo breathless but tingling with anticipation. The piazza had already begun filling up and within the hour it was packed to overflowing. He had never seen anything like it. Bunting all over the piazza, a dais draped with sashes of every hue and colour, flags fluttering from the flag poles surrounding the dais and music that blared from the speakers. He could still hear the ever increasing wail of the sirens. And then as the cavalcade swept into the piazza, they got their first glimpse of the man himself.

Then, quite suddenly, the music ceased and a voice boomed forth from the speakers; a voice such as they had never heard before, one with a strange, almost riveting quality to it. Antonio could still experience the pin drop silence in which the multitude listened and hung on to Il Duce's every word as he spoke of re-establishing the Roman Empire and restoring the glory that had once been Italy's, of Italy being the first country in the world to build motorways, of the *autostrada* networks that he had built all over Italy and about the impending war against Abyssinia to avenging the massacre at Adua and the humiliating defeat inflicted on Italy by that country forty year earlier; a humiliation made more complete by the fact that Italy was the only European nation to lose in battle to an African nation. Father Doro remembered his euphoria during Il Duce's speech and the cavalcade moving on and the crowd dispersing.

“Why did you leave home?”

“I joined the army.” The memory was galling and with a shake of his head, Father Doro swept it out of his mind.

“The army?” Clearly this was not a question that Jayant had planned on. Obviously he could not imagine that this lovable priest had once served in an army. The answer surprised him so much that he did not notice that Father Doro's right finger had missed its intended prod between the thumb and the index finger.

Antonio recalled how a few days after Benito Mussolini had visited Iseo, he and his brother Pompilio had travelled the hundred kilometres to Milan, the nearest recruiting station. There they joined the army and were packed off to a training camp somewhere in the barren, remote hills of Southern Italy.

Life in the camp was sheer unmitigated hell; weeks of rude wake up calls long before sunrise by the strident notes of a bugle, freezing cold water baths, long marches over stony ground and hilly terrain staggering under heavy backpacks, tiring drills under eagle-eyed sadistic drill sergeants, target practice, launching mortar shells.

Then there was that fateful day when Mussolini declared war on Abyssinia and all of Italy rallied behind his call. The lads marched off to war, along with the rest of their comrades, frenetically cheered by huge crowds all the way to the troopships anchored at the docks. Their armada set sail down the eastern Mediterranean through the Suez Canal down the Red Sea. There they disembarked at a port in hot, humid Eritrea and joined General Emilio de Bono's forces.

The climb up to the plateau was arduous and while the days on the table top were warm, the nights were freezing cold. Adua was captured without much resistance and the Italians advanced deeper into Ethiopian territory having to face only minor skirmishes. Two months later it was a different story, when the Ethiopians inflicted a resounding defeat on the Eritreans under the command of one Major Criniti, who lost more than half of his forces at the battle of Dembeguina Pass.

A faint smile lighted Father Doro's cherubic face as he reaffirmed, "Yes. The Italian army."

Jayant leaned forward, his eyes bright, his body trembling with the excitement of anticipation. "When did you become a priest?"

Suddenly it all came back, a torrent of memory that threatened to overwhelm him. He remembered how it had been after Dembeguina, the only victory that the rabble army of poorly armed Ethiopians had against the Italian forces. Was it that thrashing that prompted the Italian generals to ask Mussolini for permission to drop canisters of mustard gas on the hapless Ethiopians? Was it necessary to send wave after wave of Italian bombers to literally drench the Ethiopian countryside with poison to kill off all living creatures in the vicinity and make the land unfit for cultivation for decades? How could anyone allow such tactics in a modern war and that too after poison warfare had been banned by all the European powers in 1925?

Even today he often woke up from the nightmares occasioned by the horrific sight of the Ethiopian dead that ringed Lake Ashangi after the terrible rain that burned and killed everything in sight.

"1945" he answered, his response almost automatic.

"Why did you become a priest?"

How could he explain to the lad the struggle that he had? Would he understand the underlying need to expiate his role, however insignificant it may have been, in the massacre at Lake Ashangi? By then the roll of drums was growing fainter as the war ran out. And so many of his fellows were dead; dead in a futile war.

"I was called," he said simply as the present broke through the shadows of the past.

"When did you come to Calcutta?"

“1950.”

Suddenly his thoughts flew to the days when he had mulled over his posting. Why indeed had they taken the assignment without demur? Long ago his father had said, 'To be free to choose, and to choose God's way, is all that makes us different from animals'. There had been a genuine need to do good, but he knew that it had a lot more to do with the millions who died in the Bengal Famine and of course Lake Ashangi.

He remembered Calcutta as it had been when his brother Pompilio and he had arrived by ship one cold and misty December morning in the very same year in which Mother Teresa, now a good friend, had established her Missionaries of Charity in the city. He could see the vast green expanse of the *maidan* encompassing the Victoria Memorial, the race course and Fort William and the mounted police who patrolled the *maidan* on days when the football matches between East Bengal and Mohun Bagan were on; the broad and muddy River Hoogly and its bore tides with head waves as high as twenty feet; the century old Great Eastern Hotel and its later rival the Grand Hotel; the many theatres and exclusively British clubs; red double decker buses, articulated trams, yellow and black taxis of American make, black rickshaws; the animated *addas* at practically every street corner, the large Anglo Indian community concentrated in and around Park Circus and Elliot Road and the railway colonies, Chinese dentists, the teeming *bustees* and the thousands of people on its streets. And there were the Loreto schools and college that reminded him of the island of Loreto in the Lago d'Iseo.

“When did you start the school here in Calcutta?”

“1958.”

Would they believe it if he told them that their school had been paid for by lotteries and raffles? Would they have even heard of the Irish Sweepstakes, which in its heyday was one of the world's most fabulous lotteries, bestowing, in one swoop, enormous wealth on its winners and rendering many rich, far beyond their wildest dreams?

Some of them knew of the raffles Pompilio had organised, with the approval of the order, of course. Little, however, did they know about all the effort that had gone into it; the distribution of tickets through schools, selecting the winners and all the minute details required for something that eventually reached out to ever so many in the city. Only Pompilio knew how successful the raffles had been; each one more successful than the previous one and how the money had poured in.

Antonio would never forget one winner. He well remembered the large American limousine sighing to a stop in front of Pompilio's office, on Portuguese Church Street, and the enormously fat man, dressed in a white shirt, black coat and dhoti, who waddled out, followed by two flunkies. He had been expecting the man, for when he had telephoned to communicate the news, there was clear elation at the other end. The man, who turned out to be a local businessman, had said that he would come the very next day.

The flunkies were the first to enter his brother's office and they did in the manner of flunkies the world over, bowing and scraping. The fat man – he could not for the life of him remember the fellow's name now - then entered, mopping his brows to wipe away the profuse perspiration. Spotting the couch he sank into it and again began mopping his brow. One of the flunkies pulled out a hand fan and began

fanning. Antonio now remembered why he didn't wipe his face – it was full of betel nut juice – and in his mind's eye he recalled how unerringly the fellow had shot a thick red stream out with unerring accuracy through the open window.

Father Doro remembered his brother walking over to the couch and handing the winner's cheque of Rs.1,000 to the man, who in turn dipped his hand into his coat pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. This he handed over to the priest and without so much as a 'by your leave', he stood up and waddled out of the room closely followed by his lackeys.

Antonio remembered Pompilio leaving left the chit of paper in his drawer and giving no thought to it until a few months later, when he was informed by a telegram from Dublin, that he had won the Irish Sweepstakes and that the prize money of £50,000 was his. There were also instructions as to how he was to go about claiming it.

That was their miracle to cherish for the rest of their lives and to fulfill their dream establishing a school. Oh how he cherished that moment! And he relived that moment every day when he walked through the broad corridors, the polished floors and the airy classrooms or gazed out at the playing fields and the line of trees beyond them. 'Yes, God does work in mysterious ways, His miracles to perform' he thought for the hundredth time.

“How old are you Father?”

“Fifty one,” he replied as he came out of that reverie.

“Fifty one?” Jayant asked. “Then why are you standing there poking between your fingers like a three year old?”

Father Doro was halfway through the spread of his fingers before understanding broke through and he felt his face turning red as he heard the hoots of laughter from the crowd of young imps. He looked up at Jayant, his face furious for a moment before quietening into irritation.

“Kripalani! Had it been anyone but you I'd have.....”, he sputtered as he raised his hand as if to strike. And with that gesture he dispersed both his irritated embarrassment and the crowd.

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## What's in a Name?

*A man has three names: the name he inherits, the name his parents give him and the name he makes for himself. Sometimes, however, he gets a fourth - the name that other decide to call him by*

### August 1960

Although they are always in the forefront of politics, education, films, art and literature and in spite of their home state of Kerala often being pointed out as a model for other states in the Indian Union to emulate in many areas, Malayalees are a strange lot. They can be sarcastic, irascible, militant, dogged and their humour is invariably laced with sarcasm.

Among them are the Syrian Christians, who trace the roots of their religion to the arrival of St Thomas on the shores of Malabar, in North Kerala, in 52 AD. In the old days they wore their hair in a manner peculiar to the community, but today there is little that distinguishes them from their Hindu brethren except their names, which are unusual and peculiar to this community of some three million people. Names such as Varghese, Geevarghese, Cherian, Chacko, Eapen, Kuruvilla and Pothan are pointers to the religious ancestry of these people. They even distinguish them from their co-religionists who were converted after the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century, these later Christians bearing distinctive British names like Reynolds and Johnson or Portuguese ones such as Fernandes and D' Couto. Surprisingly, in spite of Dutch domination for quite a few years in these parts, there are no names of Dutch origin.

However, Syrian Christian names have their limitations because there are in all, only about thirty pure Syrian Christian names. There is of course the family name, which helps in identifying a person but that has relevance only in and around their ancestral towns or villages. In order to be specific, those who left their villages and small towns and migrated to the cities began to be identified by their occupation, though not in the manner of the Parsees many of whom, in the true English tradition of Smiths, Carpenters, Bakers and Constables, adopted the names of their occupations as surnames, giving rise to amusing ones such as Screwala and Bandoorkwala; nor did they bear the geographic connotations used by Tamil Brahmins that gave rise to names such as Calcutta Ranganathan Jagannathan or even that of the illustrious former President of India, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, who placed the name of the obscure village in Andhra Pradesh, where he had been born, as a prefix to his name.

The Syrian Christian who ventured beyond the boundaries of his home state began to be known to his friends and acquaintances within the community, but only to them, by their occupation or by their place of work. For instance Chacko, an employee of Dunlop, the tyre company, was called Dunlop Chacko, Jacob, a librarian at the Bengal Club in Calcutta became known as Bengal Jacob, Kunju once the purchase manager of Bata, the shoe manufacturer, was referred to as Bata Kunju and John, a lawyer who had practiced for a while in Dacca, the capital of what was then East Pakistan, was even long after the creation of Bangladesh and until his death, popularly known among the Malayalees in Calcutta as Pakistan John.

In the villages and small towns the 'house' name, which is almost unique to each family ensured that there was no mistaking one 'Mathen' for another. That, however, did not stop the Syrian Christian from giving one another strange names. These were not based on occupation but on some peculiarity or mannerism or humorous incident that had taken place like those in the Wild West where people knew

each other by names like ‘Limping Jennings’, ‘Thirsty Riley’ and ‘Bow-legs Brandon’ rather than the names they were baptized with.

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Mavelikkara is a small town nestling on the banks of a small river, the Achenkovil. Like most places in Kerala, it is a picturesque place surrounded by paddy fields of emerald green and acres of coconut palms through which that river meandered. Yet it is, even today, an unpretentious place that does not rate even a mention in The Lonely Planet’s book on Kerala. There is little to distinguish it from other towns in the district other than an ancient temple, an old church and the Moore College, one of the oldest colleges in the state. These, however, do not count for much in a state where churches, temples and colleges are almost omnipresent.

In the sixties, it was just another small town in Central Travancore. But it was where my roots were and it was to this modest town that my father had retired to after his sojourn of many years in Iran. I was at that time a student at the Bangalore Medical College and it was to the house that he had built in Mavelikkara that I went to during my vacations.

Although after months of eating in small *Udupi* restaurants in Bangalore, I enjoyed my mother’s famed cooking, I had never really looked forward to spending time at Mavelikkara. There was nothing much to do there. I had few friends in the place and invariably all that I did was slouch around the house, reading or pottering about in the garden. My father, too, always a distant figure to all his relations, remained in the house and hardly ever visited anyone.

With little to do other than enjoy the good food, I was not averse to doing little chores for my parents. Once, when my father wanted some Sloan’s liniment for his lumbago, I volunteered to go and buy it. As I stepped out of the house, I spotted my next-door neighbour and asked him where I could get Sloan’s liniment.

“Oh, you’ll get it at Koders,” he replied.

Koder’s? I could not believe it! S.Koder, the founder of the *S.Koder’s* chain of stores, which had been established in Cochin as far back as 1868, had been the patriarch of the Jewish community and in his day reputed to be the richest man in all of Kerala. At the time of my story it was his grandson Satu Koder who ran the establishment. Satu Koder was both the patriarch of the Jewish community and a well-known and respected figure in Cochin’s social and corporate circles.

*S.Koder’s* distributed the products of almost all the leading manufacturers in India and its outlets were prominent in all the major cities in the state. That this major chain had set up an outlet in this little town whose fame in those days rested purely on the fact that Princess Lakshmi Bai and Princess Sethu Bai of the Travancore royal family had been adopted from the Mavelikkara palace, was inconceivable. There was, I thought, simply not enough business potential there to warrant it.

“Koder’s?” I asked.

“Yes, Koder’s,” he said emphatically, but I noticed the slight smile that hovered on his lips.

“Where is it?”

“At the Mitchell Junction. Just ask anyone; they’ll tell you.”

I knew where the Mitchell Junction was, so I trotted off to get the medicine. There I looked around but could find no shop sporting S.Koder's distinctive and stylized name.

After a few minutes of fruitless search, I stopped a passerby and asked him where Koder's shop was. The man paused long enough to give me a bemused smile and then pointed to the medical shop just across the street. It was a tiny place and the name board simply stated General Medicals. There was no mention of Koder anywhere on it. I turned in askance but by then the passerby was halfway down the street. 'Surely, the man must have been mistaken!' I thought to myself.

"Where is Koder's?" I asked of the coconut vendor sitting by the roadside with a mound of tender coconuts, the tops of which he was busy slicing.

The man looked up and then pointed to the store bearing the legend 'General Medicals'

"That's not Koder's!" I protested.

"It is," he said with an emphatic nod of his head and a grin as he turned back to cutting the tops off his coconuts.

I was in a quandary. It was not *S. Koder's*, but it was nevertheless a medical shop and would most certainly stock what I had been sent to purchase. With nothing to lose, I crossed the street and entered the shop. The solitary man behind the counter had his back turned to me. He seemed to be searching for something on the shelf immediately behind the counter. I could see that he was about sixty and that he was as thin as a rake. He did not hear my approach and after waiting for a while I asked him, "Do you have Sloan's liniment?"

The man turned around and I realised immediately the reason for the amused smiles at my having asked for Koder's shop.

The shopkeeper's face was askew, with the left side of it having dropped a couple of inches. As a student of medicine I knew that the poor fellow must have suffered a paralytic stroke that left him with a distorted face and *kodi*, which, in Malayalam, means askew.

I tried to keep my face straight until I concluded the transaction and left the shop, wondering why it was that most people in this part of the world were so insensitive to another's misfortune that they named the poor man after his disability and almost to a man referred to him by that appellation.

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# A Child of her Own

*Life's aspiration comes in the guise of children.*

*Rabindranath Tagore, Fireflies*

**September 1965**

Now that she was tall enough to open the latch, Reena always tried to be the one to answer the door each time the bell rang. It was no different that morning. The doorbell rang and Reena got off her chair and charged through the passage on her plump three year old legs. How long would this enthusiasm last, I wondered.

“Who are you?” Reena asked.

“Don’t you recognize me, *mol?*” I heard a familiar voice ask.

“No, I don’t!”

“Don’t you recognize me?” I heard the voice repeat the question.

“No, I don’t!” Reena repeated.

Amma got up from the table and went to the door.

“Ah, Saramma,” I heard her say. “Come in.”

\*

We could not pin point when it all began, but it had been happening for a few months now. Things had begun to disappear - spoons, tumblers, some steel utensils and then, finally, a watch that belonged to Raju, a distant cousin who had come from faraway Kerala to try and get a job in Calcutta and like many others before him, stayed with us for a while prior to moving on to bachelor's quarters.

Raju was sure that he had left his watch on the dresser and insisted that it should be somewhere within the house.

The servants, including Saramma, our cook for the past many years, were questioned of course, but that yielded no tangible results.

Amma, in her usual forthright and no nonsense manner stated, “*Sookshikathavente muthal naanam illathavan kondupokum,*” which in Malayalam meant something to the effect that he who was careless would lose what was his to him who was shameless.

Saramma, who was within earshot immediately perked up and asked Amma in a tone we had never heard her use before, “Why do you say that, *kochamma?*”

Recognising the tone for what it clearly was, Amma replied, “Yes, that’s how it is. If you are careless, you will lose your belongings to a shameless thief. Why are you so agitated, Saramma?”

“Because you used the word shameless,” she replied.

“Why should you worry about it, unless of course you have taken something that does not belong to you?”

She turned red and the shadow of a frown appeared on her forehead, as if in irritation. As abruptly as she had embarked on the question, Saramma changed the subject and thereafter did not say anything, though her face slumped into the morose visage she often adopted when upset. Amma, as always pressed for time before leaving for work, did not give the matter much thought and within the hour was out of the house and on her way to school.

\*

Saramma had always, at least for as long as we had known her, been a moody creature. In her late thirties, she was yet unmarried and when affronted often retreated into sullen silence. She was not the easiest person to get on with, but Amma always reminded us that it must be difficult for her to be so far away from her home in Kerala and with no one from her immediate family in Calcutta. Other than a sister who lived in Baniapukur with her husband, a mechanic with a truck distributor, Saramma's closest companion was my youngest sister Reena, then almost three years old. Amma was away at school for most of the day and Saramma was practically foster mother to little Reena.

We did not know much else about her for she was rather reticent. She could, like most Malayalees even in those days, read and write Malayalam and so corresponded independently with her people back home. Her letters were therefore private.

There was of course her young man Kuriachen, who came calling most weekends and with whom she spent long often whispered talks under the stairs on the ground floor landing. With Surjo, the manservant of *Maaji*, our old land lady, having died a couple of months before, her son had come and taken her to live with him in the company quarters of the jute mill where he was employed. Surjo used to spend most of his free time under the stairs and now that he was no longer around, there was no one to interrupt or even impinge on Kuriachen's and Saramma's private conversations under the stairs.

Nobody dared to tease her about Kuriachen, but we all knew that she had a crush on the young man. Kuriachen was young and a good-looking fellow, too. I can still picture him, well-dressed with dark wavy hair parted in the centre, trying to look for all the world like Prem Nazir, the heart throb of many a Malayalee woman of those days. All of us youngsters, other than Reena, who of course was too little at that time, wondered what Kuriachen saw in Saramma. She was at least a dozen years older than him and although she was always very well turned out, had a fairer complexion than most Malayalees of that class, she was not in any way good looking. We were then too young to have even heard of the *Oedipus Complex*, let alone understand it! It remained for us youngsters a source of private amusement.

Saramma's savings were kept in a bank account operated by my father. Whenever she needed money, Appa would advance the money and then withdraw that amount later from the bank. Having seen her over the years spending her money only on buying gold ornaments and rather good silk sarees, which she would wear when she went to church or took Reena to the park, Amma had noted with concern Saramma's proclivity to lend Kuriachen money. They were not large amounts, but Amma knew that they were never repaid.

The requests had of late become frequent enough to cause her to warn Saramma that borrowers were nearly always great spenders.

“He will return it, I know,” Saramma would say.

Amma, however, persisted with her warnings, until finally Saramma retorted, “It is my money! The poor fellow needs it and I don't care if he doesn't return it.”

Thereafter Amma let the matter rest.

\*

All that had been missing until then had belonged to us and since they were invariably small and could have been misplaced anywhere in and around the house and in most cases rather inexpensive, we had not given it much thought. However, in the sixties a Citizen watch was a proud possession for a young man on the threshold of his career. Raju was insistent that he had left it on the dresser and not misplaced it anywhere.

Appa and Amma were in a quandary. Raju had lost a prized possession and the only suspect, particularly after her unexpected outburst, was Saramma. But if we had even hinted that she was a suspect, Saramma would have left us in a huff. And that would have been trouble a plenty.

Amma had been a teacher for almost all of her adult life. Soon after Appa's transfer to Calcutta she had begun teaching in a leading girl's school in the city and within a couple of years she was appointed head of the kindergarten section. It was a job she enjoyed and her salary was a useful addition to the family coffers. Her continuance at the job, at least for the next year, depended on having someone to look after Reena, who was yet too young for school. We all knew that it would be an impossible situation, if Saramma were to leave.

By evening Saramma was still as sullen as she had been after Amma's pithily sarcastic comment.

“I'm going to *chettan's* house,” she announced as she came into the living room all dressed up to go out and without so much as a by your leave, she marched out.

On some weekends Saramma went over to her sister's tiny house and sometimes even stayed over without warning. When she did not return by 7.00 pm we knew that she would not be coming back, at least not that night. As I recall it was a Friday and her absence did not inconvenience us very much.

There was a shed at the end of the property. It was nothing much to look at – just a tin roof on unplastered brick walls. Nobody stayed there and it was used primarily to store things. Saramma used it now and then and kept a metal trunk there.

That night Appa, Amma and Raju went to the shed and after trying out several keys managed to open Saramma's steel trunk. There among all her personal belongings lay Raju's Citizen watch and many of the little things that had been missing from our house.

They took everything that had been taken from the house, locked the trunk and the shed once more and returned to the main house.

The next day, as soon as Saramma returned, Appa and Amma confronted her and told her what they had found in her trunk.

“You had no business to probe into my belongings!” she screamed. “How could you?”

“As long as you are living here and in my employment, I have every right to do that,” Appa told her.

She ranted and raved for a while but then lapsed into a sullen silence. Appa and Amma let the matter rest and after a while Saramma went back to the domestic chores that were her responsibility. We all breathed a silent sigh of relief. Saramma had not left in a huff and we were hopeful that now that she had been caught, she would give up her recently acquired tendency to flick things.

It was towards evening that we realised that Saramma was no longer in the house. Although we knew she would have gone to her sister's house, we were worried for she had never left the house without informing Amma. Appa had a fair idea where her sister's home was and after waiting a while, he and Amma went there.

There, when confronted, Saramma told Appa and Amma that Kuriachen was willing to marry her and that she would not be coming back. My parents returned home and a couple of days later Appa withdrew Saramma's money from the bank and gave it to her brother-in-law. I remember that it was more than three thousand rupees, a fairly large amount in those days.

Amma's school permitted Reena to sit in her class and so that problem was solved. Life carried on much the same thereafter except in that Reena had almost overnight become a schoolgirl.

We heard that Kuriachen married Saramma and that the couple had moved to accommodations close to her sister's house. A few months later Saramma's brother-in-law came and informed us that she was pregnant.

Amma in particular was happy for her. “Poor thing. She looked after Reena as well as any mother would have. How much she must have longed for a child of her own. Quite frankly I didn't expect Kuriachen to marry her. But now everything is alright and soon she will have all that she has ever wanted.”

But that was not to be. A month later Kuriachen disappeared and was never heard of again. Saramma's money had been squandered away on food and drink. All her gold, save for the *minnu*, that symbol of a married Malayalee woman, had been pawned.

My parents did not say anything about the matter, but a few days after we heard that Kuriachen had disappeared, Saramma made her appearance at home and went back to her work almost as if nothing had happened. Only her protruding stomach gave any hint of the change in her circumstances. She did not ever bring up the subject, but we would occasionally see her smiling to herself. Was it the new life stirring in her, the tiny heartbeat that only she could feel?

She remained with us for a few months, I remember, and then went back to Kerala, to the home of a former employer, a lady doctor, who had agreed to look after her through her confinement.

\*

And there she was three years later, none the worse for her travails. A bit plumper than I remembered, but in every way all that she ever wanted to be, a proud mother with a little Reena all her very own.

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## Before the Lightning Struck

*Everyone's a little bit racist, sometimes  
Doesn't mean we go around committing hate crimes.  
Look around, and you will find  
No one's really colour-blind*

### Singapore July 2002

I was sitting in my brother Kunju's office in Singapore waiting for him to return from a inter-departmental meeting, when the telephone rang and Geraldine, his Chinese secretary, signalled through the glass partition that the call was for me. It was my first visit to that island city state and, wondering who it could be, I picked up the receiver,

“Hey Thomas!” I heard a voice holler over the telephone. Although it was strangely familiar, I couldn't place it and I wondered who had traced me to the ABN-AMRO Bank's main office in Singapore, just a day after I had landed in that city.

“Can't guess?”

“No, but I know the voice.”

“OK. Tell me, what was it that you first saw when you entered Changi Airport?”

I didn't know what to say and did not reply.

“You must have seen a lot of Chinese Checkers!”

“Dilip Abraham! What are you doing here?” I asked involuntarily, in spite of knowing the answer to that; although Dilip lived in Australia, his mother lived in Singapore.

“Well, when you've got to pay to get to the river, you'll have to stop at the bank.”

It had been fourteen years since he had left Calcutta and in all those years I had not had even one letter from him. Those were the days of snail mails and when I finally managed to get his address, the couple of letters I wrote to him remained unanswered. I would, however, think of him every now and then, especially when reminiscing about the days of my youth in Calcutta and wondered why he had not replied. I presumed that he must be struggling, trying to make a new beginning in Australia to which he had migrated.

Dilip was quite a character and one of my oldest friends. Although we did not study in the same school, our families were close and all through my schooldays in Calcutta, we would meet at least a couple of times a week and practically every day during the holidays. As a child he was always up to some escapade or other. His aspiration to become a high-wire artist once prompted him to rig a clothes-line on two poles on his terrace. Of course, his very first trial session ended with some stitches on his face and a depression on his forehead, which he carries to this day. As teenagers, we once got caught riding doubles on my cycle and had to present ourselves like common criminals at the petty case court in Alipore where we came under the gimlet eye of a stern magistrate who fined us each the princely sum

of Rs.2.00. Dilip played the guitar well - in a funky style of his own – and many were the days we spent learning new songs from the LPs that Alpha, his elder brother, also a merchant mariner, brought home from his voyages overseas.

He hadn't changed one bit; he was as big as ever and had not got rid of the straggly beard that he had been sporting when he left Calcutta. He had not lost his sense of humour either. Dilip loved punning and some of his classics, such as his photographic memory that hadn't been developed yet and the kindly advice to his mother not to pick up the sieve in case she strained herself, have remained with me all these years. I often thought of the fun he must be having in his new country with words peculiar to Australia. I could just imagine him saying something like having forgotten how to throw a boomerang but that it would eventually come back to him!

Dilip was a great raconteur and his stories were either narrations that gave an impression that he would rather be somewhere else or self deprecating ones often directed at his weight and his complexion. I often recall the words of a song, which he would often choose when asked to sing in Malayalam: *Bharam, vallatha bharam* ....which translates into 'Weight, very heavy weight'! He would invariably claim that diets were a matter of life and breadth and for people who are thick and tired of it all.

After the Senior Cambridge examinations, we enrolled together at St Xavier's College and attended the same class, but after a month or so Dilip joined the merchant navy as a cadet. Thereafter I would see him only when he came home on shore leave, but when he did, it was for months at a time and we spent a lot of that time together. I was his closest friend and knew almost his every thought, until perhaps his wedding to Nirmala. I was his best man and I still remember him mentioning after the reception that it had been an emotional wedding and that even the cake was in tiers!

Now after all these years it was great being together again. We spent the next few days touring the city. Dilip knew the city well, having been there many times from his days as a cadet. He proved to be an excellent guide and took me to places such as Mustafa's, a huge store in Little India that remained open twenty four hours, Sentosa Park, famous for its Merlion; Raffles Square and Orchard Street and to some quaint out-of -the-way restaurants, known only to those who knew Singapore well.

Over the course of those days he let on that the initial years in Australia had been really tough. Although a qualified and experienced master mariner, he had difficulty finding a suitable job in the Australian shipping industry and spent a few years in Tasmania where he taught at the maritime institute there. He liked teaching, but the pay was poor. His grin, when he mentioned that he had tried getting a job in the casino at Wrest Point in Hobart, but that they didn't have a slot for him and in any case it was a bit of a gamble, told me that he was, as usual, only punning.

It was only a few years later when he finally managed to join the Victoria Regional Channels Authority as Deputy Harbour Master, that he was able to resume work as a master mariner and receive a good salary. He seemed to have done well in his new career and by the time of our meeting he had become the Harbour Master of Geelong, one of the ports under the Victoria Regional Channels Authority.

Life in Australia had not been easy after he had migrated in 1988. It had been a long hard struggle to resettle in Melbourne with a wife and two young daughters in a country whose degree of welcome sometimes varied with the colour of one's skin. Having been born in a free India Dilip had never experienced any sort of discourtesy because of his complexion and only deemed it as a minor irritant when he was faced with subtle discrimination when he first arrived in Melbourne.

When I asked him about Melbourne, where he lived with his wife and two daughters, he was at once proud and eager and waxed eloquent on the city of his adoption. I recall him boasting that Melbourne was Australia's sporting and cultural capital, being the site of the F1 Grand Prix, the Australian Open tennis tournament, the 1956 Olympics and the 2006 Commonwealth Games and that it was also the venue of the 2006 G20 Summit.

As for its weather, he laughed and said, "If you don't like our weather, just wait half an hour, it will change. We have as many as four seasons in one day!"

"That's because you're upside down there," I laughed.

"Yes, but jokes aside, the weather is what's most difficult to get used to."

"More than integrating into Australian society?"

"Australians are generally quite easy going people. They are not class conscious; that's the best thing about them. They are, however, often suspicious and don't like people who do not fit in."

"That often leads to racism."

When you choose to live in a country other than your own you will always find a few racist idiots – they are there everywhere in the world. Again many Australians are culturally claustrophobic. Like anywhere else, if you want to live a good life there you have to make some effort to fit in."

"What about the country itself?"

"Well the rest of the world ignores us, except perhaps on the cricket and rugby fields, but it is a country that you must visit."

"What is there to see?"

"It's at once staggeringly empty and yet full of interesting stuff."

"Like what?"

"Stuff yet to be found," he replied with a mischievous grin.

"You can also gain a day if you fly from Melbourne to say San Francisco," he continued.

"Well you would lose a day if you flew the other way around, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, of course. It's something like, 'what you lose on the swings, you gain on the rounds!'"

"Australians they have a reputation of being rude, don't they?"

"They tend to be blunt, but they themselves don't view that as being rude. They think they're just being straightforward. Australians, after all never die, they just go down under," he laughed.

"Being blunt can often mean being rude."

“Not always. But you have to learn not to look for bias and when you do, ignore it if it doesn't amount to much.”

“Looks like you have fitted in,” I murmured.

“We Indians find it hard to laugh at ourselves, but the Australians don't. It's not much of a strain if you know how to laugh at yourself - after all, the koala teas of mercy is not strained.”

“You and your puns. You haven't changed one bit, have you?”

“Ha ha. The Australian can laugh at himself. A popular Aussie joke has a guy being asked at an immigration interview whether he has a police record. The fellow looks at the official and asks, *'What! Do you still need one to get in?'*”

I joined in as he began laughing with infectious gaiety.

“Another claims that a well-balanced Australian as a bloke with a chip on both shoulders. Of course there have been people like Arthur Calwell, a former minister of immigration who made comments like *'Two Wongs don't make a white'*, but that was in the 1940s. To tell the truth, I liked that pun! But these days politicians are very careful not to make gaffes like that. I think Australian have a reputation as being friendly and laid back and to a point I think they are, but like any culture they are made up of a lot of individuals and there are a number of strains of racism that exist there.”

“You've had no problems?”

“Nothing other than a back problem, but that's all behind me now,” he chuckled.

“Surely you must have faced some racism,” I said after I had laughed at the witticism.

“Yes, of course, but nothing that's insulting or meant to hurt. Amazingly a lot of their racist taunts are directed at the English. They call them poms and they are not very well liked.”

“Poms? What does that mean?”

“I don't know - 'Prisoner of Majesty' perhaps? I guess there's a bit of left-over colonial chip on their shoulders.”

“Why are they so hung up about the English? Most Australians are, after all, of English descent, aren't they?”

“Not really. Australia is today one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. Would you believe that in Melbourne the most common name after the usual Smith, Jones and Brown is Nguyen, a Vietnamese name?”

“Oh”

“Almost a quarter of the people don't have any British ancestry and if you take only the cities, it's a much larger percentage.”

“Is that why you're not affected by the discrimination?”

“It's human nature to discriminate against those who are different. If you are willing to accept that, you won't have much of a problem. Remember when they used to call us *Madrasis* in Calcutta, although neither of us was from Madras? What about that fellow who used to teach you Hindi in school, the one you said used to often tell South Indians, “*Tum lok sabh bandar hai!*”

My thoughts flew back to my schooldays when the South Indians in my class were targeted and taunted unmercifully by our boorish, dhoti-clad, pan-chewing Hindi teacher, who used Hanuman from the Mahabharata to justify calling us monkeys.

“Yes. How can I ever forget that clod! He knew Hindi, of course, but nothing else. That's why his classes were so boring.”

“How did you respond to his barbs?”

“We could do nothing other than refer to him as *khotta*, behind his back, of course. The man was vindictive and would have failed most of us. His classes were of no use and you had to study the text all by yourself to scrape through. We sat in his class praying that he would pick on someone else. He finally did.”

“He did? You never mentioned that before.”

“Well, he once made a comment about Marwaris and black market operations. When he repeated the same comment a few minutes later, Vijay Daga, one of my classmates stood up and shouted, '*Bakwas bandh karo!*'. *Khotta* charged down the aisle towards Daga yelling, '*Tum ne kya kaha?*' Daga repeated what he had said. I guess by then *khotta* realised that he was on slippery ground. He softened his tone and asked, '*Kyo?*'. Daga asked him, '*Aap Marwadi lok ke baare me yeh sab kyo bolthe hain?*'. *Khotta* then reached out to Daga, placed his hand on his shoulder and soothingly told him that he had not said anything specific about him; that he was only making a general comment and that he should forget it”

“What happened after that?”

“Nothing; that was the end of the story. *Khotta* couldn't fix Daga - he used to top the class in Hindi. I'm sure that Father Doro got to know about it, but because there was no official complaint, he would have chosen to ignore it. He must, however, have talked to *khotta*, for he eased up on his taunting - even we South Indians were spared thereafter.”

“There, that's what I mean! You will find racism everywhere, even in your own backyard.”

“But how do you respond to it there?”

“The same as everywhere else – if possible, with humour. I've not had to face anything blatantly racial, but it's irritating when someone assumes you are the go-for and not the one in charge.”

“They don't like a brown man being the boss?”

“Not so much dislike, as disbelief. A year ago when I was in the control tower when there was a sudden

and intense streak of lightning, followed by a huge thunderclap. Graham, my Communications Officer, who of course is white, came and told me that the control tower's antennae had been directly hit by the lightning and that the communication systems were down. We called for emergency help and shortly afterwards an electrician turned up. Graham had gone down to the toilet and I was the only one on the control deck. 'Giddy' the electrician said. 'Heard you've had a lightning strike. Could I talk to your boss?' Just when I confirmed that I was in charge, Graham stepped into the room and I caught the look of consternation on the electrician's face. The moment, however, passed and the fellow quickly went about his work and had the short circuit restored and everything was back to normal. I knew, however, that he was oblivious of his gaffe and so, just as he was leaving I said, 'For the record, before the lightning struck, I was white.'

Dilip burst into laughter, his chest and his ample stomach heaving. "You should have seen the look on that electrician's face! He was naturally far from delighted. Graham, of course, heard what I said and by the next day it was all over the port and I received a lot of good natured comments about it. That's the way it is with those guys!"

After a while he grinned and said, "I wish the electrician had responded by trying to assault me; I could have him charged him for battery! "

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## The Kili

*People do not understand what it costs in time and suffering to learn how to read.*

**Goethe**

Suresh Menon glanced around his office and pondered over his recent appointment. Although he was not happy with the branch to which his superiors had assigned him, having been away from Kerala for more than five years, it was he who had requested the posting to his home state. He could therefore not complain; in fact he should have been grateful.

The branch was located in a part of Cochin that had, over the years, seen business move away to more favourable locations, locations where *attimari*, the union of head-load workers, was not as well entrenched or as militant, and where the access to the new airport and other points of entry to the city were better.

There was a fresh wind blowing over the backwaters. A monsoon storm had broken out and the thunder had begun over the Arabian Sea. Was there something ominous, he wondered, in these detonations that rolled in heavy waves, like gunfire, over the water and through the sultry air. As he stared out at the dripping street he wished that the wind would not rattle the windows and that the coir carpet worn smooth by tread of hundreds of thrifty Malayalees would not emit the musty smell that pervaded everything during the monsoons.

He had been told that it was up to him to get the bank to show positive results. Only the other day, the Union Finance Minister, Mr. Yashwant Sinha, had announced a one-time settlement of outstanding loans below Rs. 10 crores, in a move aimed at ridding public sector banks of Rs. 51,000 crores of bad loans. The government, and in particular the Finance Ministry was giving a clear signal that public sector banks and public sector undertakings had to shape up or be shipped out. PSUs invariably meant unlimited waste of public money.

Arun Shourie, Union Minister for Disinvestment, Communications and Information Technology had in a recent three-part article in *The Indian Express* written that public limited had come to mean unlimited waste of public money and that the revival packages for loss making PSUs had exceeded forty thousand crores! That was a mind-boggling figure even when converted to US dollars - over eight billion. The country just could not afford such waste anymore. The minister had already succeeded in disinvesting from Maruti, VSNL and a host of companies in which the government had substantial investments and many more were on the anvil.

There had been criticism in many quarters of the minister's crusade in the newspaper and a few even observed that his journalistic zeal was in conflict with his ministerial assignment and wondered whether he was a crusading journalist or a cabinet minister! No one, however, doubted the veracity of his statements.

Menon knew that once the government had addressed the issue of the PSUs, it would turn its attention to the nationalised banks and insurance companies. Everyone knew that most of the nationalised banks had crores of non-performing assets and that the insurance companies were making profits only because of the return on investments in stocks and shares that these institutions had made many years ago. The message was clear; drum up more business or face closure.

He had taken over as manager only the day before. That very day he had talked to the staff to try and

motivate them to keep the place clean and to present a cheerful face to customers. Menon had told them that the best way to appreciate their jobs was to imagine themselves without one and reminded them that the days of clock watchers who merely marked time were over.

They were, by nationalised bank standards, not a bad lot, but there were many things that they took for granted. For instance, some of the clerks who owned motorcycles or scooters wheeled their vehicles into the bank and kept them inside the office until they left after working hours. It was not that there was no place to park these vehicles outside the building, but sheltering them from the vagaries of nature was a privilege they had become used to. He would address that issue in time, but cleanliness was something that had to be tackled immediately and reminding himself that a new broom was expected to sweep clean, he had decided to take spot checks, literally, after attending to the morning mail.

Menon was moving towards the counter when he spotted the man. He was in his sixties and was dressed in a simple yet clean and well-pressed white shirt lightly spotted by raindrops. In front of him, on the counter, was a large pile of coins and several bundles of soiled notes.

The banker paused in his stride and asked the clerk nearest to him who the man was.

“Oh, that’s Cheriachen. He sells vegetables.”

“Is he a regular customer?”

“Well, he comes here everyday to deposit his money.”

“Everyday?”

“Well, almost everyday.”

Menon went back to his cabin and called for the vegetable vendor’s statement of account. In about fifteen minutes, after the bank’s solitary computer had churned out the details and these had been placed on his table, he pored over them and then, in amazement, looked up towards the counter. Cheriachen was no longer there.

The next day, although he had left instructions with the staff at the counter that he should be informed when Cheriachen made his appearance, he kept a look out. At a quarter past ten he happened to look up and saw the man entering through the main door. As before, he was dressed in a white shirt and Menon noticed that he also wore a crisp white *mundu* that reached down to his feet shod in cream Hawaiian *chappals*. In his hand he held a large cloth bag.

The banker watched as the vegetable vendor walked to the counter and placed the bag on it. He saw him empty its contents on the counter and watched as he arranged the coins in uniform stacks and arrayed the bundles of notes on the Formica top.

When he saw the clerk reach out his hands and take the bundles and then the coins, stack by stack, Menon walked around the counter and, smiling at the depositor, extended his right hand.

The man drew back with a start, but the banker caught his right hand and to the man’s evident consternation, shook it.

“Sir, would you come this way, please?” the banker requested

“Why, what’s the matter?” the man asked in alarm.

Although Cheriachen went to the bank almost every day, he only spent whatever time it took to deposit his bundles of soiled notes and coins; he always left immediately after having done so. The bank staff had some years ago shown him how to segregate the money and, in deference to his age or was it his money, always filled in the pay-in slips for him. But the manager had never ever addressed him before; in fact Cheriachen had not ever met that official. And why was the manager calling him ‘Sir’!

“Nothing,” Menon assured him. “I am new here; I just want to get to know all our customers. Please come with me,” he said, leading the way to his cabin.

Not knowing what it was leading to, Cheriachen allowed himself to be led to the manager’s cabin and to be seated there.

“I wanted to have a talk with you about the money you have in your account,” Menon began.

“Why, is there a problem?”

“No, no! There is no problem whatsoever. It’s just that there’s quite a bit of money in it. A few lakhs, in fact.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Why don’t you put it in a deposit? You will earn much more by way of interest that way.”

“Oh, I can’t be bothered with all the paperwork,” he replied, his ears turning red in embarrassment.

“But there’s nothing to it. We can do everything. All you have to do is sign.”

“No. Let my money stay where it is. I don’t want any complications.”

“There will be no complications. I will attend to the matter myself.”

“Sir, you don’t understand,” Cheriachen protested.

“My dear sir, there’s nothing to understand. Your money remains your money, but you will earn more by way of interest. We’ll put it in a liquid deposit account. You can then withdraw whenever you like, but your balance will continue to earn interest.”

“Please sir, I don’t want it!”

“How old are you, sir?” the banker asked.

“Sixty six.”

“Wonderful! That makes you a senior citizen and entitled to an extra one per cent interest!” the banker exclaimed.

“Please sir, I don’t want it,” the man repeated.

“But why? You have everything to gain and nothing to lose!” the banker said staring at the vegetable vendor, willing him to agree.

But the man averted his eyes and then before Menon's amazed eyes his face began to crumble in distress.

“Why are you so distressed?” Menon asked. “After all it’s only a routine banking transaction.”

“You don’t understand. I cannot read or write,” he replied in mortification.

“What? It can’t be!” Menon exclaimed.

Menon could not believe his ears. Kerala was the first state in India to have been declared one hundred per cent literate and that was in 1991, more than a decade ago. A few years before that Kottayam and then Ernakulam had become the first districts in the state to be so defined. Of course everyone knew that lost in these statistics there would be a few very old men and women who were not literate. There had been a recent report, he recalled, which exposed the fact that almost two thirds of the eighteen lakhs neo-literates, including Chelakodan Ayesha the seventy two year old great grandmother who had once been the feted symbol of Kerala’s claim to a hundred per cent literacy, had lapsed into illiteracy. But how could this successful and well-to-do man be part of that miniscule minority of illiterates!

“It is true. I cannot read or write,” Cheriachen said, shaking his head sorrowfully.

Menon looked at the vegetable man in wonder.

“You are an amazing person. In spite of not being able to read or write you have managed to run a successful business and build up a small fortune. Just imagine what you could have been if you were literate!”

Cheriachen’s eyes took on a far away look as he thought of the events in his life that had brought him as a valued customer to this bank.

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He had not always been a businessman. In fact for the greater part of his life he had worked for a family; first as a servant in Varghese chettan’s household and later as a *kili* on his trucks. The *kili*’s role was similar to the man who rode shotgun on the stagecoaches of the Wild West, except in that that he carried no weapons. He went on the truck as an odd job man, providing the driver with company and assistance at the various stops along the way, particularly at the state borders where the officials from the sales tax department checked the consignments. The *kili* also kept the truck clean - which was probably how the word *kili*, which in Malayalam means a little bird, came to be used in this fashion.

Cheriachen remembered the small and shabby house in which he had been born. He remembered it kindly, because it came with memories of love, and of his mother. He could see the small boy, awakening at night, suddenly terrified by reasonless fear, and rushing from his bed into the embrace of his mother; he felt the gentle cradling as she rocked him back and forth; he heard the simple verse of

lullaby over and over:

*Rari raro rari rara roh,  
Roh, oh oh oh,  
Rari raro rari rara roh.*

His memory then slipped swiftly over the hard years of boyhood and came to the summer night when working life had begun. He thought of his early years as a *kili*. After a couple of years as a *kili*, it should have been a natural progression for him to become a driver. Cheriachen, however, had no inclination for that; in fact he disliked machinery and so was content to remain a *kili*. It was a job he did competently and with most of the drivers preferring him to the younger *kilis*, old Varghese chettan permitted him to continue riding on the trucks, although the job was really for a younger man.

Cheriachen's memory jumped forward once more and he remembered that fateful day as if it were only yesterday. It had been only a couple of months since Varghese chettan had died peacefully in his sleep and he had just returned after a long trip in which nothing had gone right. Rajan, the new driver, was a taciturn fellow and held him responsible for everything that had gone wrong and Cheriachen knew that he had already made his report to the brothers.

"Cheriachen, will you come in for a minute. We have something to say to you," Sathish told him.

Wondering what this was leading to he went into the office behind Sathish. Having worked for the family for most of his life, Cheriachen mourned old Varghese chettan, particularly because of the changes that the grandsons had wrought even in the few weeks since the old man's death. A self made man, Varghese chettan had over the years built up a fleet of trucks and had run a profitable trucking operation in Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. He had, like most of his generation, considered loyalty and trust more important than other qualities and always sent Cheriachen on the more important runs.

But all this had changed since the old man's death. His only son, Thomachen having died a few years ago, the business was left to his grandsons Sathish and Dinesh. They were college educated young men, who relied more on computers than personnel and for whom loyalty and trustworthiness did not mean all that much. Yes, they had known Cheriachen from when they were toddlers but the arrogance of youth and money prevented them from giving the old *kili* any special consideration.

"What was the problem at the Walayar check post?" Sathish asked after he had sat down.

"They changed the forms," Cheriachen replied.

"Then you should have submitted the new one."

"I did."

"But the truck was there for quite a while. Why did it take so long?"

"Well it took a bit of time," Cheriachen admitted.

"Rajan tells us that he had to fill up the form and that you cannot even read the form!"

Cheriachen looked down and mumbled, "I cannot read or write; everybody knows that."

“Well I didn’t. It did not ever occur to me that the only illiterate man in all of Kerala worked for me!” Sathish said sarcastically.

“How did you manage to avoid school?” Dinesh chimed in.

Cheriachen thoughts went back once more to his early days. His widowed mother did not have the means to bring him up and he had been sent to work in the Varghese household while he was yet a very young boy. He had been to school, of course, but all that he remembered of those first few years was that written words, even the very simple ones, did not mean anything to him. His teachers had written him off as a duffer and this had probably influenced his mother in her decision to send him to the Varghese household at such a tender age.

He was no duffer, he knew. Yes he could never get around to reading, but that did not make him a fool, did it? He had no problem with figures and could work out quite a lot in his head. But if you could not read, you were a fool; that was it. However, it did not seem to matter very much in those days. Although Varghese chettan’s house was large and rambling and there was a lot to be done, he was not overly taxed and had enough time for simple games and other recreation. There was, however, never any time or the need to read anything. He had a good memory for most things and got by quite comfortably. The only occasions when he faced some difficulty were when he went out and had to catch a bus. He could not read the destination; but that was not really a problem for he would ask someone at the bus station and get on board the right bus.

Later, when he started out as a *kili*, he had his mentors who made his entry into this activity so much easier.

But what could he tell these youngsters of these things. He merely shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s not that we want to get rid of you. It’s just that we can’t have you working any longer as a *kili* on our trucks,” Sathish declared.

Cheriachen thought of the men who rode the trucks that came from North India, the ones with all India permits. Very few of them, he knew, could read or write, and what was more, they could not communicate in any language other than Hindi. He, on the other hand, could get by in Tamil and had even a smattering of Kannada and English. That was a source of subdued pride to him. But there was no point in arguing with these young men. All he said was, “What can I do other than ride the trucks? I know no other work,”

“You can work in the house. You’ve been with us a long time and we’ll see to it that you receive close to the wages you’ve been receiving as a *kili*.”

Cheriachen pondered over the matter for a while. What should he do, he wondered. Unlike most *kilis*, he did not drink and so had managed to put aside some money, but it was not enough to see him through to the end of his life. Each year it got a bit more expensive and he had his responsibilities. He tried to mask his emotions, but his lips quivered as he stood there in that office room.

“No, I don’t want that. I would rather be without a job,” he said finally.

“In that case you’ll have to go. We’ll give you your dues if you’ll come around tomorrow.”

Cheriachen nodded at the brothers and then left the room. He did not speak to anyone until he reached home and even there it was just a perfunctory grunt to Mariamma, his wife of thirty-five years. He went to his little room and lay down in his bed striving to adjust himself to a future clouded by uncertainty until he finally he dropped off to sleep. Although he had not eaten, Mariamma assumed that he had, as he often did, eaten on the way home and did not try to rouse him from his slumber.

The next morning he woke up rather late, but after things had settled down to the usual pattern he told Mariamma the distressing news. To his surprise she bore it quite well, rather stoically he thought and when he dwelt on it later, he wondered whether it was because she had a premonition of it.

Mariamma, although outwardly quite complacent, was worried. But she knew that she should not let her husband have an inkling of her anxiety. She also knew that she must not allow Cheriachen to sit around the house, even for a day. He had to go out, even if it was only to carry out some domestic errands.

“There are a few things I need from the market. You did not bring any vegetables from Tamil Nadu on this trip. Why don’t you go to the market and get some?” she suggested.

Although Cheriachen had always brought vegetables with him when he returned from his trips to Tamil Nadu, for they were much better there, with Rajan being so taciturn he had forgotten about them. Yes, they’d have to get used to the dried up stuff that they got locally, he thought as he walked to the nearby market.

There, however, he was in for a shock. He knew, of course, that vegetables were cheaper in the neighbouring state, but that was not why he bought them there. Barring a few like *kovekka* and *vazhekka*, all vegetables were fresher and tastier across the border. What he could not believe was the sharp difference in price.

Cheriachen mulled over this on his way back home. Even at half the difference it would be really advantageous to bring vegetables from across the border, not just for his personal consumption, but to sell to others also. He could ask his friends in the fleet to bring them in. They would agree, he knew, and he would make it well worth their while. With his savings he could open a small shop. He could finance the purchase of the vegetables and engage a couple of youngsters to run the shop. All these thoughts ran through his mind like a raging forest fire and when he reached home he could hardly contain his excitement as he told Mariamma of his plans. The rest of the day went around in a blur and when he went to bed that night he did not get sleep, but kept tossing and turning around until the wee hours of the morning, working out his plans.

Mariamma, unlike her husband could read and write and knew that Cheriachen would do his best to make his plans work. He had always been a good provider and since he had never ever wasted his money, she agreed wholeheartedly. The next day she accompanied him as he went around the market area looking for a suitable place to open a shop.

Everything seemed to go the way they wanted it to and in a couple of weeks they had managed to set up a small shop. Business was slow at first but in time the word spread around that Cheriachen stocked the best vegetables in town and soon his vegetables were sold out by lunchtime almost every day.

One thing led to the other; he approached other truckers, the ones who drove their own trucks, and

entered into an understanding with them. The scheme worked better than he imagined and with Mariamma helping out, he considered supplying other vegetable vendors in the city. That was when he really began to make serious money and was forced to open a bank account and deposit his earnings there.

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The thought of the bank brought the present crashing through the shadows of the past. He looked at the bank manager and then with a shy smile said, “Yes I know. I’d have retired as *kili* on Kumbanad Transports.”

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## The Inn of the Good Samaritan

*But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.*

**St. Luke 10 vs. 33-34**

### **Jerusalem, Palestine 1944**

Adnan Khleif looked at the group that he had been assigned to guide around Jerusalem and its surrounding areas. They were a motley group of soldiers - Brits, Australians, Canadians, South Africans and a solitary Indian. The latter, a slim, prematurely balding young man, with a skin tone that was only a shade darker than his own, was from the Bombay Grenadiers, a regiment that had seen action in the Middle East, mostly in Syria. Its mission having long been over, the unit was due to return to India in a couple of weeks, and was being regrouped in Palestine, then under the British Mandate.

A confident good humour was one of Adnan's most winning qualities, but there was a passion in him as well, a deep well of it, for the history of his homeland. At twenty-five, the war years had been hard on him, a waste of his talents and the research that he had done into the history of his land and its people. He looked forward to world peace and the prospects of showing his beloved land to the tourists who would surely come, now that the wretched war was over.

This group of soldiers was not what he considered ideal visitors, but, he commiserated to himself, they would serve as a sounding board for his already well-practiced patter and he looked forward to taking them on a tour.

When all the soldiers had boarded the old bus, Adnan got in beside the driver and as the man engaged gear and drove off, he turned around in his seat and addressed them, "The older part of Jerusalem, which is where we are heading to now, is surrounded by walls that the Ottomans built four hundred years ago. It is divided into four religious quarters – Christian, Armenian, Jewish and Muslim. We will proceed to the Christian quarter first."

The bus trundled over the long empty road to Jerusalem, broken only by the occasional clump of cypress trees and drab villages. The rolling hills through which they drove were bitterly eroded and as the group looked out at the sepia landscape that moved leisurely past the windows, Adnan observed, "It was not always like this. Although there is now little but scrub and rock, it was once covered by forest."

"How do you know that?" asked a stocky brown-haired young soldier. "It looks as if it had always been this way. Just like all these other places we've been in."

"It must have been, for the Bible refers to this place as the land of milk and honey!"

The bus chugged down the dusty pot-holed road, through the almost barren landscape, until it reached the old city, where it meandered through streets lined with centuries-old buildings. It was as if they had been transported back in time and taken to a place that was at least a millennium old.

The group alighted within walking distance of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and followed Adnan through the narrow streets.

“This is the site of Christ’s crucifixion and entombment,” Adnan explained as he led them through a low arch into the courtyard of the church. “You may ask yourself, ‘Can it be genuine? Is it possible that this great church enshrines the place of Calvary and the empty sepulchre?’ But I can assure you that it is true and that is why this huge complex is considered to be the most sacred sanctuary in Christendom and why no less than six Christian sects lay claim to it.”

“Was the tomb and Golgotha so close to each other?” the Indian soldier asked.

Adnan was not as surprised at the question itself – others had made similar queries before - as the direction from which it had come. He had to date taken only Caucasians around and most of them had little knowledge of their religion and were content to let him do all the talking and listen to him. This man seemed to know more than any other visitor he had met.

“The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is not, as you would have noticed, a single structure. It is more a collection of buildings. Golgotha was well known, but the tomb was discovered only about three centuries after the crucifixion and by then Jerusalem had spread well beyond its original walls. It has been confirmed by archaeologists that both Calvary and the tomb are within the church,” Adnan replied, still wondering at the Indian’s knowledge.

At the entrance to the church Adnan pointed to a wizened old man. “He is the keeper of the keys to the church. What is amazing is that he is not a Christian, but a Muslim!”

“A Muslim!” the group echoed, almost to a man.

“Yes. The Ottomans entrusted them to his ancestors. But look,” Adnan replied with a smile, pointing upwards to the keyhole, “the keyhole is so high that he has to use a step ladder to open the door. The key to the room in which the ladder is kept, however, is with the monks of the Greek Orthodox Church.”

“Why is that?” asked one of the soldiers. Adnan presumed from his accent that the man was British.

“There have been many Christian sects entrenched here, the Franciscans, the Greek Orthodox, the Armenians, the Syrian Orthodox, the Abyssinians and the Copts and they have all been fighting over who has more rights here. At one stage they became so unruly that the Ottomans imposed a status quo over the church and handed the keys to that man’s ancestors.”

Adnan thought he saw a wry smile on the Indian’s face and wondered why.

“No Catholics?” asked one of the soldiers.

“Of course. There are the Franciscans. When the Crusaders were driven out, the Franciscan order was the only Catholic order that the Muslim rulers allowed to remain here and that was because they knew them to be peaceful. Over the centuries the Franciscans have acquired many of the holy sites and have kept them in their care to this day.”

“When was this church built?” the man continued.

“It’s been built and rebuilt several times. Sometime in the 4th century the Emperor Constantine built a huge basilica on this site; the Persians destroyed it in the 7th century. The next structure, a much

smaller one was destroyed in the 11th century by Hakim, the lunatic Caliph of Egypt. The Crusaders built the present one about fifty years after they conquered Jerusalem in 1099. It was they who decided that all of the many shrines and altars that had come up over the centuries should be sheltered under one roof.”

The soldiers spent quite a bit of time in the complex, marveling at the amazing number of shrines, monasteries, chapels and other historic monuments that were housed within that huge building.

The tour of the enormous structure over, they stepped out into the bright sunshine.

“This is the Way of Sorrows, the *Via Dolorosa*. I will now take you along the route that Christ is believed to have taken on his way to the cross, but we shall be going in the reverse order.”

The street dipped and then ascended as they passed one by one the fourteen Stations of the Cross. Their names – the Imposition of the Cross, the Chapel of Condemnation, the Shrine of the Crowning with Thorns, the Shrine of the Flagellation - rolled off Adnan’s tongue as he led them finally to the gate of the Convent of the Sisters of Zion.

“This is where the *Via Dolorosa* begins. It was on this pavement that Christ was condemned to death,” he announced gravely.

“On the pavement?” the Indian asked.

“Yes, the Judgement Hall was where the convent now stands. The Jews would not enter it because ..”

“...they did not want to be defiled by entering the house of a gentile before the Passover,” the Indian completed Adnan’s reply, to the latter’s utter amazement.

Adnan was by then certain that the man was a Christian. A Christian himself, of the Greek Orthodox Church, he was proud of his faith and of the fact that his ancestors had been converted to Christianity almost at the very advent of the religion. He, however, would have been stupefied if he had been told that the Indian’s Christian ancestry was as ancient as his own. Adnan knew of course that after the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans in 130 AD, the original Judeo-Christian community that had been described in the Book of Acts had disappeared and that there was no one left who could claim ancestry to that earliest ever group of Christians. However, not in his wildest dreams would he have had an inkling that the Indian’s ancestors in Kerala, in South India, had been converted to the Christian faith as far back as 52 AD by no less a person than the Apostle Thomas himself who had traveled to South India in that year and had died there a few years later.

They were running a bit late and therefore he did not dwell on the matter and led the group to their next site, the Wailing Wall, which stood only a few yards away.

There they paused before the fifty-eight foot wall built of massive limestone blocks. Beyond it, and shimmering high above, they could see the Dome of the Rock.

“This wall is the holiest of holy places for the Jews,” Adnan informed them.

“Why?” asked one of the soldiers.

“Historically, it is only a section of the wall that King Herod constructed when he enlarged the site of King Solomon’s Temple to accommodate his own majestic temple. But the Romans destroyed Herod’s temple in 70AD. This is all that survives of those temples. To the religious Jew it is a symbolic fragment of King Solomon’s Temple and represents the Jerusalem that they had lost.”

They did not linger there for very long and needed no prodding from Adnan to make their way to the vast enclosure that housed the Dome of the Rock. The stretch rose steeply at first and then broke out on to a large level terrace paved with flagstones, from the parapets of which they could see the desert hills of Jordan. The dome, a perfect hemisphere rested on a perfect octagon, within which was the shrine.

“This site is important for both the Muslim and the Jew. According to tradition, it was on this rock that Adam was fashioned out of dust. It was here that Cain slew Abel and where Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac,” Adnan announced and watched with amusement the incredulity on the faces of the soldiers.

“This rock is also the site of King Solomon’s Temple and for a thousand years it formed the building’s altar. The Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad flew from Mecca on his sacred steed *El-Burak* and was lifted from this rock into the stars by the angel Gabriel. This building is Islam’s first and perhaps most glorious monument and that is why, for the Muslims, Jerusalem ranks only after Mecca and Medina. They believe that on Judgement Day, the scales used to weigh souls will hang from those arches,” Adnan said, pointing to the free standing arches at the edge of the paved platform on which they were standing.

The group stood on the platform of flagged stones and looked down at the surrounding countryside. In the distance they could see the plains of Hebron, a landscape deserted save for one Bedouin shepherd and his quiet, grazing flock.

“The dome collapsed during an earthquake in 1016. It was later reconstructed and covered with painted and gilded plaster,” Adnan said, pointing to the brilliant kaleidoscope of arabesques on the inside of the dome.

Then, looking at the Indian, he said, “That was the work of Indian craftsmen.”

“Indians?” the man echoed.

“Yes. They were imported from your country in the 14<sup>th</sup> century specifically for this work.”

As they left the Dome of the Rock, Adnan said, “Do you now realise why Jerusalem is the soul of more than half of mankind. It is the fount of three world religions and the centre of an entire concept of God.”

From there they were taken down a hillside sparsely dotted with olive trees and from there to the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. There in the Garden of Gethsemane stood the Church of all Nations, a long-bodied basilica.

“This church was built within this century and houses the Rock of the Agony, the stone before which Jesus is believed to have prayed before he was arrested.”

In the tiny garden of the church stood eight old olive trees.

“You may not believe it, but it is said that these trees have been here from the time of Christ and that he actually prayed under them,” Adnan announced.

“From the time of Christ!” they exclaimed, almost in unison.

“Olive trees perpetuate themselves. If they are cut down, saplings spring up from their roots. They are all but eternal.”

“Amazing,” muttered one of the British soldiers.

“Somebody must have been looking after them for these trees to have lived so long,” another observed.

“Well, the Franciscans have been looking after them. There is an oil press here; there always has been. In fact *Gat Shemanin* in Hebrew means ‘oil-press’. The Franciscan monks bottle some of the oil for pilgrims; the rest is used in lamps around the Rock of the Agony. The olive stones are made into rosaries.”

The visit to the garden and the age of trees seemed to have an impact on all of them, even the hard-bitten Australian who had all though maintained a studied silence. The fellow’s eyes appeared to have lost their disinterested look and he stopped making the sarcastic grunts and sniggers that he had been making from time to time.

The rest of the walk back was made in silence and it was not until they had exited the old city through St. Stephen’s Gate and entered their bus that anyone spoke.

“These walls and the gate were built by Suleiman the Magnificent,” Adnan announced, breaking the silence. “Legend has it that he entrusted the construction to two brothers. These architects started building the walls in the west and circled away out of each other’s sight for seven years until their ramparts met at this gate. However, through oversight or otherwise, they excluded the Tomb of David from the protection of the walls. Because of this the sultan had them hanged and buried near the citadel. Their graves are there even today, nestled side by side under a fig tree.”

With a clash of gears the vehicle moved off and soon it was trundling down the road to Jericho, heading back to their camp. As it wound its way down to the Jericho Valley 1300 feet below sea level, a wind blew across the wasteland acrid with sand and limestone.

Half an hour later they approached a village, a heap of white blocks that stood out stark against the dusty flank of the mountain. As they drove past it, Adnan asked the driver to slow down and, pointing to a building in front of which stood a well, announced with a flourish, “That is the Inn of the Good Samaritan.”

All the men turned and looked in wonder. The buildings that they had seen thus far were far removed from the stories of Jesus that they had heard from childhood. However, they were to a man familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan and most of them were more impressed with this rude structure than all the magnificent and historic edifices that they had seen that morning. Adnan knew that they would be and that was why although they had crossed the village in the morning on their way to Jerusalem, he had not mentioned anything about it. He had wanted to save it, as always, for the last as

the *piece de resistance*!

As they left the village far behind Adnan smiled to himself, pleased with the way the tour had gone.

Suddenly he heard the strangely accented English once more. “How could that be the Inn of the Good Samaritan? There was no Good Samaritan! There was no inn! The story was only a parable that Jesus used to explain to his disciples who they should consider their neighbours.”

Adnan was stumped. He had not ever thought about this and to date no one had ever questioned the veracity of his statements. But yes, the man was right. How did this soldier, this man from a strange and faraway land know so much about the Bible? That question, however, could wait. He had to salvage his position as the expert and the final authority, at least in this group, on the history and monuments of Palestine.

“You are correct, of course. But this was the inn that Jesus had in mind when he told the parable. After all we are on the road to Jericho and the gospels definitely state that the inn was on this road.”

The Indian made no reply, but Adnan caught the glimmer of a smile and a glint of appreciation in his dark brown eyes.

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# The Would-be Comrade

*The difference between communism and democracy is – plenty*

**Tripunithara, 1959**

“The communists will ruin Kerala,” Shankara Menon moaned as he sat on the front verandah of his house, a well-preserved *nalukettu* close to the Hill Palace, once the seat of the Cochin Royal family.

This had been an almost daily litany in the Kuttakilam *tharavad* ever since E.M.S. Namboodiripad and his Communist Party of India had won the state elections two years before, to become the first ever democratically elected communist government in the world!

“They have a lot of support among the lower classes,” his cousin Shankunni observed.

“This is what happens when illiterates are allowed to vote!”

“Democracy is for everyone, isn’t that the way it should be? Even in England when they introduced universal suffrage, illiterates who were allowed to vote and many did.”

“That may be so, but look at the situation here. Today someone like Balan,” Menon said, indicating the young man who stood by him with a casual wave of his hand, “who can’t write and can only barely read has just as much a say as I have.”

Balan had been brought up in the Kuttakilam *tharavad* and had been there from the age of twelve. He had helped around the house all through his teens and although he was no longer employed there, he would appear before Shankara Menon every day and carry out any errand that the *karnavar* required of him, before he went on to nearby Cochin, where he worked as a peon in a private company.

“What do you have to say, Balan?” Shankunni asked.

“Communism is the only hope for someone like me.”

“Why do you say that?”

“They are the ones who will see to it that we are not exploited.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve become a communist!” Menon exclaimed

“No sir.”

“Then where do you get these crazy ideas from?”

“Well sir, I have been attending some of their meetings,” Balan admitted.

“Meetings! You are wasting your time.”

“No sir, it is quite interesting.”

"I don't know what they tell you in these meetings, but I know that all the communists want to do is to quench their thirst and their hunger with your *kallu* and your *oonu*."

"But there must be someone to protest about all the injustices, sir."

"Have you even heard of a protest march in Russia?"

"No sir."

"They don't even believe in God there!"

"*Chettan*, communism is not a religion. It is only a political ideology," Shankunni interjected.

"Maybe, but communists are atheists, one and all. In Russia they have abolished God. Fortunately for them, God has been more tolerant of the Russians than they have been of Him. Communism may seem a good idea, but just like prohibition, it will not work."

"They say that the Russians are better off under the communists than they were under the czars," his cousin said.

"All of Europe is better off today than they were under their kings and queens and all of them are better off than the Russians."

"So they say. But the communists claim that the European economies will not last for long and that France and Italy will soon become communist."

"That is the dream of all these college rebels. That is what they hope, Shankunni; but that will not happen and these fellows will remain mere college campus rebels."

"Why are you so sure of that?"

"France may have had, as Thomas Carlyle says, a long despotism tempered by epigrams, but the French love the good things in life far too much to become communist. As always, they do a lot of talking, but when it comes to the crunch, they will not embrace it. As for the Italians, they too talk a lot, but there it is the church that will prevent a communist takeover. Can you imagine all the Catholics in Kerala becoming communists?"

"No, I can't."

"The point is that communism cannot survive without capitalism."

"How can that be?"

"Well, if everybody is employed by the state, it is obvious that everyone gets paid by the state. So all the tax that comes back to the state is money that came from the state in the first place. So the state only gets back maybe one third of what it paid out last month. So this month the only way to pay everyone is by printing more money. So it follows that in a communist state the money soon becomes imaginary, because the state has nothing for that money to represent."

“How do you account for the missing money?”

“The missing money comes from the profits. But the only way the state can get a profit is by selling the goods abroad and the only way that this can happen is if the foreign states are capitalist and have a surplus from their taxes to buy things. Or you have to sell to capitalist companies. So it is obvious that communism cannot survive without capitalism.

“But that is contradictory because communism is supposed to toll the end of capitalism.”

“Yes, that’s true. That’s why if the whole world went communist, the entire economy of the globe would grind to a halt within the space of a week!” Shankara said in triumph.

“I’ve got to be going,” Shankunni said as he stood up and picked up his umbrella.

Shankara Menon nodded at his cousin who then opened the umbrella and stepped out into the bright sunshine and left by the ornate *padipera* at the entrance to the property.

“Balan, I know that it is your own time and your own business, but I would prefer that you don’t go for these communist meetings.”

“Communism seems to be what we need in India, sir.”

“You don’t know what it’s like where the communists rule. They say that all that Russia lacks is something for the Russians to eat, something for them to wear, and something constructive for the people to do.”

“Sir, it’s like that here, too.”

“But at least here we can say what we please and we don’t have to listen unless we want to.”

“Sir, what is the use of being able to say what one wants when there is so much inequality?”

“The communists think that man is so weak that he cannot govern himself and therefore requires the rule of strong masters. In India we are trying to build a strong economy and we will. Mark my words; it will not be through communism.”

“But we should give them a chance, sir.”

“Chance for what?”

“A chance to show that they mean what they say.”

“Once you give them a chance, you are stuck with them for ever.”

“They can be voted out, sir.”

“They can be voted out of one or two states and they will be voted out of Kerala, but if they get control of the country they won't go away. Hitler and the Nazis were also voted into power, but Hitler managed

to assume absolute power and ruled Germany as an absolute dictator for about a dozen years. They say that in Russia there are two parties – the one that’s in power and the one that’s in jail,” Menon chuckled.

Balan, too, found it amusing and laughed contentedly at the *karnavar’s* jest.

“On a serious note, I must tell you something that Joseph Stalin, who succeeded Lenin, said in 1924. He said that as soon as the classes that formed Russian society before the communists took over had been abolished and the dictatorship of the proletariat had been done away with, the Communist Party would have fulfilled its mission and could be allowed to disappear.

“But the communists are still in power there, aren’t they?”

“Exactly. The old class structure has been done away with, but the Communist Party is still there. That’s why I say the communists will never give up power voluntarily. They will have to be forced out.”

There being nothing that he wanted done in Cochin, Menon dismissed Balan soon after. He continued, however, to sit in his easy chair pondering over the changes that had taken place in rural Kerala over the past few years. It was inevitable, he thought, that with a high level of literacy, by far the highest in India, Kerala should have been the first to vote the communists into power. A revolutionary movement requires a revolutionary theory, he conceded and it was easy enough to turn out catch phrases that looked good on handbills and posters. It would, however, be a long time, he told himself, before the workers realised that theory and promises made on handbills and posters were one thing and that living up to them was yet another.

In the old days he would have dismissed Balan for merely attending a communist meeting. The equations, however, were changing throughout the length and breadth of the state. These days it was he who needed Balan more than the latter needed him. And he was a good fellow; hardworking, diligent, honest and, unlike many young men of his background, not given to drink. However, he must wean Balan man away from the Communists and their damned influence. ‘How can I do that?’ he wondered.

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Balan continued to call on the Kuttakilam tharavad every morning. Without fail, Sankara would ask him about the meetings and Balan would respond enthusiastically. Sankara tried his best to convince him of the futility of it all but he could see no change in the man and after a while stopped raising the issue.

A couple of months later, Sankara asked Balan whether he could call on the family lawyers in Kochi and bring back the draft of a plaint that was being prepared.

“Yes sir,” the man replied with an alacrity that prompted Sankara Menon to ask.

“You don’t have a party meeting tonight?”

“Oh, I have stopped going to those meetings,” Balan replied.

“I told you were wasting your time.”

“Yes sir, and you were right,” Balan conceded.

“What made you change your mind?”

“At the last meeting that I attended it was proved that if all the wealth in the country was divided equally the share of each person would be around two hundred and sixty seven rupees.

“So what?” Menon asked.

“Well,” Balan replied, “I now have quite a bit more than that.”

