

## The Letter

They went into the building chattering. The building looked a little sinister with plaster gone and moss dried up in absurd abandon on the wall. There was a vague stair-case leading upstairs. A few *saree-s* were hung on the veranda: some blouses and bodice too hung in the somber yellow light of an old bulb.

Balu got out of his driver's seat, stood outside on the wild grass and rested on the car. It was a full moon night with a sky full of stars. Venus was especially resplendent and un-twinkling. Breeze carried a powerful jasmine fragrance. A frog croaked and he noticed there was a pond nearby with some lilies. There was a dilapidated wall and a small half open door.

Balu remembered Ambika back home and the many starry nights. He realized with a great relief that the MA examinations were over at last. He must now concentrate on preparing

for the *IAS*. It seemed to be almost pre-ordained! He was sure to make it. But how high up in the list was the salient question. He thought of Ambika's unconditional love and felt elevated! He wondered how she would react if he were to tell her of today's unwanted experiences.

He sighed and wondered at the fatal sequence of events that brought him to this goddamn place. He should have refused their friendly invitation! He had a premonition he would land up somewhere vague where he did not really want to be.

He was reminded of his friend Narayanan. "Balu if you are somewhere there must be a hidden and mysterious reason why you are there. There can be no fear or boredom as long the starry sky looms above us or if it is a day, the divine sun glows in infinite splendour!!"

He thought again of Narayanan telling him once, "Balu, I am going tomorrow to Madras. There is a ghat section in the train journey. I will take the slowest passenger train! These moments are too precious!"

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IAS ~ Indian Administrative Service: the elite civil service cadre of India: the selected candidates finally become secretaries of state and central governments.

He smiled to himself: Narayanan smoked *ganja*, preached vegetarianism, spoke about the all unifying dharma, the language of seamless silences, the Infinite and the Inevitable Apocalypse!

If somebody ate meat Narayanan would ask, “How does the human crematorium feel after digesting corpses of slaughtered animals?”

In fact Balu had given up all non-vegetarian food by Narayanan’s repeated promptings and amusing warnings.

There was a cool breeze: the moon went behind some fluffy clouds and reappeared. Crickets resonated fiercely in an ascending crescendo.

There was an ambiguous laughter from some up-stair room. Something fell and echoed to a tapering silence. Almost immediately, an old film song in Tamizh came from a radio,  
 “ *Naan pesha ninaiypadellam nee pesha vendum*

*Nee pesha ninaiypadellam naan pesha vendum*” ~~~~

[“Whatever I wish to speak you must speak  
 Whatever you wish to speak I must speak”~~~~]

Balu's sighed deeply, looked at the starry ciborium and his thoughts wandered back to the evening. He had finished the last exam and he was playing table tennis in the Common Room with Ramesh, when Sudarshan and John came and invited him for celebrating the end of their Post Graduate course. He refrained initially, since he guessed they would drink and may even get drunk. He had never drunk and never intended to drink either. He had as a child seen some drunken villagers beating their wives which hurt him a lot. But finally they said, "It is a special day come on friend Balu" and literally dragged him to the car.

Jacob Thomas and 'Tennis' Vijayan joined them and they drove to a beach restaurant. Balu ate the vegetable cutlets and drank the mango milk shake! He was quite satisfied..

After that, they were walking on the beach and it was sunset. The crows fluttered around and there were many colours on the beach. *Saree-s* fluttering in breeze, ice-cream vendors, balloon vendors, ground-nut vendors, *paanwaallaha-s*

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paanwaallaha-s~ the sellers of paan [betel leaves and other related condiments.] (Hindi)

The sky was specially rubiscent and beautiful. The waves echoed an ancient code of mantram-s. There was a distant ship's horn.

Balu told them, "Let's sit and watch the twilight."

But John said immediately, "What is there to watch? the same bloody beach!"

They had other things in mind and had the money for it. Sudarshan had lots of money to squander because his father was a business magnate. They went into a posh bar and told Balu to keep company with apple juice-s. They finished boozing and eating after nearly two hours of futile gossip mostly about women and imaginary tales. Balu was rather claustrophobic sitting in the vaguely lit room engulfed in dancing billows and rings of cigarette smoke. Finally, as things turned out, Sudarshan had to beg Balu to drive the car since he was too inebriated to drive safely.

Balu had no choice but to agree and they directed him to this place and told him to wait outside this dirty den.. They thanked him as they climbed the staircase talking loudly and foolishly.

Balu listened to the crickets, looked at moonlight, remembered 'Haiku' which Narayanan had introduced him to. Basho's

frog! flower like butterflies! moonlight! Narayanan would be ecstatic.

He thought of one of Narayanan's own Haiku  
moonlight breeze ~  
crickets resounded anew  
to frog's cries

He seemed to be right in the middle of that Haiku space.

Balu heard a little sound like a cough and he turned to look back at the building. A young girl clad in a cheap red *saree* and an orange blouse was watching him from the veranda. Balu felt scared, embarrassed and turned his face away. She soon climbed the staircase and went off. He felt relieved.

Time passed too slowly! Balu felt that these guys had cheated him: they were using him as a driver for their perverse episodes. He wondered what they would do if he were to drive away in the car without them and leave them to find their way to their boarding house.

He thought of Ambika telling him, "In real love there is no choice not to love! One always loves." She prayed for him and his mother too prayed for him.

He felt he was blessed to be in this world.

The frogs were silent.

“*Chetta* do you know Malayalam?”

Balu was suddenly woken up from his reverie by a voice. The girl in red *saree* was standing next to him painted vaguely in cheap rose powder.

Balu said, “A little.”

“Can you write a letter for me? I can’t write well.”

“I will try.”

“I have got the card and pen..”

She gave Balu the card, a magazine to rest it upon and a jotter to write.

“Shall I say? Can you write in the moonlight?  
Or should we go to the light on the veranda?”

“I think I can manage in the moonlight. You can say. Please tell slowly.”

Balu kept the card on the magazine and used the car as a table.

The breeze was a bouquet of fragrant jasmines.

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*chettan* ~ elder brother – It could be used on other people who one treats like an elder brother. (Malayalam)

‘So that dear *amma* may know,  
I am Ambili writing to you. After one month I have at last got a good job. I am working in a private company. I should be able to send Rs. 150 per month. I am sending Rs. 100 now. Please use it for buying books and uniform for Appu and Sumati. How’s *achan* breathing? *Amma* do you give the medicines regularly? I will try to come home after six months or one year. I am okay here. The rice we eat here is white and not boiled. I am getting used to it. My love to Appu and Sumati respects to *achan* and you. What is my friend Savitri doing? Please ask her to write to me.’

Balu said, “The card is almost getting over.”

“Just two lines more *chetta*”

‘Sometimes I feel lonely and sad. But *amma* don’t worry. Both Appu and Sumati will study and bring name to our family. I will work here for that.’ With Love Ambili

Balu wrote in English the address she quoted, and handed her the letter.

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*amma* ~ mother (Malayalam)

*achan* ~ father (Malayalam)

*chettan* ~ elder brother – It could be used on other people who one treats like an elder brother. (Malayalam)

“What is your name *chetta*?”

“Balu”~ Balu was very sad, standing in the moonlight in that painful situation.

“It must be very embarrassing for you to talk with someone like me. I am sorry ~ *Namaste!* Balu *chetta* you will become great. May Lord Krishna bless you. You are sent by him to help me write this letter.”

“Shall I get you some ‘*kattan kaappi*’ *chetta*?”

“No not necessary Ambili. I am waiting for these people who have gone inside.”

“No! Sorry! You are a ‘big family’ member. We are not clean enough for you.”

Balu felt miserably hurt and he said, “No! No! Not because of that sister: I don’t want coffee.”

She walked into the veranda and disappeared.

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chettan ~ elder brother – It could be used on other people who one treats like an elder brother. (Malayalam)

namaste ~ a sign of respectful greeting ~ ‘I worship that in you!’ ( Sanskrit and most Indian Languages)

kattan kaappi ~ black coffee (Malayalam)

It started drizzling a little.

There were a few dark clouds around the moon.

The crickets were noticeably silent.

A lone frog croaked in a new tone.

Balu ruminated on Narayanan's words and continued to wait in the jasmine breeze.

