

S. Diwakar

The Orphans

For thirty three years the old couple had lived in that small village full of dusty old houses. They had lived in poverty in the hope that they would some day own a house in the city. Little by little they had built up their nest egg. Finally, when they did manage to buy a house in the city they wondered how they had had survived in the village for so long, like exiles. It was in that village they had married and it was there that their hair had turned gray.

One mid-summer morning the old couple put their meager belongings in a cart and started off to the railway station. The groaning of the broken cart, the gasping struggling bullocks, the whip-lashing driver - all made their way to the highway.

Their imminent journey had acquired a kind of aura. Several persons had gathered at the railway station. There were old women with the loose end of their sari drawn over their heads. There were young girls looking wide-eyed at those attired in fashionable cloths. There were men with long staffs blinking stupidly at everyone. The village elders, the post master, the school teacher were all there. A tall thin man was walking from one end to another giving orders. But no one seemed to pay any attention to him.

Some looked at the city-bound couple with envy. There were others who felt regret that they had not, like the old couple, acquired a house in the big city where they too could have led a happy and independent life. There were others too who felt that their own little village was their heaven. With a kind of detachment they waited for the train to depart. On this occasion the old man travelling to the city had particularly drawn everyone's attention. He looked captive in a tight jacket stitched at the time of his wedding so many years ago. He looked like a clown in that ill-fitting attire. He was talking and smiling at everyone who had come to bid him fare well all the while writing down the many errands he had been entrusted to accomplish in the city. He had been asked to help search for documents in a government office for someone. He had to enquire the price of a pistol for a rich fellow of the village. He had to visit many suburbs in the village and deliver a variety of messages. He was requested to send some special medicine to someone suffering from asthma. The asthmatic patient guessing that the name of the medicine was not easy to remember wrote it on a piece of paper and

gave it to him.

The signal for the train to move came on. Everyone wished the old couple a happy journey and waved their hands. Some waved their handkerchiefs too. There were some elderly people who even burst into tears. Crossing the line of crying and smiling faces the train moved gathering speed. Some distance later only the two coconut trees that looked as though they were holding the station aloft were seen. In the distance the village was visible faintly for some time and then it too disappeared.

The old couple began arranging their luggage in their dusty third class compartment. After arranging everything to their satisfaction they sat in from of each other and looked out of the window of the speeding train. The village they had left behind grew more and more remote.

The train, making deafening noise was then running in the middle of wide fields. Harvested fields and haystacks were seen. Trees appeared and disappeared faster than the train. Now and then some village huts, railway workers quarters, temple staples made an appearance. And then a flowing stream, some vines and thorny bushes and at a distance a faintly visible row of hills....

The travelers were bound to a crowded noisy city. The old man was retires school teacher receiving a meager pension. They had no children. The husband and wife were now going far from their familiar surroundings. Severing links with the past made them uneasy. Recently they had spent one whole week in the city. After many house that were for sale and after a lot of bargaining they had eventually bought an apartment. Now they had the key to the flat with them. In spite of it they were assailed by doubts and fears about their future.

There are couples who after living together for a long time begin looking and behaving like each other. These two travelers were no exception. Both had the same height, the same gentle nature. They were so alike that it was difficult to say whether they were husband and wife or brother and sister. Their blank faces which did not reveal any emotions came to life only when they yawned. In the old days the old man used to have contempt for city life. He who would breath fire at the very idea of owning property had considerably mellowed since then. Now having turned selfish, he had bought a house in the city. His wife was no different. Earlier she too had been full of idealism. But once she crossed thirty five years she had changed a lot. Not only had she added weight to her bottom but also acquired pain in her kidneys. Of late she had begun to crave for pickles. In all seasons of the year she made pickles - lime, j jackfruit, chilies and whatever else was available. The pickle jar now placed next to her was a symbol of her skills.

The sun's rays came dancing through the window. The old couple fed up with the speeding train which shook their bodies incessantly began to doze. A fly came and first sat on the old woman's nose and then on the old man's. Not wishing to swap it, the old couple only frowned. Once the old man got up with a start, but realizing that he was still in the train went back to sleep. The old lady yawned like an aged lion and then looked fondly at her husband. He immediately understood the meaning of her fond look and took out a box from the basket. Leisurely they ate the rice pudding they had brought with them from home. When the train stopped at a deserted wayside station, they ordered for some coffee. After drinking it they again fell asleep.

That night the train reached the city after a long time. The numerous city lights glittered in the distance. The passengers got ready to get down with their luggage. Looking anxious and dazed the old couple too got down from the train and drove a hard bargain with a coolie who came to help with their luggage. The old lady held a paper-wrapped object in her arms.

A man who came on the platform swinging his arms dashed against the object she was carrying. The paper wrapped around it was torn. The man who was in a great hurry went away without noticing it. But people around saw that it was a toy eagle made out of cotton wool. Its eyes made of glass pieces glittered.

Their apartment was located in a massive building at the center of the city, in a noisy street. From early morning till late in the night its windows and doors rattled with the noise of the constantly plying lorries, buses, horse-drawn carts and motorcycles. People entered and went out of its many doors day in and day out. It was not easy to guess how many people lived there. But the pulse of a distinct world beat in that building. People remained strangers and each hated the other secretly. Any small excuse was enough to set them fighting with their neighbors.

The people living in the different stores of that building welcomed the old couple with the same kind of animosity. They looked at them tauntingly and laughed at their rural ways. They whispered among themselves of their meager possessions. A hefty woman with a double chin peeped into the window as the old couple entered their home and wanted to know if they had brought in any roaches or ticks. According to her these pests were the types that would multiply in no time and spread all over the building. When the old couple with a gentleness natural to them told her the God had so far protected them from such pests the double chinned woman ought to have been pacified. Instead she gave a disbelieving snort and arrogantly turned away her head.

In this way the old couple began their life in the city. Loneliness engulfed them. No one seemed to want them. They swallowed their humiliation and tried to adjust to the situation. They decorated their apartment in the

same fashion as their home in the village. They hung the same old paintings in their bedroom. The eagle made of cotton wool occupied a prominent place. They bought a few more chairs. These chairs looked like guests and stood apart without merging with the rest of the furniture. Late in the night, much after the sounds had died down a little the chairs, bought secondhand, creaked as though they were spitting hatred. They felt that just as people laugh at old things the chairs were making fun of them.

In the beginning they hardly stayed at home. For many days they roamed the streets full of people, stood stupidly before the shops, dashed against all those who came in front of them and went into any old hotel to assuage their hunger. The city still held them in thrall. Unaware, they tried to enter this strange world, to mix with others and to try to live like others. But the surrounding world refused to have anything to do with them. Their desire was not fulfilled either in the town squares or the broad roads nor in the parks where children played. Suffering loneliness and exhausted like orphans they returned to their home, climbed the stairs, went inside and cowered in their second floor flat. The film music from the radio in the neighboring house floated in and assailed their ears for a long time.

The hefty woman with the double chin lived above their flat on the third floor. Her husband had been a retired judge before his death. She had sold her two-storeyed villa to a builder. He had demolished the villa and built a three-storeyed building which had several apartments in its place. The widow of the judge bought four flats from him - one for her own use, second for rent and remaining two for her son and married daughter. The judge's property had been divided thus some ten years ago. Perhaps because at one time she had a villa there, the hefty woman behaved as though the building still belonged to her. A victim of this incurable hallucination she treated all those living in the apartment building as trespassers. She was in the habit of sitting near a window and glaring at all those who climbed up or went down the stairs. A maidservant was the only other person in her flat. And she rarely saw her children. They had rented out their flats since they chose to live elsewhere in the city. It was only on festive occasions that the mother got a chance to see her children.

The old couple gauged the arrogance of the judge's widow the very day they moved into their new flat. Determined to somehow win over her affection, they decided to pay her a visit. One particular day there was heavy downpour. Rain drops were beating incessantly against the window panes. Thinking that this was the ideal time, they climbed the steps to the third floor and pressed her door bell. To the maidservant who opened the door they told of their intention. Within a few minutes the widow herself appeared and superciliously stood at the door. She had come thinking that she would find some excuse to spill her anger, but when she saw how those two villagers stood humbly and smiling rather timidly, she laughed and invited them in.

The old couple who had made a transition from the village to the city, walked hesitantly on the soft carpet and entered a big room. The entire belongings of the late judge had been accommodated there. They gaped at the old sofas, upholstered chairs and the huge chandeliers which moved with the breeze. There was a brown colored table with the knobs of the drawers broken and a flower pot in the corner. Next to it was a plaster-cast figurine of Mahatma Gandhi. A deer skin spread out in the middle of the room was torn at several places and had turned to a dull cardboard color. Our old man's attention was caught by the trophies, ancient swords and a bison's head - all arranged on the wall behind the table. Years ago the judge had probably worked in such an environment. But now only his portrait hung on the wall.

The old couple turned uneasy as soon as they entered the room. The judge's portrait, ancient swords, the long-horned bison's head all created some fear in them. However our old lady recovered quickly and said that people living under the same roof must help each other. But when she saw that the widow did not reply to this but merely let out a sigh, she began to praise the curtains, the carpet and the flower vase in the room. The widow continued to let out sighs. Finally, our old lady looked at the judge's wife and enquired when he had died. That seemed to have a soothing effect on the double-chinned woman. This woman who had never learnt to be polite, slowly started narrating her story. She spoke in detail about how she being twenty years younger than her husband was looked after by him like a queen, how she had visited the *Taj Mahal* soon after her wedding, how she bore two children and finally was forced into widowhood. Though the old couple sitting on the soft sofa occasionally tried to get in a word on the fate and misfortune of man, she paid no attention and continued with her story.

Her face turned red with anger when she spoke of recent events. She told them how the tenderness in her disappeared when her husband died while undergoing a stomach operation and explained how she had turned to stone after that. She cursed the doctor who had killed her husband, she complained against the builder who had cheated her. In fact, she had not met a single good person after her husband's death. Berating every person living in that apartment block, she shouted that they were all thieves and bandits conspiring to kill her. The gold necklace at her throat dangled up and down as she narrated these things.

Listening to her story, the old couple felt that at any moment she may start berating them too. But she did not directly do so. Instead, she looked them up and down, rather mockingly, and asked why they had left their village to come and live in the city, and then let out a sigh again. She told them she could not offer them coffee because there was no sugar. The old couple replied that they did not want any coffee.

When they got up to leave she gave a final sigh and told them not to disturb her again as she wished to be left

alone with her sad memories. When the old couple left that large dimly-lit room, the judge was staring at them from his portrait. Sweat poured out from their faces.

After this humiliating experience they gave up the idea of making friends with others and kept to themselves. Around this time a stranger drew their attention. They would encounter him while climbing or getting down the stairs and each time he would bow low respectfully and give way to them. Being the recipients of this unexpected courtesy the old couple were eager to make his acquaintance. This stranger had a kind of shy expression that was in great contrast to his huge body. He was about thirty years old. Gradually the elderly couple ran into him repeatedly. As days progressed they yearned for him. One day as they were going down the steps, he invited them to his room. Happy, as though they were to get a glimpse of haven, they entered his dirty, almost bare room. His face turned red with exaggerated humility. He served them with snacks and coffee he had brought from a hotel. Very soon he shed his shyness and spoke to them freely. He told them that he was the son of a millionaire and that he was a professor in a college. The old couple believed him. Seeing the cigarette butts strewn around the room, they believed that all millionaires lived like that. He offered them cigarettes. When they refused, he laughed strangely.

He kept gazing at the ceiling and all of a sudden began to weep. When the couple tried to pacify him he told them that it was better to commit suicide than to live like he did. After a lot of persuasion, he narrated them what was in his mind. He said that he wanted to start an industry to manufacture cosmetics and asked them if they would become his partners. The couple were caught in a dilemma. They had saved just enough to buy a house in the city. Now they had barely a few thousand rupees in savings. Both husband and wife advised him that since they were poor he could as well take a bank loan and start his industry. As though he expected this response, he laughed cruelly and fell on his bed, drinking something from a bottle he fished out from under his bed. The couple got frightened and began to sweat as though they were in the middle of a nightmare. He taunted the couple who watched him rather timidly and screamed at them to get out of his room. Running down from his third floor room, the couple took a long time to recover from the fright.

That evening when they were on their way to the market, the old couple sensed that a boy of seven or eight was beating up someone. As the sound was coming out of the second apartment from below, the couple looked into its window out of curiosity and could not believe what they saw there.

A man of over eighty years was sitting with a slate and a piece of chalk. A seven year old boy was teaching him, correcting his mistakes - two into two... a b c d... and all of a sudden the boy lifted the cane. The old man began pleading with the boy saying that he would be better prepared with his studies the next day. The couple looking through the window glanced at each other and shivered. Suddenly they felt that they did not

know anything. Immediately the old woman felt pain in her kidneys. Holding her in his arms the old man climbed the steps to his flat and with an effort opened the front door. That night they neither felt like eating nor could they sleep.

The new day was a Sunday. Unable to stay at home the old couple went to the Zoo Gardens. There they felt happy seeing the different kinds of birds and animals. They stood in front of the lion's cage and stared at the elephant. They also looked for a polar bear which was not there in the zoo. Not wanting to miss anything, they finally looked into a window covered with a wire-mesh. There was no animal inside that. They were surprised to see instead the man who had sold them the tickets.

They walked slowly through the crowded streets, discussing with enthusiasm the animals they had seen in the zoo. Do the crocodiles live longer than the monkeys? How long does it take for the crane to hatch its eggs? These were some of the questions they asked themselves and squirmed uncomfortably when they found no answers. The streets were filled with laborers, the rich, students and several entire families. Since it was a Sunday everyone looked happy. In the middle of this the old man's slipper got stuck to the tar on a street which had melted in the heat. When he pulled at it with both hands a little tar stuck to his hands and made him feel awkward. Suddenly seeing a familiar face among the crowds, they rushed towards that face almost shouting with joy. It was their village Post Master who was equally delighted to see them. Hoping that they could at least talk to him for a while they took him to their apartment.

The postman had developed chest pain. He had come to the city to consult a doctor. The doctor had taken an x-ray and had prescribed some medicines assuring him that there was nothing much wrong with him. The postman was asked to make a quarterly trip to the doctor for a checkup.

The elderly couple showered hospitality on the postman once they reached their home. Sitting on a chair and wiping his face with a handkerchief, the postman answered the innumerable questions they asked about their village. How were the rains and crops this year? Did the priest's daughter get married? Was the bridegroom good-looking? Who had replaced the school teacher on his retirement? As the postman answered these and other questions, the elderly couple sat looking at him with hope and hunger. His words revived many memories in them. Were the old couple happy in the city? Now it was the turn of the postman to ask the question as he looked curiously at the old couple who had "escaped" from the dull village life. They had no choice but to smile in agreement.

Just as they were narrating how comfortably they lived in these peaceful surroundings, there was a loud noise

with a thud as though something had fallen on the roof. The postman without trying to unravel the cause for the frightening noise, expressed his happiness at their good fortune.

They begged the postman to stay the night with them. But he said that since he had no leave he had to return the same night. The couple went with him a little distance to see him off. After he left, they were once again enveloped in the darkness of the city life. The eagle made of cotton wool peered at them silently. The pickles in the jar tasted even more sour. The old woman felt a lump in her throat which made it difficult for her to breathe. The old man stood near a window and stared into the road as though he had lost something precious.

Outside, the city had already sunk in darkness.

Kannada by Dr. Lalitha Nataraj

translated from the

MANY ARE THE WAYS TO THE PALACE OF LIGHT

After thirty nine years, Mannargudi Kothandapani was, for the first time, going to have a real, face-to-face conversation with another human being. That fateful day the sun had come up as usual in the Madras suburb of Thiruvallikeni. The air was so still that not a single leaf on the few, small trees was stirring. Suddenly a breeze sprang up and the smell of fish wafted from the seashore now strongly, now mildly. In a dream just before dawn, a lone crow on the rooftop had given a harsh call and a black-clad figure had materialized on his cot. He had woken up with a start, a slight shiver running down his sweating body. Lying down on his back, his hands on his beating heart, he had anxiously awaited daybreak. His eyes got used to the surrounding darkness and the day dawned: somewhere down the road, the mooing of a cow; the rattle of the milkman's can; the metallic screech of a lorry braking; the tinkle of the paperboy's cycle bell; vague muffled whispering sounds; noise of feet dragging on the gravelly road.... The paper boy's knock followed by the thud of the paper at the front door. Mannargudi Kothandapani immediately muttered, "*Start camera... action...*" and sat up in bed. Groaning, he got down from the cot. During the filming of *His Love Affair* seventy years ago, his knee joints surely hadn't made these brittle noises! He stood there for a while staring at the door and then taken a step to the side. "*Yes, a little to the left and go straight*". He moved to the door, took hold of the latch and opened the door— each movement lasting long enough for the camera to capture it. When he saw *The Hindu* on the doorstep he said "*Cut*". Imagining director Parthasarathy saying "*Well done Kothandu*", he felt thrilled.

As he picked up *The Hindu*, he remembered that Jayamani, editor of the film magazine, *Thrai Chitra*, was coming over to interview him and began to worry about how he would answer all his questions. Startled by the noise of the milk can against the gate, He watched Shivakami climbing the steps, her face unsmiling as usual. So without waiting for the inner command *Action*, he rushed into the kitchen, fetched a battered vessel for the milk and held it in front of her. Shivakami, her face smeared all over with turmeric and her hair smelling the previous day's jasmine, poured out two small measures into his vessel and walked away abruptly as if she had stepped on a snake. The jingling of her toe-rings took him back to the sets of *Fatal Kiss*. Thankappan, the assistant director, had brought a glass of milk for the heroine, Enakshi Rama Rao. How thick and creamy the milk was! Mannargudi Kothandapani stared at the watery milk in the vessel for a while. *Action*: he turned back, entered the doorway; *Cut*; *Action*: he moved straight to the kitchen. *Action*: he bent over to

place the vessel on the kerosene stove, and then straightened up. With stiff, deliberate steps he walked towards the tattered chair placed next to the cot presented to him by Nataraj Mudaliar, the famous director, for his fine acting in *The Slaying of Keechaka*. Then he slumped down into the chair, closed his eyes muttering to himself *Cut*. Not *Pack up*, but only a *Break* till he had bathed and had his milk.

For the last thirty nine years, Mannargudi Kothandapani has spent a large part of each day sitting in his chair taking in every detail of the house: faded walls that hadn't seen paint in half a century; the single window with its rusty iron rods in a dusty frame; some bordered dhothis and other cloths hung over a wire; the beam supporting the sparrows' nests; the spider-webs; the weathered, country tiles which had withstood years of scorching sun... Oh! How delicately heroine Sundarambal's lips had quivered when he startled her by breaking through the tiles of the roof in the film *Black Thief!* There was a crack near the roof, and whenever it rained the water seeped in along with the mud leaving a long, brown mark right down to the floor. His cot, next to the chair, was just a wooden frame with four legs and some woven twine. So what? Whenever he lay down on it, he felt he was sleeping on the ornate, teak bedstead of the film *Wedding Night*. The twine loosened and needed tightening up. In the corner of the room was a gramophone with its trumpet wide open... I must listen to K. Ashwathamma's rendering of *Ha priya prashantha bridayaa*... In the small cupboard above, there was a picture of Lord Kapaleshwara, a vermilion box, a sacred ash ball and incense. To its left was a huge, ancient pendulum clock. Then the thing that his eyes would continually return to - an old rusty trunk, made inaccessible to others in that unvisited house by being placed behind an old, floor-length mirror, not an ordinary one but a Belgian mirror dating from 1917.

If Mannargudi Kothandapani opened his eyes, it was to look at this mirror. Now he got up and slowly walked to the mirror. Deep-set eyes with brown-streaked eyeballs; dark skin hanging loose below the eyes; the high, prominent nose; the mouth, a mere line and lips invisible; sunken cheeks; the skin under the lower jaw hanging like a soft *dosa*; wrinkled forehead with a few gray locks.., in brief, a long, weird face. As it came closer to the mirror... Oh, the camera is on! "*Hero, get ready I say*". Yes... *Action*... Enlarged eyes spewing fire, the frowning forehead that had made the eyebrows meet, the four front teeth holding the lower lip in check, the glittering crown, ear rings and necklace.., the complete regalia of Bhimsen in Nataraja Mudaliar's film *The Slaying of Keechaka*, *Cut*... The same, long face again... *Action*... Half-closed eyes shining with cunning, the tip of the nose turned askew, lips drawn to the right in a half smile, the trimmed moustache, turban. Now he is Damodara Chettiyar of *Allfor Money*... *Cut*... What if he had aged? Surely, his sentiments hadn't *Action*. "*Oh! No. What's wrong? Your face is blank. Why Kothandu? Cry, shed copious tears. You are now the father sitting with*

the dead body of your own son in the film 'Shattered Hopes.' Cry man, cry". There, the eyes went misty, the nose tickled, the mouth opened in a half mood... there, the tears started in his eyes... *"You fools, let the reflectors shine into this eyes — hold them up "*. The first drop, second... glittering pearls rolled down his cheeks. *"Brilliant, Kothandu. Well done"*... Enough of this. Time to have bath. Mannargudi Kothandapani wiped the tears off his cheeks and turned his back to the mirror. Would it do for a man to cry thus? His face grew grave. *Action...* He pretended to hold a mace on his left shoulder and walked in majestic strides swinging his right arm. The hero of *Bhimsen, the mighty* collapsed into the chair even before his mind could signal *Cut*.

The next moment, he remembered it was Tuesday. Realizing that Kutti Krishnan would be here any time, he got up in a flurry, hurried to the corner, shifted the mirror aside and opened the creaking trunk. The smelly seventy-year-old, close-collared green coat and the red valli his grandfather had bought for him for his thread ceremony, released from the pressure of the lid, seemed to heave a sigh of relief. Mannargudi Kothandapani put them aside gently lest he hurt them. He ran his hands over the contents of the trunk, just like a conjurer, and came up with an old cloth bundle. He took out a few smaller bundles from it and selected one that contained a few monochrome photographs. His practiced hand automatically picked out, perhaps for the millionth time, the one he wanted, and his face lit up with joy. Returning quietly to the chair, he held the photograph up to the light and gazed at it.

The yellowed picture had faded at the edges. A girl, her eyes wide in alarm and lips trying to smile, stood in a zari-bordered silk saree worn in Aiyer style. Her hair had flattened to the head and the white flowers peeped out from behind her ears. She looked grim with her glittering two-stoned nose-ring and *Kumkum* as big as a thumb-print on her forehead. She stood leaning over the barely visible *Tulasi* pot. Mannargudi Kothandapani looked at this same photograph everyday. And yet, that fateful day, he felt the photograph was trying to say something to him.

My beloved Maragathavalli, why have you come alive today like this? For many years I have been writing to you unfailingly once a week. Have you ever replied? I am quite alone here and yet I am not sure I can speak to you; for I am only a film actor, not a stage actor who can wax eloquent. But I believe there's the talking bioscope these days. I hear one of our own men appeared on the screen and spoke for fifteen minutes, the fool! I do not even wish to see it even in my dreams. Words should stay within the heart. Why should we say them out loud? Never mind that. Now you're also alone like me. The other day when Palani told me that your husband had died, I felt like crying. I wrote to you as much. Even now it's not too late; if you say yes, we can

still get married. Then we could act together in films... What if we do not speak, don't we understand each other? So, will you decide soon? Just drop a line to let me know. If only I could say okay, my nephew Ramabhadran of Thiruvallikeni will arrange the wedding. Did Kutti Krishnan give my letter to you last Tuesday? I am well. Until next Tuesday then.

It was a Herculean task for him to put his thoughts on paper, even to hold the steel pen in his unsteady hand and to keep dipping it into the inkpot. Finally when he had finished, he folded letter into four, cursing the brittle paper which tore in the process. He wrapped it in a second sheet. *Action...* He moved with a slow, deliberate gait towards the cupboard and then ***Cut...*** Thinking it was time for his bath he glanced at the wall-clock.

Jayamani, who had braved the fierce sun, came up the creaking steps sweating profusely. Baffled by the deserted-looking old house he wondered if he had lost his way. The reason for his bafflement was simple — he had been born in post-Independent India and fed on the fantasies created by Shivaji Ganesan, M.G. Ramachandran, M.N. Nambiar, M.R. Radha of yesteryears and the more recent Kamalahasan, Rajnikanth, Prabhu and Sathyaraj. He still remembered how stunned he had been at seeing M.G. Ramachandran's palatial bungalow. Coming in from the scorching sun, he felt blinded and his surroundings seemed to dance about him, or was it him spinning like a top? Dizzy, he sat on his haunches as the sunshine streamed in through the gaps in the tiled roof. As he raised his head trying to peer through the dusty sunbeams, he gradually made out a toothless mouth and a pair of eyes staring from their deep sockets. He felt like screaming, but couldn't. Slowly he could see the chair and the cot next to it. Gathering his wits, Jayamani addressed the weirdly smiling face, "Mannargudi Kothandapani...?" "Yes, that's me", said Mannargudi Kothandapani showing him to the chair. Immediately *Action...* he went into the kitchen, poured water from the mud pot into a tall copper tumbler, offered it to Jayamani and settled down on his film-star bed. *Cut...*

What happened next? Was it real or was it a dream? Who can tell? Jayamani hold on to each question for fear it would fly away, stroked it gently and then gravely handed it to Mannargudi Kothandapani.

"Indian Cinema is now celebrating its platinum jubilee...."

"What? Platinum jubilee? Did you say seventy five years? It's not even twenty! Why are you blinking? Why if you like, you could check with any one of these — Ardeshir Irani, Haribhai Desai, Dadasahib Phalke, Nataraja

Mudaliar, Gubbi Veeranna, Padmanabhan, Yaragudapathi Varavara Rao. Ask any one, you'll realize how right I am."

"Who are these people? They don't even sound like Tamil names. Never mind. Can you tell me something about the films of your time?"

"What do you mean 'my time'? Don't you watch bioscopes now? My film *Wronged Wife* must be running at Everest. Go and see it. When it was released the other day, even some foreigners came to see it. How heroine Ambujammal shakes with fear when I lift my hand to hit her in the last scene— enough to set your heart fluttering. Thirukkodikaaval Ramanatha Iyer plays violin for that scene in the theatre. Simply marvellous! ."

"Why did you quit films once the talkies came into vogue?"

"Who has quit? Me? Never! I still act in films. In fact, tomorrow when I start shooting for Nataraja Mudaliar's film...."

"No, I wasn't asking you about that. Why didn't you act in talkies?"

"Haven't you heard the saying, 'Words break up homes'? Why should we ape the foreigners? What our Gandhi says is right. All of them should be kicked out. If you want dialogue in a film, why on earth should you need a flesh-and-blood actor? All you have to do is to set up your camera in a house or marketplace. I've seen those talkies! Just because you can speak, should you blabber away? Tch, tch.. .I had to watch them with fingers in my ears."

"Weren't you offered roles in talkies?"

"Wasn't I? Oh God! The other day, South India Movietone asked me to act in their new film. When I went there, they gave me a four-page dialogue to deliver. I didn't have the heart to speak it."

"What did they say?"

"What could they say? I refused to say the lines. One of the assistants said, 'Sulking idiot, can't manage to say a

single line.' The bastard." "Forget it. Now tell me who do you like the most — Shivaji or MGR?"

"Who are they? In the first place, they should have acted in films for me to like or dislike them. Look, there are hundreds who aspire to get into films. But the moment you start worrying about what people would say, that's the end of it. Who is that Shivaji you mentioned? What's is that other name —MGR — what a name? Couldn't he think of a good Tamil name? So, these two... do they know anything about acting? Then send them over. I'll have a word with Nataraja Mudaliar or Ardeshir Irani."

Jayamani, perplexed, suddenly started sweating so much that he was completely drenched. A boy who rattled up the steps and started to say something stopped suddenly the moment he saw the stranger. Mannargudi Kothandapani, who had been sitting on the cot, got up to get the letter he had written, wondering why Kutti Krishnan had come so early. The moment he turned his back, Jayamani made a dash for the door, thanking his lucky stars.

Just as Mannargudi Kothandapani reached into the cupboard for the letter, Kutti Krishna announced, "The lady is no more, Sir." He couldn't believe his ears. He glared at the boy and asked "When?"

"Last evening."

For a long time after that Mannargudi Kothandapani just sat there staring at the wall. Slowly he began to perceive the new reality that enveloped his being.

It was thirty nine years ago that he had visited Maragathavalli in a house on Peter's Road. He would not believe his eyes when he saw her as a widow. At thirty, being a widow, she had looked lustreless and old. Even at that time he could not relate that woman to the girl with sparkling eyes and round cheeks whom he had seen ages ago on the sets of Yeragudapathi Varavara Rao's silent film, *Sarangadhara*. She had come with her uncle. His turban, the three lines of sandal paste drawn across his forehead, the lush moustache and the long coat floated up from his memory forming a vivid picture. She did not get a role in that film or any other that he was acting in. Unaware, he had fallen in love with her. But he dared not tell her. (Nor did he tell her later, except through letters.) She gave up hopes of becoming a film star and got married. (How heart-broken

he was at the wedding!) He had wandered around Peter's Road for the next few years in the hope of catching a glimpse of her.... All of this felt like a bitter-sweet, pleasantly painful dream.

Her husband had died rather suddenly thirty nine years ago. (All he remembered of the husband was that he was an orthodox Brahmin working in the City Corporation office.) When he heard the news (Who gave it? Wasn't it Sengottayan, the light-boy?) how he had rushed to see her... She wasn't quite the same; yet when he realized that the old flame flickered within him still, how thrilled he was!

She had not only recognized him, but had cried her heart out as if he were a true friend. Even in that intimate mood, he couldn't bring himself to tell her of his love. Perhaps it was only after that that he had started writing to her once a week. First Murugan, then Palani, then Krishnan Kutty took his letters to her. In the beginning, they said she used to receive his letters with a frown, but later, awaited them with an eager smile. Poor girl! May be she might have lived longer if he hadn't bothered her so much pouring out all his love in letter after letter.

Confronted by the reality of an empty past he'd imagined to be rich and productive, he was now utterly shattered. Neither the scenes from his ancient, silent movies nor the disembodied commands, *Cut* and *Action*, could give him solace any longer. He glanced around. Why was it so dark, even when windows and the door were open? He stepped outside.

Setting foot in the main road crossing his street for the first time in thirty nine years, he was taken aback by the crowds of people everywhere. It dawned on him that time had gone past not only for him, but for the world around. His debilitated state made his gait uncertain. The crush of cycles, fruit baskets, balloons and plastic things on the crowded footpath together with people jostling each other made it impossible for him to move at all. The garish shop windows with their brightly-lettered neon signs of all shapes and sizes, dirty green buses, jaundiced-yellow autos (he was seeing them for the first time!) dogs, cows, heaps of garbage all around, the deafening loud speakers (was this called music). He felt dizzy with the overpowering stench the excrement, stale flowers, gutters, people's sweat that cumulatively gave out, and sank to the ground. As he sat on the ground strewn with pieces of paper, rags, used banana leaves, dried cow-dung, knots of hair and empty tins, his attention wandered to the cream-colored, finger length, balloon-like object which had stuck to his left chappal. He picked it up and held it by the two ends. It had a mouth at one end; the other end was like a nipple. He wondered if it was a new kind of balloon. Putting it in his pocket, he got up and walked on.

In that city, breathing with an effort like a heavy pregnant woman and heaving like the sea, he felt altogether lost. Wherever he turned, people, people, crowds of people everywhere. And clothes he had never seen before; different kinds of vehicles; many-storeyed buildings right next to pathetic huts; the droning flies; sultry weather even when the sun had gone down. All at once, the shops were lit, creating an other-worldly atmosphere. Along the walls were huge, colorful posters with men, women and even girls in many different postures and moods. *Kaavalkaran*, *Tillana Mohanambal* —were these films? There, facing him was a red-eyed man with a gun, as tall as a coconut tree! What a huge crowd in that building near his foot! One particular poster attracted Mannargudi Kothandapani who was walking along mindlessly. It depicted a nearly-bald man with a thin moustache and a contented, toothy smile giving a saree to a beggar woman. He was clad in a white shirt and a white dhothi; a black cloth with a red border was hanging from his shoulders. In big block letters, it was written *Dr. Kalaigner Pallandu Vaalge* — “Long live Dr. Connoisseur!”

He shook his head for he couldn't make any sense of all this. Just then, the stench hit him so hard that he screwed up his face. He was near a small bridge. What must have been a stream at one time was now a huge pile of rubbish where all the filth of Madras had accumulated. There were greenish patches of water here and there — perhaps the same water which had been used to wash buttocks. Mannargudi Kothandapani thought of the rivers Coovam and Adyar. Where were they flowing now?

Peering intently about him, seeing everything with wonder-filled eyes, feeling anxious about the changed environment, Mannargudi Kothandapani who kept stopping and walking on, felt all at once extremely helpless and burst into tears. Oh God! How am I going to find Maragathavalli's Peter's Road house in this jungle! He simply collapsed on the ground. From the neighboring teashop some people came running. Offering him a soda, they asked him where he wanted to go. They called an auto for him and gave the driver his address. But Mannargudi Kothandapani changed his mind, thanked them, and told the auto driver to take him to Ramaiah Gounder Street, House number 13.

He was surprised by his own decision to visit his uncle after thirty nine years. He had learnt that his uncle was ailing. Weren't they the same age

more or less? He wondered how his uncle was now. All of a sudden, he recalled that Ramabhadran, who came to see him occasionally, had said that the old man sinking. Just as he started feeling bad about his delayed

visit, the auto stopped.

His nephew Ramabhadran paid for the auto and helped him into the house. Mannargudi Kothandapani, who was a mere legend to Ramabhadran's wife Vijayavalli and their children Geetha and Narasimhan, now appeared all the more mysterious. Except for Ramabhadran, the others had not seen him in many years. Mannargudi Kothandapani, who slumped down into the rosewood chair against the wall, looked exhausted. His eyes had sunk into their sockets and foam had formed in the corners of his mouth. Just as Ramabhadran's wife was enquiring if he was keeping well, Mannargudi Kothandapani drew the four-year old Narasimhan on to his knee, hugged him tightly and stroked his hair. And then on an impulse, he felt in his pockets for something to give to the child. What came out was that balloon-like object. God knows when he had put that in! Ramabhadran, who was a man of today, exchanged meaningful glances with his wife while his raised eyebrows eloquently asked what was wrong with the old man. Unable to comprehend anything, Mannargudi Kothandapani sat there peering for a long time.

Translated from the Kannada by Vanamala Vishwanatha

and Janet Lord

Still Waters of the Interior

On that cruelest day of summer, a curly-haired man in a pair of dark-blue trousers and a white shirt entered the compound of Parklands hotel at Panagal Park in Madras carrying a heavy suitcase. His beady eyes in his tired face had sunk into their depths as though he had wandered about the whole day in the scorching sun. Sweat from his neck, armpit and back had completely damped his white shirt which clung to his body, outlining its contours. Even climbing the six steps to the foyer was an effort for him; he lifted his legs as if his black boots had suddenly become way too heavy. By the time he reached the counter, his exhaustion was total. Dropping the suitcase with a thud and throwing his entire weight against the edge of the counter, he asked the bald-headed, swollen-eyed, fat fellow manning the desk, "Got a single room?" He was out of breath. The fat fellow looked at him for a long moment, his large eyes widening as though he was watching a strange animal. Then, tilting back his head a little and pushing out his lower jaw, saliva red from betel dribbling from the corners of his mouth, he mumbled something and pushed forward a thick, old register which was already open. When our man, taking a pen out from his pocket, was about to write, two fat drops of sweat ran down his forehead to the tip of his nose and fell on the register. Holding the pen firmly in his sweat-soaked fingers and mumbling "Very sorry, please forgive me", he inscribed: 'S. Mrutyunjaya, 82, Fort Road, Bhuvanigiri, Karnataka.' The fat man, trying in vain to register a little surprise in his stern visage, exclaimed, "What! Are you from our Karnataka?" and without waiting for an answer, pulled the drawer, took out a bunch of keys and jangled it to produce a metallic noise. "Eh Palani... Room number twelve... Take the keys and open the door..." he shouted.

All at once a breath of fresh air swept into the hotel and mildly lashed Mrutyunjaya just for a moment, and he felt a flicker of joy even though it was quite warm. Palani was a mere boy; twelve or maybe thirteen years old. He wore green striped half-pants and an oversized sleeveless shirt that had layers of dirt and turned into the color of mud. His thin hands and legs were like sticks, and his eyes looked like seashells in his thin, bony face. But his long, up-turned nose appeared to be full of life, like a sparrow about to take flight from a branch.

Materializing from nowhere, the boy threw his dirty towel over his shoulder, took the bunch of keys from the fat fellow and, carrying the suitcase, started up the wooden stairs. For a moment, Mrutyunjaya wondered where he had seen the boy. But the next moment it struck him that when he was the boy's age he

must have looked like him. He followed him with exhilaration totally unaware of the sound the wooden steps made: tak... tak.... The walls were all cracks, and devoid of any color; dusty cobwebs hung down the ceiling. When Palani, after taking a few steps stood before a door, Mrutyunjaya, regaining his consciousness all at once, noticed the door number in the gloom: Twelve. "What!" he said to himself. "One plus two? Why, three is my lucky number!"

It was a tiny room, ten feet by eight. Paint was peeling off the dirty walls; a round table ancient beyond years, a rosewood chair with a gaping hole in the middle, a flower-bedecked Lord Muruga's picture in the niche opposite the door, and a heavy cot with carved legs covered by a blue-striped bedsheet and a pillow, a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling. Just as he was wondering about windows, his glance fell on a big painting a little above the door. That's all. Palani had placed the suitcase in the room and went out to bring a broom. He began to sweep the floor with such force that dust rose up and got into Mrutyunjaya's eyes, nose and mouth. He felt dizzy and sat down on the bed. When he opened his eyes again he saw balls of hair, burnt-out matchsticks, stubs of beedies, a flattened condom blown to its full length, dry flowers, papers kneaded into little balls – all that Palani's broom had gathered in a dusty heap.

In the next fifteen minutes, Palani made the room somewhat tidy and tolerable: a white bedspread on the cot, a water-filled earthen pot and a glass on the round table. A cup of coffee too. Mrutyunjaya undressed and, wrapping on a light blue-striped lungi he had brought in his suitcase, he washed his hands and face in the bathroom, drank his coffee, and, remembering that he had asked Palani to bring in his meal at nine, opened the door and stood for a while watching the corridor immersed in darkness. He closed the door and stretched out on the bed. The cobwebs hanging from the ceiling wobbled to the tune of the whirring fan. Taking in the entire room once again, Mrutyunjaya's gaze gradually wandered toward the painting above the door. As the picture looked so familiar, he pushed the round table to the door, placed the chair on it and climbed up to study the painting minutely.

It was an old picture with creepers carved on its four-inch-wide wooden frame. The gilt work, though worn out here and there, still appeared beautiful. A flowing river at the base; a boat with oars at the right-hand corner; two palm trees at the waters' edge. In the background, about half a mile away, a brown-colored hillock. Over the hillock a blue sky with a few white clouds. As Mrutyunjaya gazed at the scene, there was a light breeze that rocked the boat. The river broke into gentle ripples. Feeling as if he was in a hurry to travel, he held on to the frame of the picture with his left hand and leaned his right on the wall. Then he slowly raised his right leg and put it into the boat. Next moment his left leg had followed suit. The boat wobbled a little because of his weight. Now his hands took hold of the oars. Within the fraction of a second, he left the scene churning the waters with his oars.

Palani brought a plate of food to room number twelve exactly at nine in the evening. But however much he shouted and banged the door, there was no response from inside. When someone disturbed by Palani's hollering screamed, "Eh, why are you making a racket? Go away, boy. If he wants to eat, he will go the dining hall", he turned back and descended the steps to return to the kitchen. Once there, he covered the food-plate with another one, and not feeling hungry at all, entered the storeroom to lie down on a gunny sack amidst heaps and sacks of onions, potatoes, green chilies, rice, dhal and flour with rats and cockroaches scurrying around.

Next morning when Palani came to inquire if Mrutyunjaya wanted a cup of coffee, the situation was the same as before. Room number twelve was silent. The fat proprietor tried to allay Palani's anxiety by telling him, "Maybe he is tired after his long journey. Let him sleep as much as he wants." But he himself became anxious when the man called Mrutyunjaya did not stir out of the room even after four in the afternoon. People collected before the room and shouted, "Sir... Sir... Mrutyunjaya Sir... Mrutyunjaya Sir" again and again. The door was brutally banged with force. Finally when five persons including the fat proprietor, after struggling for half-an-hour, broke open the door, they were perplexed to see a chair suddenly falling off the table with a thud. Mrutyunjaya was not there; no one was there. His suitcase was open and a few clothes had spilled out. On the edge of the cot a pair of neatly folded trousers and a shirt. A pair of black shoes peeping from underneath the cot. But the man himself had disappeared. To the fat proprietor, the whole thing looked mysterious. Having stared around several times and after checking the bathroom, he was about to step out when his eyes fell on the blank gilt frame on the wall. The painting was gone. No wonder his mind became blank for a few minutes. He just stood there gazing at the wall and blinking his eyes.

Afterwards, however much one raked his brains, there could be only one explanation. Accordingly, the fat proprietor telephoned the police station at the Thyagarayanagar Bus Terminus. The policemen who came to the hotel could not believe what the fat proprietor had to say. By the time they got down to asking him, "Enna Vanangamudi Sir, you said you had to break open the door. In which case what happened to the man who was inside?", there were hot dosas placed in front of them. Relishing the dosas leisurely and drinking hot coffee while listening to the story of Vanangamudi, the proprietor, yet again, they left with an advice to lodge a written complaint.

Mrutyunjaya felt elated as the enveloping darkness began to melt and the noise his oars were making began to disturb the stillness of the river.

A waft of cool breeze shook the bushes along the bank and a lone bird suddenly took off to the sky shrieking. The eastern sky colored itself in rose as if to prove that a new day had dawned. A breath of fresh air made this man, who had rowed all through the night, aware that he was almost naked but for a piece of lungi covering the lower part of his body. Feeling that he was no stranger to these parts, he rowed his boat towards left bank. The waves beat rhythmically against the bank. Hillocks, fields, trees and bushes – all disappeared one by one as the boat moved along as if to bring into focus the warm sun-dried barren land, a dusty leafless tree, a few boulders burning in the sun and several eagles haunting the skies. Suddenly the boat came to a halt like an adamant child. How did I traverse so many miles? wondered Mrutyunjaya. As he opened his eyes wide he realized all of sudden that he was rowing the boat in a river which was now a mere trickle; he could see the riverbed which was beginning to dry up. What on earth do I need this boat for, he thought as he jumped onto the bank and ran and ran. He ran breathlessly, sweating in the scorching sun and trampling on stones and thorns all along....

When he reached his village Bhuvanagiri, he couldn't believe his eyes. All around was sand that had erased every trace of the river; he could find neither green grass nor palm trees he was so familiar with. After moving about half a mile, dragging his feet with an effort in the sands, he saw a few roofless huts. In front of one there stood a man his age. Mrutyunjaya went near him and, to his surprise, realized that the man was watching a naked boy of seven or eight lying inside the hut. The boy was not black. Even the hair on his head was not entirely black. It was closer to gray. He was so thin that the skin on his forehead had cracked in the scorching sun. His face with no trace of cheeks or lips had such a weird glow that Mrutyunjaya shuddered for a moment. His fingers and toes were like little stubs that mechanically moved with the other bones of his skeleton. Two wrinkled balls of skin formed what could have been his buttocks. He stared back at the man staring at him. Mrutyunjaya was curious to know what was really transpiring between them.

Now the boy came out of the hut and in fifteen minutes made a heap of dry sticks and twigs he had collected. As though foretold of the boy's intention, the man took out from his pocket a shining cigarette lighter and lit the heap. The boy sniffed out a dead rat from a crater and, holding it by the tail, roasted it over the fire. Strangely, the fire did not singe his hand! Afterwards when the boy was trying to swallow the whole rat, the man's camera clicked with a flash. Next moment Mrutyunjaya was running away as though he had seen something grotesque and forbidden. Did the man turn his camera on him?

Mrutyunjaya ran like a mad dog to where he had stepped off the boat. Once there, he rested a while to catch his breath, and pushing the boat out into the current, jumped in to start rowing. Where did I read that there was a severe drought in these parts? In which paper, *The Hindu*?, he thought. Suddenly he remembered he had seen the boy's picture in the paper. Engulfed in a sea of melancholy, his boat began its slow return.

Shankar Vadivelu was transported to a world of immense joy and happiness listening to the sound of his newly-married wife pouring water over her - she must be washing the soap off her body now - in the bathroom. Covering the already closed bathroom door with his wife's saree for extra protection from the curious gaze of the outside world, he remembered everything right from the moment he and his wife left Kanchipuram and reached Madras at four in the afternoon, and how, after hearing "no rooms" at several hotels, they had finally arrived here. They expected to hear the same "no room" once again but maybe because of his lucky wife, Malarkodi, got this, a fairly large room. Seeing his wife emerging from the bathroom, her damp hair across her shoulder wafting a strange fragrance, he couldn't contain his exhilaration. As he bodily carried her to the cot and started undressing her, the girl who had married him just a week ago was visibly embarrassed and said, "For heaven's sake, why don't you at least put out the light please?" Shankar Vadivelu looked at his watch for a moment before switching off the light. It was nine in the evening.

Shedding her inhibition in the dark, Malarkodi removed her saree and blouse, and when she was about to moan with pleasure, her eyes half-shut, her husband suddenly switched on the light. The girl, taken aback, hid her face behind her hands. But gradually she got used to light and gave herself to his tender embrace. Tossing and turning in a river of passion, they fell into a deep sleep. No way they could have heard the sound of rippling waters that came from above the door or the creaking boat when it jolted against the river bank exactly at ten in the night. Mrutyunjaya dangled his right leg over the boat and tried in vain to land it on the chair he remembered he had placed on the table. But however much he tried, he failed to locate the chair and, suddenly off-balance, tipped over and thudded onto the bed. Finding a fallen stranger with horror-stricken eyes and disheveled hair, Malarkodi screamed loudly and ran to the bathroom to lock herself in. Shankar Vadivelu awoke and shouted, "Thief... thief..." He started beating Mrutyunjaya left and right.

Hearing the strange screams and the sounds of beating, Vanangamudi, the proprietor, and four others rushed up the stairs and banged on the door with such ferocity that the door gave way. Shankar Vadivelu wrapped himself with the bedsheet to cover his shame. Seeing Mrutyunjaya in the clear light shed by the bulb, Vanangamudi's puffed eyes popped out. "Badmash, why have you stolen our painting?" he screamed and turned back to look at the frame. The painting was intact on the wall. Unable for a moment to tell dream from reality, he shook Mrutyunjaya's shoulders. "Where were you these last four days? Palani, call the police."

Mrutyunjaya was bleeding profusely in the mouth because of a benevolent sock he had received from Shankar Vadivelu. "What, four days have passed by so quickly!" he exclaimed staring at Vanangamudi as if stunned forever.

-- Translated from the Kannada by the author

in collaboration with Mr. K.K. Mahapatra