

Ameena HUSSEIN
Three stories

From *Zillij* (Sri Lanka: Perera-Hussein, 2003)

The Pain of Imagination

"You are a storyteller, so tell me a story."

"I will."

She looked across the table at the big man. His grey hair. His brown eyes. She watched him get older as time passed and wondered if he had thought her beautiful, and that if he did, think that now she got uglier by the half hour. Justice of the Ugandan Supreme Court, Sittcer Ibrahim, drank his beer looked at the slight girl in front of him and speculated if he had got himself into a situation. But the girl began to speak and he soon became transfixed.

"When I was eight years old I thought I was a saint. I did not pray because I did not know how to and did not need to. I wore a long dragon scarf on my head and wore a skullcap on top of that. I must have looked odd but I didn't know that for I had imagination. I imagined I was normal."

The girl paused. She looked at Judge Ibrahim. She took a sip of beer. He took a gulp. He looked at her Shiva third eye bindi and said, "It must be the bindi but you look beautiful. I wish I had met you earlier; we could have had many pleasant evenings." She smiled and said "But I was around, you just had no imagination to see me."

She continued her story. "So when I was eight and thought I was a saint I came upon a nest of red ants in the ground. I crouched down and watched them - fascinated. I followed their trail, I absorbed their concentration. Then after a while I went into the kitchen got a kettle of boiling water and poured it over them. And then I stopped being a saint and became just a very strange child."

Judge Sittcer Ibrahim made a face. He didn't quite know what to make of all this. He admitted to himself, that initially he had designs on the girl. He hadn't seen her at the conference for judges, but suddenly when it was all over she materialized. She claimed to be one of the organizers. Now, without the herd of people around, he concentrated on her. What Judge Ibrahim didn't know was that the girl had designs on him.

"Tell me your story," she commanded.

And he told. A sketch at first.

"When I was 18 years old, I met this beautiful woman from Zimbabwe. We met at a party and she told me that she had no family. She had no money, she had no home. She asked me to marry her and so one of the guests at the party married us till choice do us apart. I was 18 years old and took the marriage seriously. We lived together in my house and she looked after me well. After five years of marriage, I heard her telling a man I have no money, no family and no home, will you marry me? So I married them until choice do them apart." That is my story, he said and shrugged his shoulders and placed his hands apart.

"More," she said staring at him with her blue-green eyes that were set in a tamarind face.

"Then," he continued hurriedly, eager to obey his young and beautiful despot, "as I lived alone in a beautiful villa that overlooked the Virunga Mountains I received a telegram. An Indian playwright wanted to interview me. She was writing about the forced immigration of the Indians from Africa. The morning she was due I woke up early, had a banana for breakfast and walked about my gardens. I bathed in scented water and combed my hair carefully. I wore my favourite kameez and seemed to lounge about while a frenzy seethed in my stomach until she came."

The young girl in front of him seemed distracted, and while he spoke, she spoke too.

"These eyes," she said, "are not mine. They are the inheritance of an Australian woman who got sidetracked."

Sitmeer Ibrahim did not know what he was to do. Was he to continue his story, which he had begun to enjoy telling, or listen to the girl? He decided to do both. He spoke, he listened and while his story followed a certain pattern, a logic, an order of sense, hers raged back and forth and covered a multitude of years and generations.

"She was travelling with her mother," continued the girl. "On her way back to Australia from the compulsory European trip that all well brought up young women must undertake in their youth. The ship, *The Amsterdam* had docked in Galle and while they had tea on the veranda of the New Oriental Hotel, a young man happened by. He wore a fez at a jaunty angle and his crisp cream linen suit and shiny brown and cream shoes found their way to the women's table. Abdul Kareem Siddiq at your service, he said. He was invited to join them for tea and soon Abdul Kareem Siddiq was deep in conversation with Mrs Peters while her daughter Alice looked on. Mrs Peters was greatly impressed by Abdul Kareem and as the days passed by, over numerous cups of tea and dramatically beautiful sunsets, they conversed on many subjects. They even spoke about religion. Abdul Kareem had a simple philosophy. He believed in the goodness of mankind. He didn't spend much time thinking of the ills and evils of the world. He had never encountered any. This privileged young man who had the best of everything - lived a comfortable life, and who was determined to enjoy life to the fullest - radiated the belief in the goodness of mankind from every pore. Mrs Peters who had been nursing a most private and secret hope at the beginning of their meeting began to be even more convinced of her plan. When Abdul Kareem who now met them every morning for tea and every afternoon for coffee suggested that they prolong their visit to Galle, Mrs Peters asked him if he could be so kind as to cancel their booking on *The Amsterdam* which was to leave in two days time. When Abdul Kareem suggested that perhaps they might benefit from a drive around the Fort, Mrs Peters declined kindly and said that maybe he

could describe it to them when he came to visit the next day. And so it was that Mrs Peters and Alice never left the New Oriental Hotel to see Galle, in their minds Galle came to them in the form of Abdul Kareem. He spoke to them of the narrow streets and the interiors of the houses. Of the long dark passages that cooled a visitor instantly and led them to wonderful light filled courtyard that let in the monsoon rain with the rhythm of Kandyan drums. He spoke of walks on the ramparts of the Fort where one could sit and watch the sky turn from aquamarine to night in a single moment.

After three weeks Mrs Peters decided that Alice and she should book their passage to Australia. She broached the subject with Abdul Kareem over their evening coffee and made him distraught. He didn't know why and while he wept silently between sips of coffee watched placidly by Alice, Mrs Peters gently suggested to him that of course they would be able to stay if he would marry Alice. Alice, who obeyed her mother unquestioningly, seemed amenable and so it was arranged that Mrs Peters and Alice would be introduced to Abdul Kareem's family the next day. The meeting was to take place at Abdul Kareem's house, which Mrs Peters was keen to see.

The next morning sharp at ten o'clock Mrs Peters wearing her pearl choker and Alice in her crisp rose pink linen dress that set off her pale complexion drove by horse carriage to Abdul Kareem's house. They stopped at an imposing gate, which was opened by a thottah; they drove up to a magnificent house located on top of a small hill that looked over the sea. When they had seen the gate, Mrs Peters began to release a small breath of relief but now when they saw the house both Mrs Peters and Alice gave a little squeal of delight.

They were ushered in by Abdul Kareem himself and immediately saw a small cluster of people in the middle of the room. There was a middle-aged woman surrounded by a number of children and a few older young men and women who stood about the room. There was a young woman standing by the window holding an infant to her breast. She did not turn around to greet Mrs Peters and Alice and at that first meeting they never saw her face. Abdul Kareem was beside himself with joy even if the others in the room seemed to be doubtful and have reservations. He turned to the middle-aged woman and then to Mrs Peters and Alice and said here is my wife and then turning to all the others said and these are my children. Mrs Peters and Alice were speechless. They could not say even one word, not even goodbye.

While the girl had been relating her tale to Sitteer Ibrahim, he had been relating his tale to her.

"She came on a cloud of orange", he said. "A wisp of a shalwar kameez tossed about her and in the Ugandan heat she looked like a rare hibiscus. I want to know, she demanded, and I in my eagerness to please told her everything. She was married, it's almost over, she assured me, in a day or two I will be divorced. It took her 13 years to get her divorce and during all that time we were so happy. We lived in the beautiful villa that overlooked the Virunga Mountains and she wrote and I judged and we were so very happy."

"What happened then?" asked the young girl, who had not it seemed lost track of Sitteer Ibrahim's story.

"She got her divorce and then left me. She now lives in New York; she became a film director and makes Indian exotica film for the American market. It's a pity! He sighed; she could have been so good. Poor, but so good."

"So did Abdul Kareem recover from Mrs Peters and Alice's departure?" Asked Sitteer Ibrahim, who thought it only polite that he show an interest in the young girl's yarn.

"Oh! They didn't go," said the girl looking at him with startled eyes as if Sitteer Ibrahim was a dimwit for not understanding. Sitteer Ibrahim did feel like a dimwit because he could not fathom what had happened.

"They got married," the girl continued, as if it was the most normal thing to have occurred. "And I," she said pointing to her eyes, "inherited my grandmother's eyes."

Sitteer Ibrahim preferred his stories. He thought the girl who had seemed cutely odd at first was now scarily weird and he scolded himself mentally for getting into this mess.

"But how did it happen?" He asked, not without a little incredulity in his tone.

"Oh!" Said the girl now bored with having to spell out little details to her audience of one.

"Well after some thought Mrs Peters realized it would be better for Alice to be the second wife of a rich Ceylonese businessman than the only wife of a crude thick-fingered Australian farmer. Alice and the first wife got on famously and between them they produced thirty children for Abdul Kareem."

Sitteer Ibrahim thought if he must spend time with this kook of a girl he might as well try to get her into his bed. He was lonely and feeling lost in this third-world town he would never have chosen to visit of his own volition. His life seemed shaky and shapeless and lately he had been thinking often of his lost orange hibiscus. So he began the seduction process.

"You are so beautiful," he said.

The girl fixed him with her aquamarine eyes.

His voice was not as steady as he wanted it to be, he cleared his throat and continued, "...and there is an air of magic that surrounds you."

Her mouth twitched.

"Your face reflects the serenity of your soul."

She scowled.

Judge Sitteer Ibrahim stopped. He knew it wasn't working and so he drummed his fingers on the coffee table and wondered what to do next.

Suddenly the girl stood up.

"Come," she commanded imperiously and Judge Sitteer Ibrahim meekly followed. They drove at a wild pace through the crowded streets of Colombo. For much of the journey he closed his eyes and when he did open them his immediate reaction was to gasp and close them tight.

The roads of Colombo possessed of people, cars, belching buses, bullock carts, cyclists, trishaws, lorries, dogs and greedy crows, all intent on making their presence felt, seethed with a symphonic hum which crescendoed and diminuendoed all around him. The girl seemed oblivious and added to the cacophony by insanely sounding her horn at regular intervals. Eventually they arrived at a tall narrow white building that looked like a wedding cake. Without saying a word she took him inside and instantly he was transported to another world. It was a shop, it was a museum, it was Xanadu.

While he wandered through layers of art in every form the girl followed him reciting her story, picking a bowl here, fingering a book there and all the while continuing her litany of legend.

"Abdul Kareem's family wasn't always rich. About two generations before, the family lived in a Muslim village located a few miles north of Galle. They were farmers and tradesmen and the whole village belonged to one family. Five years after Abdul Tariq was born, there was a girl shortage in his village and by the time Abdul Tariq came of age to be married there was no one left and so the village/family began to look elsewhere. Where normally a relative of no quality would do, in the case of strangers the family/village began to be extremely fussy and soon Abdul Tariq was a mature thirty five years of age with no suitable bride in sight. He began to get worried. He took to taking long solitary walks along the hills and the riverbank. While he walked, he talked to God and soon he gained a reputation of being either a madman or a man of God."

"God," he would say, "you revealed a religion that said enjoy marriage, go unto your wives and till the soil, delight in the world I have made for thee, but I have none of these enjoyments. I have not even one wife, let alone four. The village is full of couples with their children and it makes me sad that I am unable to take pleasure in the beauty of your creation - so despondent have I become. What do I do Lord? I cannot even become a religious man of solitude because the concept of long-term seclusion does not exist in mainstream Islam. So what am I supposed to do?"

Thus, Abdul Tariq lived his lonely life, doing his work, taking his walks and talking to God.

One day while walking at the edge of the river and reciting his thasbih he saw an old man crossing the river towards him in an old boat full of goods. The river was rough and soon the old man was in great difficulty and unable to steer the boat towards either bank. Abdul Tariq ran down towards the embankment and began to shout out instructions to the man to avoid the treacherous waterfall that was two miles down.

"Jump! Jump!" He instructed.

"Swim! Swim!" He screamed in a panic.

The old man jumped into the river and soon it became obvious he couldn't swim. And while Abdul Tariq unwilling to enter the precarious waters watched him drown, the boat quietly swirled round and round with its cargo of goods and came to rest by his side. Abdul Tariq was distraught by his action and yet had the presence of mind to inspect the boat. Upon examination Abdul Tariq discovered that the cargo of goods was in fact a beautiful woman who was the old man's daughter. Her name was Imagination and seeing her position she agreed to marry him.

Abdul Tariq was ecstatic. "See!" He triumphantly announced to the villagers. "God says ask and you shall receive."

The girl took a deep breath, she stood in front of the old porcelain bowls that had hand painted emblems of crescent moons and stars. She ran her fingers round the circumference of the large saharans and lifted the post koppus to her eye.

Judge Sitteer Ibrahim exploited the pause in the story to bring her attention to his tale.

"I too met my wife at a time of death," he rushed out. "I was on my way to Malaysia when I heard that my best friend had died in a car crash in Dubai. I decided to change route and go to Dubai and in transit at Charles de Gaulle airport, wandering through the circles of passage, I stepped upon a middle-aged woman doing yoga. She opened her left eye and asked me to sit beside her. At first I was embarrassed and tried to continue on but she kept on reappearing in her yoga posture wherever I happened to wander to. So I decided to humour her and sit down. There we sat the middle-aged woman and myself in the middle of the passenger lounge. I must have sat there for about an hour. She did her yoga and I just sat there and after some time I realized that a sense of deep peace had come over me. I didn't want to leave I wanted to stay on with this yoga practitioner. And so I did. We got married and lived in Paris and she still lives there you know. She is a marvellous woman. An odd wife but a marvellous woman."

Judge Sitteer Ibrahim had a foolish smile on his face as he thumbed through a handmade notebook. He opened and shut it in a continuous motion until the girl reached over and took it from him.

"Now Abdul Tariq too had an odd wife," she said. "For he soon realized that his wife Imagination was no ordinary woman. To others she appeared to be a middle-aged woman who was rather plain and ordinary but to him right from the beginning she looked like a young nubile nymph who gave him sideways glances crowded with meaning. While she looked slovenly and unkempt to the rest of the family/village, Abdul Tariq saw her dressed in tussar silk and tanjoo golds. And every night as they reclined on the floor of their simple house, Abdul Tariq delighted in the world that God made and tilled his soil.

One day Imagination went walking far out to the distant hills and yet there were some who swear they saw her by the riverbank as well. There were some who said they saw her swimming in the river and others who saw her sleeping on the One Tree Rock west of the hills. Abdul Tariq did not worry. He knew he had a special wife and he gave her the unheard

of freedom of being herself. Imagination returned late evening weary and tired and moved with a heaviness that spoke of fatigue.

Abdul Tariq who had come to love his wife very much did not question her on her movements and waited for her to tell him what happened. But Imagination ceased to speak and soon it became apparent to family/village that she was with child. While her belly grew and swelled with life, Imagination wasted away until at 6 months she gave birth to a large distended lump who shrieked and cried, while Imagination quietly died. The child was called Pain and Abdul Tariq developed a distaste for his daughter who was born of mourning."

"Her name," said Sitteer Ibrahim, fingering a delicate black and white dumbara cushion, "was Jacqueline and she had been brought up in Pondicherry, India. After the airport we went to her little apartment in the 9th arrondissement right next to the Opera. It was a one-room attic in a beautiful old building that had chandeliers and high elaborate ceilings. The attic window had the most marvellous view of rooftops and the Madeleine and on good days you could even see as far away as the Tour d'Eiffel. But winter was not a good time. It got cold in winter and the whole of Paris turned a blunted grey. The sun never shone and the clouds lay thickly piled like blankets in the sky. It rained incessantly and even the soulful songs of Edith Piaf couldn't block out the monotonous drip of water outside. She tried to cheer me up. Poor Jacqueline, she lit scented candles and threw brightly coloured wraps over the sofa. There was always tea brewing and sometimes she would make curry. But it was no use. I just couldn't hack it in miserable Paris; even the trees of the Champs-Élysées Boulevard are not lit up all days in winter. And so one dreary late winter day I left. Just slipped out of her life like a gentle wind that speaks of spring."

Sitteer Ibrahim had a wistful expression on his face; he draped a hand-woven shawl over his shoulders and looked sadly at his reflection in the huge 18th Century mirror that hung alone on a wall. The girl too draped a shawl over herself and linking her arms companionably with his continued her tale. She hoped it would bring some lightness to the sombre mood that had descended upon them.

"Pain, despite her name, brought joy and happiness to the village. She had none of her mother's mysteries or her father's oddities and grew up to be a beautiful young woman. She was clever but learnt to hide it from others. She was strong but encouraged the idea that she was weak and delicate. She was fickle in heart but claimed she was as faithful as a little mouse. She was rich but they all called her poor Pain. She was efficient but was seen as helpless. And soon it came about that Pain was the most desired girl by both men and their mothers for the prize of wifhood. Abdul Tariq was glad to give his daughter in marriage; he was partially healed from his wife's death and no longer held his daughter responsible but he never could bring himself to be a father to her. And so Pain had never been held by him or kissed or cuddled, she had never sat on his shoulders and walked about the village or had him put her to bed. But what you never have you don't miss and so Pain grew up with the love and care of the family/village but not of her father and she didn't know the difference."

Night had fallen and Sitteer Ibrahim looked around the bedroom he was now in. The girl lay on the bed she had no clothes on but her socks. Her eyes were closed and her little chest rose and fell with a calm rhythm. He began to undress slowly and took his time to lay his clothes on the Chinese chest at the bottom of the bed.

"I saw Jacqueline again," he said. "A few years later I was passing through Paris and thought I will visit her. I went to the attic apartment the 9th arrondissement right next to the Opera House. It was summer and the whole building had thrown open their windows as if to embrace the season. Jacqueline was there; she was holding a cup of tea seated on the tiny balcony that overlooked the inner courtyard at the back. She opened her left eye and said 'OM' and a wave of peace came over me once again. I slipped into her life like a summer zephyr. I stayed for six months.

Sitteer Ibrahim lay himself carefully next to the girl; he looked up at the high ceiling and the extraordinary shadows the candle threw upon it.

"What happened to Pain?" He asked the girl. "What became of her?"

The girl turned towards him on her side, her body was moulded into a question mark and her hair covered her eyes.

"Pain got married," she said.

There was a long pause and Sitteer Ibrahim thought she had fallen asleep. He stretched his hand out to touch her cheek when he was startled into withdrawal by the sound of her voice. She had been watching him, he thought. Watching and waiting. Sitteer Ibrahim felt slightly ridiculous by now. He was naked and so was she but while her nakedness seemed to clothe her, his only made him feel witless. He had lost interest in making love to her and if it came to it he knew he would not be able to perform.

"While all the village boys and their mothers had their eyes on Pain she had other plans for herself. Pain loved the family/village but she knew there existed a world out there. A world that held undreamt of treasures. A world of fantasy and adventure and imagination. Pain made her decision; she had to leave and there was only one way."

The girl turned her back on Judge Sitteer Ibrahim and continued her tale still sleeping on her side. He marvelled at the smoothness of her skin and appreciated the blemishless spectacle that was offered. He almost touched her but didn't, instead he did something better, he listened.

"Salim, which means peace, was not his real name. When he was born his parents held grandiose visions for his future and called him Dhakwan al Din, which meant Intelligence of the Faith. But Alas! Dhakwan was born with kindness of heart and goodness of spirit but he had no intelligence and so the family/village unable to keep up the charade of calling him Dhakwan al Din quietly changed his name to Salim for he was the most peaceful being the village held. Salim the simpleton had no ambition or vision for himself. He was most content staring up at the blue sky and dreaming or sleeping in the fields hidden by the tall stalks of paddy, so when Pain made her decision to marry Salim, it was he who was surprised most of all. But he wisely kept his astonishment to himself and agreed to marry the beautiful and most desired Pain."

“One year after the marriage the family/village was thrown into consternation when Pain, her husband Salim and their three-month-old son, Abdul Kareem, left the village without a word. The family/village never heard of them again.”

The girl stood up and went to the window. It was dusk and the dove grey sky tinged with pink was disarranged with crows that had begun their ritual flight home. She closed the windows and the silence that surrounded them was like a refuge. He looked at her full slightly asymmetrical breasts, her delicately protruding belly, her abundant hips and her rounded buttocks; he felt desire arouse him.

“Come,” he invited her, towards the circle of his arms and enfolded her within himself. She lay her cheek against his grey haired chest and allowed her hands to run up and down his pleated flesh on the sides.

“Pain,” he whispered to her, his mouth against her hair, “had found her life partner in Salim. She taught and moulded him and he learnt desperate to please her. And soon the important city of Galle saw a new and successful personage in their midst. He was a gem merchant, a banker, an importer and exporter, a philanthropist, an educationalist, a religious leader, and a husband and father.”

The girl looked up at Judge Sitteer Ibrahim and smiled, she folded her legs around him and whispered in his ear, “After six months you heard the call of your heart. You left Jacqueline in her attic apartment in the 9th arrondissement next to the Opera and you went to live in Africa. Where the heat sears you and the smells defeat you and yet you feel alive.”

“What is your name?” Judge Sitteer Ibrahim asked the girl, while enveloping her in a crush of passion.

“It is,” she panted out, seriously, “Alam al Takhaiyul.”

“Ah!” He said as he realized what it meant. He was beginning to understand.

Now and Then: The natural progression of things

In the year 500 AD the great sage Adishanya had a series of visions that he inscribed on fifty ola leaves. In the late forties an archaeology student discovered some of the writings in the tragic Pulatti expeditions. They foretold of dreadful times in store for the island now called Sri Lanka. Legend has it that once all the ola leaves have been recovered peace and prosperity shall reign once more. So far only 32 of them have been found.

Ola leaf Number 15

*There will come a time when blood will flow.
The country will be split and Red will be the only colour.
For many years people will suffer
Mothers, Fathers, Brothers, Sisters,*

Sons, Daughters, Husbands, Wives.

The ambulance wails down the road. It maps out a route with sound. A sound that begins near the Kollupitiya junction - a faint moan - that crescendos into a high scream outside my house and then a diminuendo towards the General Hospital. Over and over it continues throughout the night. Tonight is a bad night. I lie in bed straight as a ruler. My eyes are closed and I try to empty my mind. I try not to think of the airport in Ratmalana, each plane arriving hot upon the tail of the other. The tight line of ambulances with their doors swung open. The silent but steady emergence of wounded. An occasional moan, a sporadic shout but most often silence. I think in black and white. Except for the blood. The blood is red. What else can blood be but red? Gentlemen start your engines, I think and then I see the ambulances tear out of the tarmac and toward the city. They are going to the hospital; but it is so far away. Every second should count, I think, why the hell couldn't the hospital be closer to the airport. It makes sense, right? During times of war a hospital should be built close to the military airport. And then I think, I wouldn't hear these ambulances then. I wouldn't be reminded then that I live during a time of war.

I hear my husband whisper, "Let's go dancing, darling."

I put on my dancing shoes and head off to the Blue Elephant. They are playing techno music and I dance as if in a frenzy.

"Come on baby," the newly imported English DJ wheedles. He is young. All of twenty two years and pimple craters.

"I said Come on baby!" He now screams. "Strut your stuff, darlin"

He jumps up and down and the crowd goes wild. I shake my head from side to side. I feel my hair slapping my cheeks. First one cheek, then the other. I lean back and bend my knees. I jump. I bend. I shiver. I am dancing and I forget.

Pilawoos at four in the morning

"Muttai Roti, Roast Chicken, Onion Sambol aanam oda," my husband orders, as we sit scrunched around a dirty marble table our knees jostling for space. The young Muslim boy dressed in a faded sarong and torn Mettatica T-shirt slaps plastic plates with a fork down in front of each of us, and then a jug of boiling water. The boiling water is ritually poured on each plate, the fork is swirled around a few times, and the water is swivelled around the plate then emptied onto a side. The food arrives and we eat. The boy stands on a side watching us as we wolf the roti. I catch a glimpse of him through the side of my eye and wonder what he thinks of us.

"Falooda kondu va," Ravi shouts at the boy. He nervously comes forth with the faloodas two at a time. The last falooda spills on Ravi as the boy stumbles against the chair.

"Madayan," he screams. *"Po da,"* he shouts at the apologetic boy who tries to explain.

"Sorry dorai..." the boy stammers out.

"*Vai Pothu*," he arrogantly tells the boy before storming out to sit in the Mercedes. We scramble up and I see Suresh talking to the boy and slip something into his hand. Five hundred rupees is left on the table.

"*Hey! Boss, mitchum thanks.*" Then it's onto the dropping-off routine. Ravi sulks while the rest of us chatter nervously. He has drunk too much and we are thankful that he didn't get into a fight. I remember how the boy looked at Ravi. I close my eyes and let my head fall back onto Anjali's arm. My head swims. Too many gins and tonics, I think wearily.

The Merc belts along the Galle road.

"Avoid Bullers Road Machaan. Too many check points and I don't have my ID."

"Silly Bugger!" Suresh mutters under his breath as he steers the car deftly over the speed bumps.

"Halt!" the command ricochets around the Merc. A wary peer into the car and I stare brazenly back wondering what he can read in my eyes. Rich kids, he must think. "ID please."

Suresh proffers a driving license. They look at Ravi seated next to him.

"ID please sir."

Ola leaf number 27

*Who is the ruining man?
The one of anger and wealth
The one of hate and division
The one of greed and
jealousy
Such is the ruining man.*

They confer in a huddle. Then back again to us. "Get down please. And stand aside."

We stand arrogantly. Indifferently. Don't these fuckers know who we are? They search the vehicle casually. Then it's a polite, "Thank you. Good night."

On our way again, Ravi starts "You know why they did that don't you?" We don't reply.

"It's because I'm a Tamil," he continues.

"But how do they know that machaan? Don't over react. Wilson could be a Burgher name. In fact you do look like a Burgher."

"My ID card is written in Tamil you idiot!"

"Seriously! Why on earth is that?"

"I don't know machaan. Some Thondaman bullshit I guess, that has come to bite us." We lapse into silence till we reach home. We crawl into bed and then the sun rises. Another day wasted. More lives lost.

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Ola leaf number 19

*The city will explode.
Not once. Not twice. But
many times over.
There will be darkness that
descends on our children.
As if the sky will fall on
top of them.
The blood will travel from
the North to the South;
from East to West.*

From where I was, it was only a medium sized boom! It could have been anything. But our instincts have now been trained towards only one direction. It had to be only one thing. A bomb! The question was where? The distance from Kynsey Road to Greenpath might only be two miles at most. It took me forty minutes to get home. Traffic was thick, a different kind of traffic. It was not the usual before-school, after-school, lunch time, before-work, after-work kind of jams. This was a panic-ridden, wretched and hopeless kind of traffic jam. This was a sitting-and-waiting-in-your-car, not-moving-for-minutes, not-knowing-what-was-going-on kind of jam. This was a watching-many-people-rushing-around and yet-not-moving kind of jam. This was a bomb jam!

Ola leaf number 33

*This war is waged like
water
In no constant form
It flows in accordance
with the ground
And kills with the
merciless thunder
Of a waterfall*

"It was a flash of lightening that went through the house," he explained. "It came through the back and sped through the passage and erupted through the front door. Then came the sound. The windows broke," he said, looking at the pieces of stained rose pink glass at his feet. A line of blood leaked out from under his bandaged head and made the slow journey down to his chin. He sat down and cried.

"My daughter," he wept. "Where is my daughter?"

The children were safe. The roof had fallen on their heads and yet they were safe. They stood in rigid strict rows waiting for parents to pick them out and take them home. They stood in silence and all they heard over and over was the roar of fury in their ears. For many months afterwards, no lullaby lulled them to sleep, no song soothed their sorrow, no whispered speech touched their minds. All they heard was that roar.

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Ola leaf number 35

*The rains will fail and
darkness will be
imposed.
A Godless country
raped and plundered
those who lead will not
be worthy.
And the country's
wealth will flood away
from her.
She will be paralyzed
with apathy*

The sweat creeps down my back. It inches its way to my buttocks. It clings and moves and gathers both momentum and mass. It leaves a spreading stain of misery on my clothes. I try not to move. Every shift in position makes it worse. I lie there staring out at the darkness waiting for the relief of dawn.

The sun leaks into the sky and under normal circumstances I would be appreciative of the gashes of violent colour that streak the canvas of sky, but now I can only take it as a legitimate sign that a new day must begin. I have now taken to sweating while having a shower. The sweat gushes out just as fast as the water. The fan hangs splayed impotently against the ceiling. The eau-de-cologne is poured down my body and yet in a few hours the stale smell of sweat will pervade my nostrils.

Ola leaf number 37

*A shroud of Heaven and a
Coffin of Earth
A pearl-less oyster sleeps on
the ocean bed
Discarded and thrown
It tempts only the scavenger
Who rips it apart with
avarice*

Life creeps along, the country is stilled. The vibrant hum of life, the neon lights, the blaring kadé music cannot be found. At night candles flicker ominous shadows in houses that stand silent and tragically in a city that has been forced into darkness. I snort in disbelief and think thank God my parents are dead, for they thought life would get better for us!

• • •

Ola leaf number 43

*The innocent will be
killed.
Death comes in the form
of other men.
Trust and honour will
mean nothing
Peace they say will come
through violence
It is a war that is fought
for others by those who
don't quite know what is.*

The man waited at the corner under the cover of darkness. He watched. He absorbed every detail, every sense of the place. Then he went to his rented room and lay down and closed his eyes. He didn't sleep; over and over again he replayed the event that was to come. He felt like God. The next day he woke up early, downed a cup of scalding tea. Dressed very carefully and two hours before he was, left for the corner.

The man waited at the corner under the cover of light. He watched. He absorbed every detail, every sense of the place. He walked little, he spoke not at all. He watched with a concentration that could only be suspect. People passed. Cars drove. Policemen guarded. I passed him by and gave him not a glance. He was ordinary like you and me. Then at the traffic light he called out to me.

"Hello," he said, "sexy disco!" Leaning down towards the car window, as he pushed the button, resting against the car, all he thought was it is so easy. I am God.

Ola leaf number 1

*I see the gods in your body
You are eternity
Being and nonbeing and beyond
I am the rite, the sacrifice
The fire, the oblation.*

[...]

From *Fifteen: a collection of short stories*
(Colombo: 1999)

Enchantment

The speaker has a crow's nest on her head. It is really her hair heaped on top of her head; tendrils escape into jagged wisps that stand around her face and droop artfully onto her forehead. It is a conference, and she, looking like Draupadi, who, though not beautiful, is sitting regal and speaking well. She says the word *identity*, and I feel my heart jump. It is a word that evokes much in my world today. I am going through, you could say, an identity crisis. I have fallen in love, lust, infatuation; call it what you may. I have all the symptoms of this whatever - which in my case is a strange attack of the flu. I sit at the conference table, feverish and parched, and recollect our first meeting. I relive the scenario as if it is an art movie - all slow motion and strange dialogue; fragmented light that plays on a shadowed water garden that disperses the smell of araliya flowers. The color of her pale skin against black clothes. Gold hair and blue eyes. Gentle touch and cigarette kisses. I am easily frightened, and yet the tumultuous feeling in my gut does not let me go. I stay, and thus it is I who have invited her in. I feel that I am about to enter an irregular world.

Sleep

I will not sleep with you, I tell her that every day. And she smiles back at me. It is too confusing, I go on. And still she smiles. She runs her hand down my bare arms and goosebumps sprout aggressively in protest. She smiles while I push her away. I will not sleep with you, I echo firmly. Never! And then, I think, I have said 'never' before with regard to other matters. Nevers that have become maybes that have become I will. I look at her reclining in the moonlight. Her legs are swung over the arm of a swirly-whirly wrought iron chair, and her head is tilted to a side like a perpetual question mark. Her hair curls invitingly around my finger, and I give it a gentle tug. She resists and keens her neck up to the sky. She looks like a caged bird dreaming of freedom. She is so beautiful that my body feels hollow, my heart is at my throat waiting to jump out. We see a crescent moon and a perfect bright star. It is a lover's sky. She turns and looks at me and smiles while her fingers play nervously with each other. Her hands are smaller than mine and her wrists look smashable. She is taller than I am, and yet I find out she is so fragile. 'Careful,' she says a fraction too late as I dive in and bite viciously on her shoulder. She shakes me off. Now it is I who am smiling.

First Sight

It started with a squat. 'I can't do that,' she said, looking down at me while I deadened the pain in my haunches, trying to look comfortable. 'I am too old,' she said. She who has passed off as 30 and is 49. We were both mildly intoxicated, at that stage where you allow the waves of alcohol to wash over you willingly. She sat with others, but I had eyes only for her. The fountain dribbled a water song, and the reflection of the water divided her face into concave light patterns that traced dunes on her sand-colored face. Her eyes were now a cool green that glistened like a newly sliced kiwi fruit. I wanted to lick it. Instead I let my tongue unfurl

a torrent. I didn't know it then, but I was laying the trap. She blinked, but for an instant, and she didn't know it then, but she was caught.

I have to go away abroad, I tell her, for a few weeks. It will be good for us, she replies, her eyes granite. Yes, I agree laconically. Our hands remain intertwined. I leave her in the early hours of the morning with a chaste kiss on her neck. Her jugular twitches in betrayal.

Apart

I sit with my legs stretched out under crisp white hotel sheets. The warm Delhi night licks my skin, leaving traces of perspiration. My pajama top clings to me. The heat is unbearable. I open french windows, and a rush of air causes the long white curtains to billow flirtatiously and reveal glimpses of a quotidian Indian street. Sadarjis lounging beside ancient-looking new Ambassador taxis, their turbans wrapped like repression tightly around their heads, lean dogs that hunt determinedly through garbage piles, scooters weaving crazily at acute angles. A woman walks languidly by, her duppatta trailing on the dusty road. She irritates me for no reason. I want to run down and wrap her duppatta around her throat. Suddenly she looks up at me and smiles. I am surprised and retreat in haste. I have drunk tonight a few brandies with belligerent academics for company, and now, sandwiched between the sheets, I listen to my walkman play tapes of movie music that transport me to a meretricious world. In between Hungarian folk songs from *The English Patient* and stirring passages from *The Last of the Mohicans* I am strangely amazed at my situation. I am not young any more: these are feelings of youth, of those who have their whole lives before them. The churning intestines, the fluttering heart, the mooning around - it's not for us, middle aged professionals. I hate this, I think, or do I? This upheaval of my life, this unnecessary complication. Why, I wonder, do humans fall in love? Is it merely a habit, as Veblen insinuates, akin to alcoholism and religious ritualism? Is it that some people are prone to 'falling in love' more than others? Will it be discovered that some are born with a chemical imbalance that causes them to fall in love more frequently than others? I remember reading somewhere, some trashy supermarket magazine most certainly, that a Hollywood actor once checked into a clinic to be treated for being addicted to sex. Will there come a time when love prevention clinics will do thriving business? And what about this sex business? Why do love and sex have to be intertwined? Is it not a tall order to require the person you love to be the one you love to have sex with as well? Do animals not have it better? They see, they respond, they fuck. But is this love? I'm not sure. Was I ever sure? I don't know. I try to analyze it. Exhausted, I sleep.

Delhi Dreaming

History lolls heavy on Delhi's shoulders. There is no escaping it. As I was driven around this old and weighty city doing touristy things, I thought about her. How she looks, what she may be doing, her blue-green eyes, her delicate hands; my absorption in her is abruptly disconnected by the taxi driver drawing my attention to Majnu Ka Tila. It is a place where vegetation has repudiated the earth. A barren place that yet steams with the ghosts of passion. Cliff of lovers, the taxi driver says softly, staring up at the rocky ridges. I turn my gaze to him and I wonder if he has ever been in love.

Many many lovers, he says, and immediately I am interested; they jump, he concludes dramatically. I react, startled into silence and ponder this morsel of morbidity. He seems bent on drawing my interest to the peculiar. Nehru Park, he whispers after some time, having driven crazily back to the city, and points out slim wavy-haired boys who stand affectedly smoking Tarzan beedis. Their bush shirts open out to salaciously reveal firm stomachs. Their betel-stained teeth flash. A Jaguar cruises. A diplomat or a rich man looking for perfunctory pleasure. The boys go wild. They gesture obscenely, lick their lips, wiggle their hips. A dark tinted door opens, a pale hand beckons, a young boy gets in. He smiles shyly at the others. He can be no more than 17. His hair is plastered onto his scalp. His cheeks glisten and redden at the whoops and whistles that leap out of the crowd as he gets in. The car drives off. The driver looks towards them leeringly, and I am beginning to get frightened. I look at the back of my driver's head and wonder what's in store for me. Take me back, I request in a panic. But he doesn't understand. Will not understand? My singular tour is not yet over, and mixed with alarm, my mind subconsciously absorbs my surroundings. Old Delhi is cramped and thick with narrative. I see a well-fed man, wearing delicate embroidered crimson shoes on his tiny feet, scurry through the passages and wonder if he hurries to keep his appointment of love. I almost hear the tinkle of anklets and imagine a pale-skinned nautch girl, whose name is Zubeida or Raushen, singing a ghazal that weaves harem intrigues around her captivated audience. They still exist. These nautch girls who have now acquired the patina of Bollywood and sing lewd songs with zest. Their eyes stare out harshly at their audience of new-rich men who jostle each other with impatience and rivalry. They long to be done with the niceties and get down to the real business. I am deposited safely back at the hotel, and pay the taxi driver with quiet alacrity, relieved to find myself safe and sound; he nods his approval of my passive behavior.

Introspection

It is Sunday and the city monuments stand in majestic solitude. I saw a dead cow yesterday lying across the middle of the road. Someone had carefully laid its shape out with rocks and placed a green branch at its head. It lay there all day; I must have passed it a million times. It made me think about death. The evanescent nature of life. If everything is so transitory, I think, then why do we put such weight on decisions we make in our lives? Why not live for the moment, the feeling, the now? Why not make all decisions with the id in the forefront? Because, I converse with myself, we don't live life alone. We interact with other human beings, we love and hurt and teach and learn other human beings. We need, and with that thought in mind is how we live.

Today, I notice idly, the cow was gone. The rocks and branch still stood marking out the space of death as if to mourn what once was. We drive through wide streets flanked by old tall trees that arch out expansively toward each other. Big houses and big gardens stand in opulent solidarity. They are big square blocks with ugly windows and balconies. They are nondescript slabs of money. Rich people, my guide indicates with drawn out gestures that speak of lots of money.

Identity Confusion

They think I'm an Indian, a North Indian more specifically. I have the look, I agree. The pale skin, the brown hair, the light eyes. I am not Indian, I insist, all the while aggravated that my

colleague has got into the Indian spirit with zeal. He begins to speak pidgin Hindi, and causes us to be overcharged by the taxi driver. I lose my temper, and he withdraws, piqued. We don't speak, but later over dinner I try to explain. It is their arrogance, I say arrogantly between mouths of crisp thosai. My colleague delicately spoons cream of chicken soup into his mouth; he shrugs the Indian food off with disdain and can't seem to understand what the problem is all about. He loves to dress Indian, attempts to speak Hindi, but hates Indian food. I on the other hand, he says, shovel Indian food down my throat at the slightest excuse, but hate to dress Indian and refuse to even pretend to speak Hindi. Don't make a big deal about it, he says, dressed in a new brown kurta and white Indian trousers, munching his way through an Indian version of a hamburger. What does it matter if they think you are Indian? You should take it as a compliment. Indians are very good-looking people, you know, he says a trifle sternly. I acquiesce but am not convinced. He doesn't know it, but all my life I have been mistaken for something I was not. During my years in the West I was the Mexican, the Hindu, the Spaniard, the Arab, the Other; back at home I was everything but my own community. I realized that Identity was a luxury.

Gift

I have bought her a ring. It is delicately thick with spaces of intricacy woven in silver. I wore it all day so that it may be a shared gift. I twist it around my finger, and surreptitiously steal glances at it. I like it. I like it very much. I dawdle on the bed, trying to read. The television is on, and the Hindi equivalent of MTV blares out and clogs my ears. It is too much and I mute the sound, and in between page-turns catch glimpses of aggressive pelvic thrusts and shivering bosoms. Tomorrow I go home. I am not a good traveler, I realize. No sooner I leave the shores of my land than I ache to come back. I long for the heat and dust of Colombo. I strain for the sound of the sea, a glimpse of the Indian Ocean. I relish the monsoonal deluge that leaves roads drowned for days on end. I want to see the clash of verdant olive and emerald from my bedroom window.

The home of stone and light

We talk and sit in front of each other and try not to touch. Our knees almost meet, and our hands are millimeters away. I can't stand it and get up and walk around the house. It's a beautiful house. It's not hers. She is house-sitting, and yet she seems so appropriate in that setting. Open space and light that spills around like a generous daystar. It is an *Architectural Digest* kind of house, and she seems so at ease in it. The time to leave comes around, and we stand together to say good-bye. It feels impossible to come to the realization that once I leave I will not see her again. I talk to her. And our bodies lean into one another. We kiss. And she leads me slowly up the stairs.

She pushes me against the sideboard, and her hand slides up my thigh. My white linen dress is pushed upwards. Her hand rests on my stomach and I wait aching for her touch. She finds me, and is wondrously surprised at the desire that leaks out of me. I arch my back and give into the sheer feel of pleasure, but when she demands more I am scared and push her away, and stand like a schoolchild with my bag on my feet and beg to be let off. She is angry; I feel it, and I explain that my resistance is not the fear of giving in but precisely that I will give in. My fear gives way to words and I tell her a story of many years ago. I must have been around eight or nine years old; there was a pretty girl who sat behind me in school. I don't

know how it evolved but one day we began this game. It was called The Railway Children. We had been to see the film together with my parents. The next day she described a scene that I knew hadn't been in the film. I denied its existence; she insisted and offered to act it out for me. I hesitantly agreed and in doing so, set the stage for multiple re-enactments. Do you want to play the Railway Children, she would ask. and I would say yes. Then she would lift my school uniform and gently ease her hand into my panties, letting the uniform drop gently around her hand. Like this, she would whisper as she fingered me. Like what? I would ask hoarsely. Like this, she would say again. And after a few minutes withdraw. We played this game the whole term. She always doing the touching. Me always being touched. The next term she was not there, she had gone abroad. I never played Railway Children with anybody else.

She lies on the bed looking at me as I relate the story, and I am soon on top of her. I ask her to touch me. I see her pupils shrink. We roll around, and my dress is hiked around my hips and her hand is bucking inside my panties. Don't bite, she says as I come. I don't bite.

Cake and Sugar Dumpling

We speak - as usual, short hurried abrupt bursts that seem to frustrate her. Now, away from her, I regurgitate bits of information and scrutinize them for meaning. You want to have your cake and eat it, she said. I agreed enthusiastically. It was true. I made no bones about it. But I have no cake, she said. Only a sugar dumpling, I offer, enjoying the banter that has arisen between us. Ah! But first I must taste it, she re-joins, and I feel suddenly shy. She decides she needs to find herself a cake.

Discontent

I need space. I feel closed in. She doesn't trust me. She thinks that I am playing games. I want everything my way, she says. She is right. I do. I want to be with each of them, and I want to be left alone. Once again we have bad phone conversations. Once again we have sudden meetings that turn out all right. I talk. She listens. She's angry. I understand. And yet again we decide from tomorrow we are to be out of touch. One week. Two weeks. Till whenever. Till whatever. She says something interesting. We are back to the cake context. I have my cake and want to eat it as well. So does she. I will be looking, she says. Good, I reply. This is new for me, she says. I make a mental note that it is a topic I must pursue for later.

Black Beauty

It is evening, and as I sit at my desk looking out of the window, I see an araliya tree spill its flowers onto the sidewalk. There is a strangeness about me. I have met her today. A long leisurely time without the characteristic clock-watching and haste that has generally marked my visits. I have worn a black dress, black bra and black panties. Looks ominous, she says at the sight of me, and I bounce onto the bed with a big smile. She has discovered two triangles in my right eye. Two triangles of light that are balanced on the edge of my iris. Her blue eyes, now blue-green, bore into mine and they register that I am cool and calm.

Her lips hover over my stomach and I wait for the inevitable touch. This time I let her taste me, but I am tense and I reach down for her and pull her up towards me. I can't come, I say, and moments later she brings me to a silent and yet shuddering release. I laugh! She is surprised, and then even more when I suddenly roll on top of her and sit on her chest. Her hands are stretched above her, and I hold her smashable wrists in a vice-like grip. You are strange, she says, I have never made love to someone before who wants so much to be in control. She is partially right. It is that I don't want to be out of control. It's not the same thing. Her skin is soft and smooth. It bruises easily like an over-ripe plum. I suck my presence into her shoulders. She wears them for days, like a badge. And when they fade, I give her another.

The Beginning of the End

She has drunk too much and is angry. She sits at her little table and swills her beer carelessly to her mouth. It dribbles down the side of her chin and she angrily shrugs it off. She is depressed. The house-sitting days are over, and it's back to a cramped room and living with Mum and Dad. I sit on the edge of the bed, slightly uneasy. Her skin reflects the yellowed wall, and the tattered coir mat sits askew on the scuffed floor. 'I'm getting drunk,' she mutters. And I continue to sit silent, unable to react. I realize how it must seem to her. I come off as cold, heartless. A spoilt rich bitch. Her eyes shift uneasily as she senses my discomfort. 'Bugger off,' she says bitterly, unable to cope with my seeming shallowness. I hesitate just for a fraction, and then I stand up to leave. I deliberate near the door, looking back at her. She is still beautiful. She is still desirable. But I am no longer interested. She avoids my gaze. She doesn't fit in here. The place where she grew up has outgrown her. Nothing fits. It shouldn't be like this, I think. I feel apologetic and hate myself. I crawl down the dingy staircase, averting my eyes from the stains of neglect on the walls. Am I imagining a smell of stale urine? I fling myself outside. The day is pearl-gray. The sun is shrouded; there is rain in the air. I drive fast and it begins to rain.

Goodbye

I run up the stairs two at a time. She is sitting at the window, looking out. She does not turn around, and yet I know she is waiting for me. Her hair has grown and she has lost weight. She turns around and smiles, and my heart jumps right out. It lies before me quivering, and as I move towards her, I step right on it and squish it down.

She is house-sitting once again. Every year for one month. I heard it from friends. She has found her cake. I heard it from enemies. When she turned, I knew that she knew that I would come.

We balance on the stone slabs just outside the entrance and say good-bye. It is filled with lightness and laughter and I am astonished at the mood we are both in. We lean into one another yet again. A crow pheasant flashes by, startled. A water fountain purls softly, and her gold hair is entwined with mine. We linger over the parting. She places her hand in mine and slips the ring in-between. I close my palm and feel the circle of silver. I smile at her and she at me. We both have an idea of what is to come.
