

**An excerpt from “Dust motes from a sunbeam” a play by Vijay Nair ( 2007)**

*Act II. Scene I*

*A prison. Two years later*

SAMEERA. I can't believe you are here.

RATNA. I don't know why I came.

*Ratna takes out a tiffin box from a bag. She gives it to Sameera.*

SAMEERA. What is it?

RATNA. Chicken curry and Paranthas. I read in the papers you wanted non-veg and they weren't giving it to you.

SAMEERA. Thank you. That's very good of you.

RATNA. It's not much. It would just suffice for one meal.

SAMEERA. That's a lot. I won't be able to finish so much.

RATNA. I am sure you can manage.

*Pause*

Do you want to eat now?

SAMEERA. May I?

RATNA. Of course!

*Ratna takes out a bottle of water from her bag and gives it to Sameera. Sameera starts to eat hungrily.*

RATNA. The food they must be giving here must be quite terrible.

SAMEERA. It's quite okay. We take turns to cook it. But it is vegetarian.

RATNA. You were a vegetarian when you stayed with me. You couldn't bear the sight of meat.

SAMEERA. I started eating everything after I went back.

*Pause*

Did you cook this?

RATNA. Yes. The curry is the same recipe you gave me.

*Pause*

I suppose it doesn't taste the same. I can't cook like you.

SAMEERA. It's very good.

RATNA. You don't have to say that.

SAMEERA. No. Really. Do you have a paper with you?

RATNA. A paper?

SAMEERA. I want to wrap two paranthas and save it for later. They never give paranthas. Only rotis.

*Pause. Ratna rummages in her bag and takes out some paper napkins. Sameera spreads one and places two paranthas on them. Carefully ladles out some chicken on paranthas and keeps them aside. She looks up at Ratna.*

SAMEERA. Are you very angry with me?

*Silence*

That's why I wanted to meet you.

RATNA. Why?

SAMEERA. Because I thought you would be angry with me.

RATNA. I am. Just because I got you food doesn't mean that I have forgotten everything.

SAMEERA. I thought so.

RATNA. I could have been sitting where you are now. In this miserable cell with no fan.

*Pause*

I am claustrophobic. I wouldn't have been able to survive this for more than a week.

SAMEERA. It's not so bad.

RATNA. Do you have a cellmate?

SAMEERA. I had an old woman for a week. She was a thief. Her term got over. She didn't want to go. They had to force her.

*Pause*

They told me they would be getting someone soon.

RATNA. All this is so unnecessary. See what kind of soup you have landed yourself in.

*Silence*

Are you finished? Already?

SAMEERA. I don't feel like eating anymore.

RATNA. Keep it. You will feel hungry later.

SAMEERA. If you are so concerned about my eating, you can't be very angry with me.

RATNA. Don't push your luck.

*Silence*

SAMEERA. You remember the day I cooked Biryani for your friends.

RATNA. When?

SAMEERA. The time you wanted me to meet them. So many of them. Rafiq saab and all the others.

RATNA. That disaster-

SAMEERA. I was thinking of that evening just before you came in. They just loved the Biryani I made. I felt so proud.

RATNA. What Biryani?

SAMEERA. The one I made while teaching you.

RATNA. What are you saying? You didn't make it. You fell ill that day. You were puking all the time.

SAMEERA. No. You are talking of another day.

RATNA. I am not. I can never forget that day. I was so stressed. I had told all of them I was going to cook. I don't know why I did that. I just get carried away. Then you said you are going to help me. I was so relieved. And then something happens to you just when you are about to marinate the meat. You get sick.

*Pause*

I had to call everyone and postpone the party by a day. There was no Biryani for guests. We just ordered Chinese.

SAMEERA. No. I cooked.

RATNA. Stop lying.

SAMEERA. What?

RATNA. Stop telling lies. Stop making up stories. Why do you do this?

SAMEERA. It's not fair on your part to accuse me like this.

RATNA. I am not accusing you. You are lying through your teeth.

*Pause*

Who has been teaching you? Your new lawyers? The new friends you have. Remember they are the ones who have got you here.

SAMEERA. Why would I lie about something like this?

RATNA. I don't know.

SAMEERA. Please don't be upset. I am sorry. I didn't mean to...

RATNA. You have been such a disappointment. I thought you were young. And brave. We could have done so much together. We could have made history. We would have made those bastards pay for what they did.

SAMEERA. It's not that simple.

RATNA. No?

SAMEERA. No.

RATNA. Why did you do it?

SAMEERA. The thing about memory is that it does not know how to discriminate.

RATNA. What?

SAMEERA. The thing about memory-

RATNA. I heard you the first time. But what does it mean?

SAMEERA. You are telling me the party did not happen. I did not cook. But that is not how I remember it. I was shy to begin with. But they praised my cooking so much that I forgot...I forgot everything. Although they were drinking...they were nice. All of them said it was the best Biryani that they had tasted.

RATNA. Lies. All lies!!

*Sameera looks upset*

This is what happens to liars. They get trapped in their own lies.

*Pause*

And what is all this nonsense about memory not knowing how to discriminate. Who taught you all this rubbish? It doesn't even sound like you. You were such a simple girl. Someone who couldn't even speak proper English. How can you talk like this?

SAMEERA. Like what?

RATNA. You know what I mean? When you were with me, you could be trusted.

Then you went back. God alone knows what they did to you. And you became this monster. Every day the papers had a different story about you. One day you say something. The next day you recant. Then you say something else. And you recant again. Then you make all those vile accusations against me. You say under oath that I forced you to give false evidence. You know what that means? You know how much trouble that could have got me into. After all I had done for you.

SAMEERA. You never did anything for me. You got me food today. I am grateful. That's all.

RATNA. I don't believe this. I should have never come. Everyone warned me. But I had to do this. How stupid can I be! The whole office is going to laugh at me after I tell them what happened here. They will all be sweet to my face and tell me I shouldn't feel bad. I meant well. But behind my back all of them would snigger.

SAMEERA. That must matter a lot.

RATNA. What?

SAMEERA. Whatever they say.

RATNA. Of course it does. It hurts. The whole thing hurts.

SAMEERA. What about me?

RATNA. What?

SAMEERA. Do I matter?

*Pause*

Did I ever matter?

RATNA. Don't try that with me. Don't ever try that with me. I am not the one who let down those who were close to me. You did. Your own uncle's family. Nine of them! Massacred! Two babies. Did any of that matter when you signed up for that fat bank account. How much did it take to forget the carnage? 5 lakhs? 10? 15? 50? Don't you dare turn moralistic on me! Not a single phone call after you left. Not a single letter. You forgot all the promises you made before you left. Whatever it was...threats...bribes...you could have told me. I would have come wherever you asked me to. They wouldn't have dared to touch me. The courts are buying for their blood. If they had as much laid a finger on me...Why did you forsake the truth? Why couldn't you tell them what you saw?

SAMEERA. I told them. I told them the truth.

*Pause*

I saw dust motes falling from a sunbeam. They scattered after a while. The sun has a way of moving just when you think it would never go away. They are there for a while. Scattered dots... and then they disappear.

RATNA. What crap is all this? This doesn't sound like you. What dust motes? Where?

SAMEERA. In your kitchen.

RATNA. There is no sunbeam in my kitchen. What's wrong with you?

*Pause*

I see. This is the ploy. I should have seen it coming. You have really become very clever. It's a plea for insanity. Is it? And I am supposed to get you out of here. I don't believe any of it.

*Pause*

How can I fall for this!

Is this for real?

SAMEERA. I don't want to go anywhere from here. I know I can never be safe. But this is the safest it can get. What can they do to me here? Beat me? Rape me? Maim me?

None of that frightens me any more. I saw enough of all that.

RATNA. So you did see all of it. You are finally telling the truth.

*Silence*

SAMEERA. I swear all I saw were the dust motes that fell from the sun beam. Even on that night, when I crouched on that cold terrace and saw them filing in...one after the other. They were so silent. There was a lot of shouting and screaming outside...but when they came inside they were silent. The entire family crouched. I could see my cousin sobbing...she had the baby in her lap. I thought she would smother her. She was clenching the baby so tightly to her. I wondered whether he was already dead. He was as still as those who came in... *Pause* and then it was morning. I could see a single stream of dust motes falling from a sunbeam. They scattered when they fell on a bloodied face. I couldn't recognize it. There was so much blood.

RATNA. That's not what you told me the first time. You said you saw him and his cronies...screaming and shouting...ranting for their blood. You saw them being butchered. Even the babies. We had such a good case in our hands.

SAMEERA. I only saw what I saw. I saw them again in your kitchen.

RATNA. STOP LYING. THERE'S NO SUN BEAM IN MY KITCHEN. THERE ARE NO DUSTMOTES.

SAMEERA. I saw them. What can I do? I saw them the day after the party. After I met all your friends. After they asked all the questions. And I answered them. Every single one of them.

RATNA. You never answered any of them. You just sat there. Tongue-tied. It was so infuriating.

SAMEERA. I did.

RATNA. You didn't.

*Silence*

RATNA. You should have told the truth...instead of denying everything. I always believed you would.

*Pause*

I was dumb. I was stupid.

SAMEERA. They wouldn't spare anyone-

RATNA. Don't go on and on. What's the point? It is too late. You should have done it then.

*Silence*

This feels wrong somehow. I should have never come. I will go. I don't know what you are trying to do here. But I don't think I can help. I feel too tired now. Too stupid! I can't even help myself. Look where helping you got me. Inside this cell. And I am claustrophobic.

*She gets up to go. Sameera is staring into space. Not looking at Ratna.*

SAMEERA. After I went back, the summons came. We were put up in this grand resort.

*Ratna turns back.*

RATNA. I read about that. You went with your entire family on a paid holiday. Paid by those killers.

SAMEERA. Yes. Everyone. My father couldn't come because he was visiting his village for a few days. All the rest went. My mother. Sisters. Brothers. Sister-in-laws. All of us had a room to ourselves. It was very nice. Like living in a dream. Such good food. That's when I started eating meat again. And nothing to do. My brother swam the whole day. None of us knew how long we were going to be living there. But we wanted to live there as long as we could.

RATNA. Disgusting! I don't want to hear any more.

*She starts to leave again.*

SAMEERA. Stop! Don't go. Let me finish what I am saying.

RATNA. What is there to hear? If you think honesty is going-

SAMEERA. I started to sleep well. No waking up in the nights. Eight hours. Nine hours. Ten hours.

*Pause*

One night I was woken up. By a woman I didn't recognize. There was something oddly reassuring about the way she lead me out. I felt I could trust her. She was so gentle. *Pause.* There was a courtyard at the back. It was a full moon night- swathed in white. There was the

intoxicating smell of raat ki rani and champa. I saw some figures huddled out there. And there were others surrounding them. At least twenty of them. As many as in that party. He sat in the center. In a chair. Smiling at me. Just like your friends smiled that evening. As if he had something grand to say. I smiled back.

*Pause*

I didn't see her at first. The eyes take a while to get accustomed to the dark. First it was my mother. Then a woman was standing there stark naked. Not a stitch of clothing on her! Even in the dark I could make out her breasts had shriveled. She has always worn the veil. I had never seen her like that.

She must have been sobbing. But I couldn't hear her. I looked at all of them. Sisters. Brothers. Sisters-in-law. All of them sat there looking at the ground. Then I heard him.

"You know what you have to do."

"What?" I don't think anyone could hear me.

But he did.

"We would get you new lawyers," he said. "Just listen to them."

Then he got up and left. The woman who had led me out of my room went and draped my mother's dupatta around her. Then she also left. All of them did.

We got the money the next day.

*Silence*

RATNA. You are not telling me another lie, are you?

SAMEERA. I am never going to say all this in a court.

RATNA. I can help-

SAMEERA. No. You have done enough.

*Pause*

I am sorry I said all that about you in the court. I thought you had powerful friends. They couldn't do anything to you.

RATNA. Listen-

SAMEERA. No. Please don't. I told you I feel safe here.

*Pause*

If you can, ask them whether they can give me chicken some time. I feel like eating all the time. Not anything. Just rich gravies. Like my mother used to make.

*She lifts the paranthas and puts them on her bed.*

They will take us for evening exercise. I don't want the ants to get them.

RATNA. I would like to visit you again.

SAMEERA. Don't.

*Fade out.*