

Kavery NAMBISAN

Excerpt from a forthcoming novel

Chapter One

In those two hours of quiet between waking and noise, massaging the tender spot behind one knee, Mani remembered.

The unchanging ritual of the two-yearly trip to Delhi to visit his son was over. He went, every time, with mixed feelings. Within the parameters of Mitra's solicitous affections and Swathi's maternal control, they were kind, really. They took him where he wanted to go and had friends over to be nice to him. For a few weeks he could relax without Chinna to scold about flavourless daal or leathery chappatis; without counting the money out for weekly provisions; and without the homicidal sounds of house-building so yet another idiot like himself could move into Vaibhav Apartments and then protest in futility.

The duration of his stay in Delhi was never discussed, out of propriety. It could be two, two-and-a-half, three weeks. He knew when his son and daughter-in-law began to wilt under the strain. Mitra repeated his rancid jokes, out of spite, it seemed and Swathi became ever so slightly frigid and sour-faced. On returning from work, she fretted that she had no time to put the house in order. "I simply cannot cope... one of these days I'll have to give up my job and stay home..." After a polite interval of a few hours Mani would oblige. "Time to book my ticket, you think?"

"Pa..."

"You've just *come!*"

But the same day calls would be made, the driver despatched and the ticket purchased. A surfeit of affection for three days and the family would be on its way to the station to see him off.

This time was no different. For a chaste few weeks he had done all the right things. He was gracious with the guests and kind to his grandson. He ate punishing salads and listened to Mitra talk about the purity of social work.

Oh how had he produced such a son? A PhD in Chemistry and a sinecure scientist in the department of agriculture; a benign intellectual with a passion for highjacking conversations. Mitra's aim was to educate listeners and to entertain with jokes as stale as bus-stand pakoras. His wife Swathi was a calamity, an indestructible plastic rainbow. Her maddening virtues were as firmly in place as her embroidered chikans and organdies. The day before Mani climbed into the train in Madras she called his doctor long-distance and took notes on his treatment. During his stay in Delhi she

scrutinised his tablets and the food on his plate. “Have some curd rice, Pa. Good for the liver,” “Have some carrot soup. It flushes out the kidneys.” Grazing through bristling vegetable gardens of gas-inducing greens and yellows, gulping soups, kitchdi and curd rice, he longed for spicy, crackling food on his tongue. His tongue that gave him more pleasure than his liver or kidneys or heart ever did.

Mitra and Swathi deserved each other. Their daughter who was at college in Madras and their son in Delhi Public School should be pitied, Mani thought. And thinking, knew he was being unfair.

Generally his behaviour at Mitra’s had been above reproach. And as usual, armed with the thick spiral-bound manuscript – the reason for his unfailing willingness to visit Delhi – he made his round of publishers. Two or three times a week Swathi’s driver took him to Dharyagunj where publishers worked in little office rooms jammed with bookshelves, computers and uninterested looking copy editors. In the last few years there had been several encouraging signs, with one publisher offering to publish if he would pay part of the printing costs. Mani of course was certain that somewhere, perhaps in a posh second or third-storey office, sat The Publisher who would spot the riches in those 759 pages. Riches! That was an irony, considering the subject matter, and yet strangely apt. Meanwhile, every time a publisher said sorry this is not for us he believed one more idiot had been erased from the list. He could only be getting closer to the mark. Until he met the right one Mani was content to do the rounds, go back to Madras with the precious manuscript and return two years later with a fresh copy.

His stay in Delhi over, he boarded the train, happy in spite of the sandwiches awaiting him in his bag. Cucumber, stacks of it, when what he asked for was mutton fry with chapattis. The journey at least promised to be restful. AC-Two-tier, lower berth; barred, double-glass windows. No bumptious youth or inquisitive women seated near him. He opened his bag, sniffed gloomily the cucumber breath of Swathi’s sandwiches and took *Short Stories from Goa* out of the bag. He leaned on the recoiling softness of the railways pillow, read two stories (liked one), dozed, ate a sandwich and waited for the chaiwalla. Watching him dole out see-through chai in trembling thin plastic cups, Mani said no. He would get down during the fifteen-minute halt at Mathura and fill his thermos.

A longish wait at the signal on the outskirts of Mathura and just as the evening sun softened in the west the train pulled into the station. Clutching his flask and with the red bag slung on his shoulder Mani headed for the door, effectively blocked by a young couple heaving their luggage into the carriage while the traffic on either side waited, cursing. Having lost precious minutes, Mani quickly made for the queue at the tea counter. A flat-nosed youth poured tea from a kettle, expertly measuring the level in the cups with his eyes. Yet again trembling plastic but the tea definitely of better quality.

“Two or three?” the youth asked Mani, plucking the flask out of his hands. “Four,” Mani said and could he rinse the flask with hot water? The boy obliged but when Mani wanted him to go easy on the sugar, he shrugged. “Readymade.”

Mani was ferreting for the money in his wallet when he heard the train and saw passengers jump smartly back into the carriage. Even those further away than he made a dash for it and leapt in without fear. “Run!” Hands beckoned from the carriage, faces screamed. Mani stood motionless, aware of his inability to make it. Flask in hand he watched coach after maroon coach of the Tamil Nadu Express blur past his eyes.

Mani sat on an empty bench and screening his eyes against the shaft of light coming in through chinks in the platform roof, took stock. He had with him the just-filled flask of tea and on one shoulder, the red travel bag. The bag held a towel, soap, toothbrush and paste, a bottle of water and two books. Dark glasses, reading glasses and his wallet. And the manuscript, originally in his stand-up bag, which had changed places with the dried fruit and nut packets in the last half hour before he left for the station. Intuition, he thought, applauding himself reverentially. The suitcase with his clothes and the standup-bag-on-wheels crammed with packets of dried apricots, walnuts and pista were on the train, and forever lost.

It could have been worse.

The station seethed with passengers, porters, hawkers, sadhus, agitated railway clerks and officious ticket collectors. People everywhere but not one to share his misfortune. At a water tap next to the bench a withered old woman washed a rag, which she then spread, over a basket. Balancing the basket on her head she walked resolutely towards Mani.

“Saab... chikoo? *Ek dum taaza*....very fresh...”

Mani turned away but the chikoo-seller wasn't put off. Squatting before him she asked. “Dilli?”

Mani told her. “Missed the train? Hai Ram. Pray that someone deserving gets your things.” She sidled closer on her haunches. “Don't be afraid. Buy a ticket on Karnataka Esprase, go to Bunglour and from there the Brindaban to Madras. Or wait till nine and catch the Kanyakumari.” She observed his dismay. “No money? Hai Ram. I'll take you to the dharamsala. Stay for a few days, write a chitti to your people.”

Bhagwan Devi was dressed in a washed out purple blouse and green sari. Her greying hair was scanty, her teeth discoloured, her ears and nose ornamented with little splinters of wood. She helped Mani with the ticket – standing in for him in the queue that was as long as a sleepless night – when he went to the toilet. He got a ticket on Kanyakumari Express only to find that it was second-class, unreserved.

Mani pleaded. He tried threats and wile. Nothing doing.

Bhagwan Devi consoled him. “It isn’t difficult. Six or seven or nine to one seat.” Three of her front teeth jutted loosely from her mouth and moved together like dancers on stage. “This Mathura is all right. But Bunglour and Madras, ‘Show ticket and seat number!’ they shout.” She sidled closer, patted her basket of chikoos with a protective hand. “I was thrown out of a reserved compartment, *bhaiya*. *Sachch*. The passengers demanded that I show my ticket. Ticket? I said. Is it not enough that I sell fruit that you’re going to eat? When I refused to budge, the ticket collector dug his heel into my bottom, and kicked my basket full of Nagpur oranges out of the door. I threw myself over my basket, broke my rib and saved my oranges. Hai Ram....

Two hours for departure. On Bhagwan Devi’s advice, Mani lay sideways on the bench and holding the red bag to his chest, closed his eyes. He woke to the sound of commotion near him.

A young man in jeans and tee-shirt was shouting: “*Packet maar!* Call the police!”

And Bhagwan Devi with folded hands and a toothy smile: “*Beta, mein chor nabin boon... maaph kardo... pardon me!*”

Mani intervened. “Don’t shout, please... and it’s pocket, not packet.”

“That’s what I said. Packet maar!”

“Teach her a lesson she’ll never forget....”

“Pocket. It’s pocket. She’s no thief. Let her go, let her go.”

High drama for fifteen minutes. Punitive measures against the chikoo-seller and strategies for protection of valuables were discussed freely. The man who lost his wallet retrieved it and was pleased. In the midst of the uproar, Bhagwan Devi removed herself from the scene of crime.

Mani found her leaning against another bench, her back turned towards him. He got up and took a seat there. She half turned to him and he saw that her face had gone quiet. Her wrinkled hands wiped the flat cheeks and neck full of hollows as though rubbing away shame. She must be my age, thought Mani. He touched her bony shoulder. “Don’t be sad.”

“*Bewaqoof boon mein!* One of the first lessons we learn is never to steal from the back packet. Especially when the pants are so tight. I forgot.”

The meaning dawned and Mani felt acutely embarrassed, as though he had pried open a secret. “Where do you live?” he asked, lamely.

“In the train. Where else?”

As train after train chugged through the platform and darkness fell outside, Bhagwan Devi talked. Her early memories were of their hamlet near Baarh where she lived with her parents and a brother. From as long as she could remember she had travelled on trains to sell ash. To Patna, Barauni and Begusarai where women liked nothing better than ash to scrub their oil and soot-stained vessels with. Her father bought ash by the sackful from the cremation ghats. Bhagwan Devi rode on the trains every day, all her childhood lived with an ash-filled bag on her shoulders. She ate, bathed, quarrelled and slept in unreserved bogies. Her nose, eyes and stomach filled with the fine grey dust, her nails and teeth were begrimed with ash. She was happy. For a brief time of three months when she matured, her mother left her at home and she hated it. Without the wheels moving beneath her, she felt crippled and was happy only when she was back in circuit.

“Ash was our livelihood,” she said, looking at the enduring grey of her palms. “Until the new magic powders came and women switched to the foul-smelling stuff.” By then she was old enough to be married off, to a hotel hand in Barauni. He behaved with the dignity befitting a hotel hand and treated her with scorn. The most exciting part of her day was a trip to the water tap ten minutes away. Her feet itched and eyes longed for distant places. Their two daughters married and moved away; her husband turned to substitute pleasures.

Bhagwan Devi decided to run away. To demonstrate her goodwill she kept a stack of freshly made mooli rotis in the fireplace for her husband. With a bag full of sattu, an aluminium vessel and five rupees, she walked away from their hut. A couple of buses later she was in Patna railway station, boarding the Teensukhiya. That was thirty years ago. Or thirty-five.

“Don’t you miss your family?”

The teeth quivered and on her brow was a wrinkle of pain. “Sometimes. But see. My daughters will want to make me stay at home and I can’t do that....”

The lights came on along the length of the platform and food was on display everywhere. Bhagwan Devi eyes moved wistfully from vendor to buyer, to busy mouths. Mani offered his sandwiches and then realising they were well past expiry, tried to retrieve the packet. “They must have gone stale –”

She dug into the packet and seized a sandwich. Out came the bread triangles, the smell of stale cucumber. Bhagwan Devi turned a sandwich over, sniffed and took a bite. She shook her head and then wolfed it down. She ate each sandwich in two bites and when the packet was empty, crumpled and flung it away, with a searching look at Mani.

He was mortified by her gaze which implied sympathy. For an old man sustained on stale bread.

Mani drank his tea and thought about the wasted comforts of his flat in Madras. The silent rooms with their uncomplaining furniture, unresisted heat, unswitched-on fan,

and the kitchen undespoiled by his handiwork. And Thangam? Rangarajan had agreed to take care of the cat. A nice man, Rangarajan. A non-interfering old bachelor with the stiff-backed dignity which Mani himself lacked. Thangam, Mani knew, would brush seductively against his foster parent, wind himself round his ankles and trip him up at every step. All for some fish and rice.

The doorbell would ring in every other home but his. Even when he was home, he liked it that way. Moving about in his flat, enjoying the priceless solitude he listened to neighbourly sounds audible only during those moments when the battering sounds of construction ceased. Mrs Sambandam axing a coconut, Parimala boiling milk in that infernal whistling vessel or Shanta's pressure cooker hissing for the eighth time – a sure giveaway that it was mutton for lunch. Kasi and Shanta were guiltless about food. Kasi carried his blood pressure lightly and Shanta discussed her gallstones with pride.

At twenty-past-nine, for thirty rupees he had himself shoved into the compartment by a porter. From his fraction of a seat he watched women being kneaded through the windows. Mothers with sleeping infants on their hips, tremulous grannies and children of mind-blowing elasticity captured every inch of space inside the bogey. Seatless multitudes stood, squatted, crouched and curled between the feet of strangers. Bundles, baskets and tins were hurled into the carriage, thrust beneath seats or flung on the upper berths.

Bhagwan Devi fought her way into the hive with determined use of her elbows.

“Mai, Chikoo...?”

Mani felt a morbid sense of delight. Travelling unreserved with a seventh of a berth to himself, just think. He would get even with Kasi and Shanta when they gloated about their Florida trip. He would mention, casually, this two-day epic journey and then dismiss sympathy with: “It was good for my soul.” And give them yet another reason for calling him an eccentric.

Eccentric was the mildest of pejoratives used to describe Mani. Swathi said he was peculiar, without knowing just how peculiar. A few months after his wife's death Mitra had hinted that his father should see a psychiatrist. More brutal, his daughter Sandhya said, “Appa will one day become crazy.”

Mani was aware of going trembly in the head. Slowly, painfully, he battled with the unbridled anarchy of his thoughts. He learned to control a certain way of thinking, a certain tendency. It seemed to work.

Ten past eleven and the noise inside the compartment down a few decibels. Fans caged in metal frames on the ceiling blew pathetic gusts of air. A scrawny youth in jeans wedged between Mani and the window looked out of the window to check some contraption that had been strung up on the window bars with rope. After a while he began to doze, his head striking the window bars with every intake of breath. Mani worried.

A couple with four children filled the space on the floor between the two berths. The man, with a red checked cloth tied stylishly round his neck, folded his knees against his belly and smoked. When somebody objected to the bidi, he grinned and lit another. Each time someone objected, his grin got wider, more foolish. The wife, a large woman with her pallu framing her face, leaned back and closed her eyes, her hand reaching out to this or that of her errant kids for a warning slap or a pinch. “Munna, *Naai!*” “*Pagli*, stop teasing the baby!” Eyes shut she carried on a muttered conversation with her husband, instructed him to check on some bundle or box. She was in absolute control. In the night the second youngest who was maybe five, went up to her and pulling open her blouse, started to suckle. She did not stop him, nor did she open her eyes.

The train stopped. Vendors selling chai drummed on the windows like moths; passengers rubbed sleep out of their eyes, scrambled for baskets, bundles, chappals and children and jumping out, vanished into the night. Mani’s neck ached, his backside was numb and his bladder urged him to the toilet. He fought his way through a pickle of bodies. He peed, squatting precariously over the hole while the rails raced beneath him with vertiginous speed. His bowels had mercifully seized up. If he ate and drank the bare minimum, he could save himself the horror of swaying above the dodgy hole.

An impatient hand rattled the rusty door-latch and hurrying out, the thought struck him. Too hard, too late.

His bag, his red bag.

The porter who expertly hustled him in to the bogey and got him generous inches of space had said in parting: “You’ve got everything, no?” with a wave of his hand below the berth and pocketing the money, melted away.

Where – where? He knew even before he looked: in the berth above him, across him and on the other side of the aisle; beneath the berths, requesting sari-clad women and puzzled old men to move a little so he could search. *Kya baath hai?* Have you lost something?

He went on a futile search up and down the compartment. Twice on seeing the familiar red, he gasped, but elation died before the gasps were fully expired. The bags were not his.

It wasn’t the loss of his favourite bag that he mourned. Or his toothbrush-soap-books-etc-etc but the manuscript. The 759 pages which would one day be bound between covers to grace every distinguished bookshelf in the world.

It was the only copy. Stubbornly, he had refused to listen to Mitra’s suggestion that he get someone to put it on a computer and take a backup. He liked the look of the neatly typed pages, he liked the fact that Harini had typed them with her own hands, strewing her notes on the dining table for months on end while the final draft was

being finished. He still had her diaries – two cartonsful. But they would only contain sentences and passages scribbled in her abominable handwriting. He would never be able to decipher them and then fashion them into her magnum opus.

Sorrow seared him into a strange numbness and he sat still, very still. The heat, the steamy breath of strangers, the malodours of their existence, the strain of sitting upright when he wanted to lie down meant little. He had lost it. Lost it. It was a crime akin to murder.

The fat woman had taken his seat and blockaded herself with luggage. Mani perched himself on the far edge of the seat by gently pushing his neighbour. The fat woman was visibly compressed and leaned over with dangerous looks but he didn't care.

At five in the morning Mani brushed his teeth at the sink near the toilet. There was all of that day and night and until ten the next morning when the train would reach Madras. He looked past the sleeping youth at the world changing and dying before his eyes. Dreary stretches of over-baked earth, huts with cowdung art on the walls, late risers shitting peacefully, with all the world – instead of a cramped metal cage – their lavatory.

He peeped past the youth and saw that the contraption strung up from the window was a bicycle.

He watched the passengers busy themselves with food packets and tiffin boxes. The fat woman surrendered her seat and sat with her family. The father let go of his bidi, untied his status symbol neck-cloth, wiped his nose and spread the cloth over the gently swinging dining table. The six-some made an aromatic meal of rotis, subji, onion and pickle. Meal over, the kids ate groundnuts, leaned on Mani's legs and pulled at his trousers.

Mani recovered, lost and regained his seat, always to the fat woman. Outside, the heat was blinding; the sun reached in past the unconcerned youth and scorched Mani's face and arms. Should he resort to his dark glasses? No, he was conspicuous without it. Stations came and went; hands reached in with chai, glocose, nuts, sweets, namkeens, paani-water and sachets of ice.

“Thanda-thanda...! Cool-cool...!”

“Two, bhai. Give me two.”

The slippery sachets of ice landed on his lap, causing a map of wetness on his trousers. Following the cue from other passengers, he bit off one end of the plastic sachet. The icy water dribbled. He seized the fast-disappearing cubes and rubbed them on his face. He rolled up his sleeves, ran the cubes up and down his arms and relinquished the second packet to the kids before the ice was gone.

Nagpur. The youth next to him let go of his indolence and summoned various vendors plying Elbow Service. He acquired four or five packets and huddling them

on his knees, started to eat. “You want food?” he asked Mani, as though the possibility surprised him. “Puri or dosa?” He made a quick transaction through the window. The zestful taste of aloo-puri startled Mani’s stomach with pleasure. Let go of caution, his stomach urged. *Have, have*. At worst, there is diarrhoea or dysentery. He drank tea – now the see-through variety – and felt the sweetness assail his teeth and gums. The youth polished off his various food packets and bought three chikoos from Bhagwan Devi. He bit off the top, split them in two and ate skin and all, smartly spitting the smooth black seeds out of the window.

Mani ate bread-omelette. “I’ve got food,” said Bhagwan Devi when he asked her if she wanted any. “If you can get me a cup of dahi...”

Spreading a piece of newspaper on which a filmi hunk displayed his biceps, Bhagwan Devi laid the table for her meal. Her movements became slow and deliberate, her eyes soft and her bony hands fussy. Out came the aluminium vessel into which she measured two fistfuls of sattu, onion, green chilli and salt. She poured the dahi into it and wiped the kullad empty with a finger. Squatting there in her dung-coloured sari and purple blouse that hung loose around her elbows, she ate. Bhagwan Devi constricted herself into a narrow space between seat and aisle. Two well-dressed men boarded at Nagpur, got themselves sitting space without resistance and talked sadly about people who did not know how to share.

Around noon a grotesquely obese man with a small face and a head of thick curly hair climbed in. His chela made instant space on the berth opposite Mani. The four passengers who had been uprooted moved further down the bogey without protest. Bhagwan Devi’s prattle ceased; self-consciousness pervaded the compartment, much like the silence in a classroom on seeing the cane-wielding teacher.

The man appeared to have completed some unaccustomed exertion. He sweated profusely. Flipping open the buttons of his shirt he wiped his glistening chest with a towel. He thrust it into his armpits and beneath his pendulous breasts and flung the wet mop into the waiting arms of his chela; he shook himself like a dog after a bath and sprayed his neighbours. His chela placed a bottle of water in his extended hand. The man drank in terrifying gulps and tossed the empty bottle back. Vendors were eager to offer complimentaries: spiced channa, cutlets garam, Seven-Up, Glucose Energy Biscuits. He ate and drank with the disinterest of one whose mind was on higher things.

Mani watched in fascination. The plump, radiant torso became a face, the nipples its eyes, the navel its mouth, the rolled up shirt sleeves its flapping ears. When the man got off at Secunderabad, everything swung back to normal. Who was he? “Pattar Singh!” whispered Bhagwan Devi. She wouldn’t say more.

As the day wore on Mani was imperceptibly drawn into the one large family of passengers. Inside the carriage, each had a status, an identity. For him there was a special courtesy and kindness. The fat woman, remembering now and then his misfortune, offered him a piece of orange or a biscuit. “Lelo na....”

Bhagwan Devi squatted near the aisle and rearranged her chikoos, moving the softer more perishable fruit to the top. A man selling cold drinks battled his way through the aisle. "Budiya, move!" he shouted. Bhagwan Devi saved her haunches in time and then catching Mani's eyes, smiled engagingly.

He felt tiredness in every crevice and fold. How much longer would he have to brave the smells of bodies, bidis, sweat and bad air? The eternal rumpus? His mind was grinding towards self-pity and in a feeble attempt to fight it he watched his companions. Sometimes a face would go still, frozen with anxiety that excluded everyone else. The eagerness to live came riding on an unending inside strife and that would never change. He could smile at the crazy tedium of it; he could weep.

How many sorrows did life boast of? How many types of headaches and bellyaches, how many sores, how many varieties of constipation or red eye? How many desires, how many hurts, how many pleasures? And for him, how many years? Ten. Twelve. Twenty. How pathetic to want to live, knowing there was precious little that remained.

He must hope. That was the only way. He must hope that by some miracle his red bag would turn up. There was nothing much to steal from it. The thief could have the nuts and fruit and even his dark glasses which were an expensive gift from Swathi and rather nice.

He made one last trip to the toilet that night, trying to block out the unbearably mephitic smells. As he lowered himself over the hole he became aware of a nauseous giddiness that made the rails jump and slide beneath his feet. Rising, he lost his balance and grabbed wildly; one foot dangled over the hole and he lost a slipper to the railway tracks.

He limped back, his feet wincing over the floor now richly coated with the wreckage of teeming human hours: hairballs knit with dust, sweet wrappers, broken bangles, rotting peel. And he without a slipper.

The fat woman came to his rescue. She ordered her husband to take down the "Bombaiwalla bag" from the upper berth. Much of her wardrobe tumbled out of the bag and with it a pair of rubber slippers wrapped in paper along with a comb and a cake of dark pink soap. The slippers were too small and Mani's heels jutted inches beyond but he could manage. The woman wanted nothing in return ("Arre... isme kya hai?") but in the end accepted the thermos flask as his gesture of thanks.

At twelve noon, two hours late, they rolled into Madras Central. Mani smoothed his crumpled clothes and combed his hair. Farewells, hand-claspings and hugs. Bhagwan Devi refused his offer of fifty rupees but took it eventually. "This is a nice station," she said, tucking the note into her waist. "Enough place to sit and so many customers. In the morning I'll take the 'TN Up.'" Could she visit him if she could, sometime, she asked and Mani scribbled his address on a piece of paper. Her sand-coloured teeth executed a few quivering steps as she bid him farewell, checking one

last time if he would like some taaza – No, no. Lifting the tokri on to her head, she turned and walked away.

Mani watched those small brisk hips vanish into the crowds. He would never see her again, he knew, because the reality was that he would forget the chikoo-seller in no time. The chance to help her in some way was forever gone. How unfair of life to bringing this woman in touch with him and then take her away. Harini would chide him for such foolish sentimentality. Regimenting his thoughts to the matter at hand which was to reach home, he made his way towards the exit. There was Bhagwan Devi again, on the other side of the wide road, standing before a hoarding for cell phones, her face adorned with a pair of dark glasses.

Then it flashed. “Hey! Stop... my dark glasses! My *bag!*”

She had turned round now, and even from the distance he could see her satisfaction as she stood there surveying the world through his goggles. She hadn't seen or heard him. Only one thought filled his mind. If Bhagwan Devi had stolen his bag – but where was the bag? – he might still be able to retrieve the manuscript. Trying to suppress his excitement, he fought his way forward through the crowds. A several seconds wait before he could cross the road and by then no trace of her. The chikoo seller had vanished.

Disgusted, he went in search of an auto.

At the auto stand outside he learnt about the bus-drivers' strike. Autos were in heavy demand and he had a better chance of getting one if he crossed the road. After several futile attempts to stop an auto, one stopped. The driver would take him to Vaibhav if he shared the ride with the big, long-haired man already in it. Mani got inside and as the auto started to move, his nose picked up the smell of raw meat which came from the bags the man carried. I'm a teacher, the man said. He lived not far from Vaibhav Apartments. Mani wanted nothing to do with teachers who carried bags filled with raw meat.

Food, and plenty of sleep. In two days he had a perfectly satisfying bowel movement. The first few days were tiring, what with neighbours barging in. Ranganathan had gone to the station to meet him as planned, and there had been panic. Now a week later, Mani had peace from visitors.

The doorbell. That would be Sethu. Rising, he made his way to the door.

Chapter Three

Inhaling the acid smells of orange peel, tomatoes and slimy bits of idli, Sethu reached into the dustbin to see if anything – other than discarded food which he never took – would be worth it. Once he had found, amidst the Vaibhav refuse, a red toy bus with three of its wheels intact; another time a black cap in perfect condition except for UCLA inscribed in yellow across the front. Shaking the cap clean of tangled hair and cigarette ash, he had put it on. And found himself looking at Ritesh, the son of Bina Madam in Flat 6C.

The look on the boy's face had hurt Sethu more than any ridicule. He often met Ritesh walking down the stairs or getting his bicycle from the garage on his way to school. Ritesh with his girl eyes was the type Sethu wanted to help.

When Sethu wore the cap to school, the boys had sung, "Ucla-Pucla!" as though the word UCLA had bawdy connotations. Sethu knew it was envy.

This morning there was no gift waiting for him in the dustbin. As always, he stopped first at Mani Aiyya's flat. Aiyya switched on the fan and Thangu nudged his aching legs, beseeching he be let out. Sethu looked wistfully around, his eyes searching the passage past the kitchen leading to the room beyond it. The girl with fair guitar-holding arms and the shadowy birth mark like the map of Tamil Nadu on her right arm... where was she? He couldn't ask Aiyya. Once, standing right there under the fan, she had spoken to him.

"Kathrikai, thakkali, vengayam..." Aiyya read from his shopping list. *"Koththamalli, inji, poond..."* Make sure the *thakkali* is on top." He scrutinised previous bills, holding them two feet from his eyes. *"Vendakai* fourteen rupees, *pooseikai* twelve..."

Hopefully the old man wouldn't notice that the bills for the vegetables had been rewritten, by Sethu's father. Sethu himself did not mind cheating the other two homes but this old man was the girl's grandfather.

Aiyya rolled the bills carefully and placed them behind his time-piece on the mantelshelf. "I must speak to your father," he said.

Surely he hadn't been found out?

Thangu scooted past Sethu and bounded off to the garden to worry some hapless bird. Flat 5C next: The Amma would be peering at him through the little glass-covered hole in the door. No matter how hot or sweaty outside, Sethu wasn't asked in. "Don't disturb, we're eating," she would say. "We're talking," "I'm on the phone," "Aiyya is reading the paper." When she did open the door she took the

previous week's bill, thrust the new list and the shopping bag in his hands and closed the door. Quarter kilo of each item and nothing costing over eighteen rupees a kilo. Standing instructions.

Last house, Flat 6C. Bina Madam opened the door and shouted, as if he were deaf. "Wait!" She harangued Sethu about his clothes being dusty, his feet dirty, his fingernails black. "I'm getting someone else," she threatened every time. Her words rained like blows on his back as he hurried out of her reach with three bags, three lists, and money.

*"Kanni – Kannagi!
Kanni – Kannagi!
Nee-en – Nee-en – Nee-en
Kannmanneeeeeeeee!"*

He sang as he walked. His dream song for his dream girl whose name he did not know.

His mind had shifted happily to his secret love for Mani Aiyya's granddaughter which, as a precautionary measure, he did not reveal to his best friend, Thatkan. He imagined his life with her.

"Kanni.... I'm going to office."

"Wait, *anna*. Here's your lunch. I made mutton biriyani and semia payasam. And got some jalebis...."

Wonderful, terrible things happened to him when he thought about sleeping on the same bed with her. The urge to play his secret game with himself overcame him and his left hand reached inside the pocket of his shorts. Then he pulled it away. It was so pleasurable a game that it would leave him feeling drugged, so drugged.

Dreaming thus he turned into the muddy lanes of Sitara and remembered the argument with his mother before he left home that morning.

"I'm not eating that mess," he had said, watching her pack his lunch: a hotchpotch made out of a fragment of samosa, some upma and half a dosa. Fresh turd, it looked like. He hated to eat other people's leftovers, more so in school. He ate furtively, behind a cupped palm, with his stomach tightening with shame. He preferred his mother's rice and poriyal which he could eat with his tiffin box open.

That day his mother had been in a foul temper. The signs were obvious: the heavy-footed walk, the savage hammering of clothes and the war with the vessels as she washed and scrubbed. She was waiting for a chance to blow up.

"What did you say?" she screamed. "I'll show you why it's good enough –" Without any warning she jumped up from where she squatted near the fireplace and socked Sethu on the head.

“Ai. Don’t say a word,” hissed his sister, rubbing the side of his head where a bump was beginning to form. “She’s like that today.”

“And yesterday, when she told Appa about my shorts,” Sethu said, crossly. Amma could have easily shut up about the recurring hole in the left pocket of his shorts. But she went and told Appa and Appa thrashed him.

Today Appa had just looked on when his mother hit him. “Why don’t you use an *arwal* next time?” He addressed his wife without looking at her. “Where’s the point in coming back here, if all one gets is....” The rest of his words were lost as he strode out, shutting the door with a bang that sent a shudder through the walls.

The humiliation of it hurt Sethu more than the blow. Quarrels between his parents had been frequent in the last few months and his mother’s foul temper was a result of their nocturnal brawls. Sethu, a sound sleeper himself, never heard. His sister told him. “Bad enough we’re poor,” she said. “I hate it when they fight.” The fights ended a day or two later, with Appa grovelling shamelessly and Amma preparing his favourite dish.

Sitara where they lived was an expanding township adjacent to the Vaibhav Housing Society. Some people called it Nakshitam and many called it a slum. Three times a week Sethu walked to Vaibhav and back and then again in the evening to hand over the shopping at Flat 3C, 5C and 6C. The brick-and-mortar wall between the two townships was climbable if you positioned stones on one side. The men who worked on Vaibhav building sites (and lived in Sitara) preferred the leisurely walk along the road, and rarely came over the wall. The boys liked the short-cut but only when the security guard was not in sight.

Of the three other boys from Sitara who worked at Vaibhav, Thatkan was Sethu’s friend. He came early, to water the lawns in C Block and after school at four to weed the flower-beds, tend to the palm trees and clean the fountain. Vaibhav residents strolled on the asphalt drive around the garden, they exercised, and their children played.

That day, walking away with the shopping bags, Sethu hadn’t even looked at Thatkan. Not after what he had said that morning. What a thing *da*, Thatkan, how could you even – He wouldn’t think about it. He would walk home, bathe and dash off to school where sitting next to Thatkan, with the boys and girls angled forward on benches and the headmaster thundering away, he would relax. Thatkan had said it in a fit of rage. It would pass off.

Poor Thatkan: to be so unlucky with his father, and recently his mother. He lived with his family in the swamped, neglected part of Sitara where Sethu wasn’t to go. The houses there were uniformly derelict and more or less fenced off from the rest of Sitara by its fetid air. Sethu was thrashed once for going there.

Thatkan parents were coarse and quarrelsome. Kittan cleaned sewage which clogged the open drains criss-crossing Sitara, he climbed down manholes and opened up blocked pipes. His clothes were a dirty grey and his curly hair matted with muck. Filth was second skin to Kittan. He boasted that he had once worked in Bombay for a Hindi-speaking cloth merchant who owned two cars and a fleet of trucks. "Once you've cleaned the toilets of rich people and seen their shit, you've seen everything," said Kittan. Nostalgia for those Hindi-speaking days made him name his first son Thatkan. "Meaning *heartbeat*," he told everyone. "My son is my heartbeat."

"I'm not his heartbeat," Thatkan said.

Ningi signed her doom when she married Kittan. She flatly refused to clean toilets and it led to interminable wars between the two. She made money instead by selling flowers. She went from house to house with her flowers in a basket on her hip and another on her head: sevanti *poovu*, chendu poovu, malli poovu, and rosa poovu. Ningi was the local gossip. Her flowers – discards bought cheaply at the main market – were usually a day or two old but her news was fresh. All of Sitara befriended Ningi, more for the news than the flowers. This of course, before her accident.

When young, Thatkan and his brother Shivan had a single pair of shorts and a shirt between them. If Thatkan wore shorts, Shivan got the shirt. If Thatkan took the shirt, Shivan had the shorts. They were always half-clothed. On Sunday afternoons when Ningi washed and dried the shorts and shirt, the boys cavorted in complete nakedness.

In the mornings, Sethu and Thatkan squatted together beyond caste boundaries. A little after the men left home swinging bottles of water and the women walked away with their tin cans, the boys went their way. The very young did it perched alongside the gutters within view of mother or an older sister. When three or four years old they wandered off but being disallowed the company of bigger boys, did not stray too far. Bottles of water were hard to come by, so they improvised wipes with flat pieces of stone or a clutch of leaves. Thatkan and Sethu had grown out of that stage a long while back. They went swinging their soda bottles of water, like the men. Lowering their shorts they squatted, with the morning breeze fresh on their backsides. They poked at the dried up turds with sticks – the same turds which their mothers collected in gunny bags. Or they inspected fresh offerings and speculated on each other's repast of the previous day.

They played marbles and debated their future. Thatkan said he would not be a latrine-cleaner who went down manholes and unblocked sewers. Kittan often roped in his sons to help him. "I do it now because I can't not do it," explained Thatkan. "I cheat my nose by pretending that it's not a stink that makes me want to vomit but a nice scent. Attar... sandal... malli"

They discussed the peculiarities of the rich. "Your thatha on third floor," said Thatkan. "What does he need that huge place for?"

"He has nine chairs, and a sofa set with soft cushions for the cat to sleep on."

“What a waste. Sethu – why don’t we...” Thatkan leaned across and whispered. “I can unlatch a ventilators from outside. The wood’s warped everywhere, haven’t you seen? Give me a gap of one inch and I’ll do it.” His eyes widened at the prospect. “We won’t steal anything... just have a look around when Aiyya sleeps after lunch. They all sleep after lunch. We’ll switch on fans! Lie on the floor!”

If it had been anyone else’s house, Sethu might have agreed. But not Mani Aiyya’s. Aiyya was nice, in a crazy sort of way. And he was the girl’s grandfather. “They bolt themselves inside with locks and double-locks. Wonder what they do all day.”

“Make money.” Thatkan flicked a piece of dried up turd with his finger and sent it skimming thirty yards. “At home and in the office. The same thing. Their clothes never get dirty, you know why? They do brain work, you donkey. How many thoughts do you think in a day? About shopping for those people in Vaibhav... about school, about eating and sleeping and kabaddi and if you get a chance...” he grinned wickedly. “Those secret games. Six or eight or ten thoughts, no more. Those people, they think hundred or thousand thoughts in one day. I’m going to ask Swamy Sir how it’s done.”

Thatkan thought up new games to play during their morning ablutions: There was ‘spit-hit’ in which you hit another’s spittle mid-stream. A more challenging sport was where squatting you dug your big toes into the mud until they left their imprints, squirmed your haunches to move back a few feet and aimed your pee to fill each depression. The aesthetic perfection of the feat was as important to Thatkan as the faultless lines of his India map in Geography class. Sethu ended up wetting his legs.

Danger worked on Thatkan like a magnet. He ran across railway tracks just as the train approached, teased stray dogs and then fussed over them. Grasshoppers, crippled chicks, fly-ridden dogs and wicked-looking crows were brought home and cosseted until his mother chased them away.

He had a peculiar addiction to smells. He pinched the most fragrant flowers off his mother – rosa, malli or the god-favoured, creamy thick sevantige – carried them in his pocket to school, crushed the petals between his fingers and inhaled deeply, his thin nostrils quivering like a dog’s. Every time he opened a book, he held it to his nose. He sniffed the coconut oil that girls drenched their plaits with, the bottle of glue on the teacher’s desk and the sweat on his own shirt after a game of kabaddi. Sethu wondered if he did it to forget the smells of his father’s profession.

When it came to his future, Thatkan was serious. He would be a police officer.

“Me too,” Sethu said, making a split-second decision. This affirmation made at the most intimate moment of the day had sealed their friendship.

Thatkan, who had witnessed crime, petty and big laid down the rules. “I won’t allow crime,” he said, driving a stone hard into the mud. “We’ll punish the guilty, no

matter who. We'll make money and get out of here. Live somewhere grand like next to the Chief Minister's house."

"I'll be a police officer right here," said Sethu who couldn't imagine living outside the comforting hub of his existence. More easy-going, he preferred life in small chunks. Today, tomorrow, maybe the coming Sunday when his father brought ulundu vadais and his mother made tea with milk and he could fight over the last vadai with his sister, knowing he would get it.

"Live in Sitara and nobody will notice you. Police must live in bungalows da, like film stars. With three, four servants, cook – and gardener. My house will have two dozen balloon-sized light bulbs along the compound wall. Sentry at the gate. I drive home, sit on sofa. One servant pulls off my boots, one servant heats water to soak my feet in, one brings tea and bondas."

Thatkan the know-all was liberal with his fantasies and claimed them as fact. Like when he peeped through the mesh-covered window of Flat 1A and saw a man massaging his wife's armpit with his It.

"Simply you're saying."

"I watched! The man kept saying, 'Some more? Some more?' The woman giggled and squirmed like she was enjoying herself. Once I saw them in the kitchen pulling at each other's pubic hair."

Sethu giggled helplessly. Even Thatkan could not have imagined something so crazy.

Once they had decided on the police, they talked of khaki uniforms and leather belts, socks and shoes; of whipping their own muscled thighs with the lathi in slow motion while intimidating a criminal; snapping handcuffs on thieving wrists and kicking erring backsides into barred cells.

"If a thief happens to be the father of a – friend, do we still punish him?" Sethu looked slyly at Thatkan. Kittan had once been nabbed by the police for the theft of a gold chain in a house where he had been called to unblock a pipe.

"Yes."

"If a man who's married with children brings another woman –"

Thatkan mouth quivered in a thin line and he shouted. "LIVE WITH A SLUT, FACE THE GALLOWS!"

Some years ago, Ningi had unearthed the truth that Kittan had been seeing Urmi, the mother of two fatherless infants. Ningi went insane. She chased Kittan out of the house which resulted in him ricocheting back into Urmi's arms. Then she begged her husband to come back, which he did. With Urmi and her kids. Helpless, Ningi took

it out on the children of her rival. She called them bastards, denied them food and ill-treated her own two boys. Thatkan lived in the thick of such deep unhappiness. At twenty-eight, his mother looked like a hag. She dressed carelessly, with her sharp breasts hanging slipshod inside a thin blouse held together by safety pins and sometimes peeping through. She tried to dilute her own misery in arrack.

Sethu had more doubts: “How about cheating? Suppose *someone* is cooking up the price of things bought for *someone* else –?”

“Jail.”

“Stealing coconut and jaggery?”

Thatkan considered this for a moment. “That’s taking what your mother forgot to give. Not a police case.”

That particular morning, Thatkan had been very serious. He poked the hard ground with a stone and said all of a sudden. “You’ll do what I ask without being a coward?”

Sethu agreed, a trifle uncertainly, hoping it would be the mildest of Thatkan’s daredevil capers. It turned out to be infinitely worse. Sethu protested. Thatkan implored. They fought.

“Woman!”

“Madman!”

“Don’t help then. I’ll do it alone.” Thatkan marched off, forgetting his water bottle.

Sethu watched him break into a run along the marshy ground, stepping mindlessly on evacuations in various stages of desiccation. You had to watch your step for some of it would be fresh.

He was dumbfounded. “Help me kill my father,” Thatkan had said. “He’s at home right now, drinking himself to death. We’ll only be making it easy for him.” They could dash off from school during games, do the job and be back in time for geography. “I’ll hold his hands at the back and you keep his head down in a bucket of water,” Thatkan explained. He was serious. “Better I don’t do the drowning myself. Father and all. It’s less criminal for you to do it with me helping.”

Sethu washed himself quickly, and got up. “And then we go to the gallows?”

“No one will know. How will they find out that my father is my enemy?”
