

**Vol 1**

**Memoirs Of A Taboo: A Novel**

by

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## Cast

### 21st-century characters

*Ambilli Nair*, protagonist

*Indu, Unni* – Ambilli's mother and father

*Manu* – Ambilli's husband

*Shobha-tai* – Ayah, when Ambilli is a school girl

*Saudamini/Achchamma* – Ambilli's grandmother

*Kunjumalu edathi* – Achchamma's childhood friend

*Shwetha* – Kunjumalu *edathi*'s grand-daughter

*Madhu* – Ambilli's friend

*Sumesh/Makhi* – Madhu's brother

*Mrs Iyer, Mrs Debjani, Mrs Rustogi, Mrs Sahu, Mr Varma* – Ambilli and Madhu's college teachers

*Vinod* – Madhu's ex-husband

*Anand* – Madhu's live-in partner

*Seema* – Ambilli's office colleague

*Vijay* – Seema's husband and Ambilli's ex-colleague

*Ganpatrao* – *Peon*, errand-boy in the office where Ambilli also works

### In Bangalore...

*Amruta* – Ambilli's roommate in Bangalore

*Siddharth* – Amruta's date, arranged by Fiona

*Fiona* – Ambilli's friend in bangalore

*Shashi* – Ambilli's friend and colleague

**In Mysore...**

*Rajeshwari Amma* – Devadasi woman working as a cook and caretaker

*Husain* – Rajeshwari Amma's 10-year-old adopted son

**18th-century fictional characters**

*Paarvani*, protagonist

*Pankaja Amma* – Paarvani's mother

*Ajji* – Paarvani's grandmother; not related by blood to Pankaja Amma

*Siva* – Paarvani's childhood friend

*Rati Kumari* – Paarvani's childhood friend and courtesan's daughter

*Jamaal* – Killedar (commandant) of Seringapatam Fort under Tipu Sultan

*Thomas* – British artist crossing Sultan Bathery forest

**In Malabar...**

*Narayanan Namboodiri* – The high-caste brahmin who helps Paarvani

*Veliya Ammayi* – the Nayar matriarch who runs a refuge home at the Kizhianur *ettukettu*

*Shakuntala chechi* – Princess, chieftain's daughter taking refuge in Kizhianur

*Bhargavikutty, Damayanti* – Refugees at the *ettukettu*

**Historical characters**

*Haider Ali, Tipu Sultan* – Father and son, rulers of Mysore (1761 – 1799)

*Sheikh Ayaz* – Hindu abductee (Kumaran Nambiar) turned Nawab of Bednore

*Rani Lakshammanni* – Imprisoned Queen of Mysore, wife of Immadi Krishnaraja

Wodeyar (King)

*General Harris* - Governor of Madras

*Narayana Rao, Tirumala Rao* – Sons of the slain Pradhan Govindarajayya from Mandya who were secret agents for Rani Lakshmammani.

Names of places used interchangeably:

<b>Old name</b>	<b>New name</b>
<i>Bombay</i>	Mumbai (1995 onwards)
<i>Nayar</i>	Nair
<i>Seringapatam</i>	Srirangapatnam
<i>Thiruvithamkoor</i>	Travancore

*in memory of my achchamma*

*for ammamma with love*

*for the stories that remain unsaid  
and those that endured many taboos*

**Memoirs Of A Taboo: A Novel**

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*Bodies pressed together in the morning rush-hour, we inched forward as one slow solid mass of civilisation towards the only two open doors at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus station. I was among four rows of perspiring, swearing, stubborn heads, none of our hands visible, for the crowd had plastered them firmly down to our sides. Our feet grew eyes, scanning the floor for the six descending steps that led to the subway - our only escape - at least until we returned in the evening to head back home. We were a sea of commuters-by-train, and all of us knew, from practice, that if one of us even stumbled slightly or missed that step, the consequence would be an avalanche of limbs and torsos, and hundreds, or at least 50 would be killed.*

*Amid all that suffocation, amid all that routine pressure that day, there was a moment when my senses suddenly sprang to life. A warm hand had felt my buttock. I was on the first step, the only spot where I could turn to look around. And then it all happened very fast. On impulse, I pulled out my umbrella from my shoulderbag, and albeit a little clumsily, swung it around with all my might.*

*"Hey! It's only me!!"*

*The noise, the trains, the announcements, the crowd and the disgust, suddenly disappeared as a pair of kind, deep brown eyes stared at me, holding me gently by my shoulders in mid-embrace and part-defence, unsure of how I would react. I was in my kitchen in London and my husband had sneaked up on me,*

*startling me out of my flashback. I was embarrassed, ashamed that I still remembered an incident - when did it happen? seven? No...ten years ago? And guilty, to have interrupted his affection for me. To have kept him away for no fault of his. For the first time in the six months of our new marriage, I closed my eyes, and surrendered to a hug.*

*Touch. It is interesting how a touch never fails to arouse the intention behind it. And how a body never forgets that intention. The unspoken, unshared secret between women - and men - all over the world is this. The body never forgets.*



## (1)

**Mumbai. May, 2004.**

Ambilli stopped writing. The train was beginning to move again. She put her notebook and pen back in her handbag, and looked out of the window. It was a month since she had arrived in Mumbai, eight months after her marriage. Her husband was a good man. He loved her, which is everything that a young woman could ask for in a happy marriage. But Ambilli had too much bottled inside her. She needed to get away...

The warm afternoon breeze from the window suddenly made her aware of where she was. She sighed, leaning her head to rest on the jerky wall of the train, realising that it too had become hot in the scorching heat. Thankfully, she had to get off at the next station.

The train was still considerably speeding up. Carefully balancing herself, she made her way through the criss-cross of chiffon-, denim- and cotton-knees that belonged to the women of that first-class compartment, and stood by the entrance.

Mumbai's local trains have only one or two first-class compartments for women in every 12- or 15-coach carriage. Despite Ambilli's protests, both her husband and family insisted that she travel by the same. This meant that apart from the 17 or so ladies who could be seated in the half-compartment, there would be at least 40 of them standing in that cramped space during peak hours. As for non-peak hours like this afternoon, Ambilli had a couple of eunuchs and a bunch of young street urchins for company. The boys crammed themselves on the footboard of the open passageway. Frequently, when the train curved along the tracks they turned reckless, leaning out to cheer or wave to their companions doing the same on other coaches ahead, on the same train. The eunuchs, after a busy day visiting housing societies and *checknakas* for money-collection, fanned themselves with the end of their saree. One of them seemed genuinely irked by the behaviour of the little delinquents. While the train rattled on, one of the boys, very dark-skinned and lean, wearing a torn vest and khakis, showed off how he could swing himself

around the pole effortlessly, and land back firmly on his feet. Ambilli too watched, her heart in her mouth, as she was reminded of something that had happened just two or three years ago. The train was too fast. There were countless electric and other poles by the side of the railway tracks. One wrong move and the boy would be pulled under the tracks, or be killed if he was lucky. If he was not, he would spend the rest of his poor life made even more miserable with the loss of a limb or two. But the young, cacophonous whoops of freedom don't hear any warnings.... Suddenly, without one, the boy received a resounding slap on the cheek that brought a hush over all of the others in the compartment, and made the boy stand still at once. It was the eunuch.

“What do you think you are doing, you wretch! Don't you have any family to feed? Do you think the Indian government has nothing else to do, except for picking dead bodies like yours off the tracks, like flies around a sweetmart? *Sala bhenchod!* Why didn't your mother wring your neck when you were born!?”

The boy, leaning his back on the train corridor, slid down to the floor and squatted, holding his sore cheek sullenly. He wouldn't dare open his mouth. The others too, frightened by the eunuch's outburst, sat quietly by the door and looked out to the tracks, waiting desperately now for the station to arrive. The women in the first class carriage all nodded to each other and seemed to agree it was a well-deserved slap. Ambilli smiled to herself, trying to suppress a laugh.

*The Mumbai trains, she thought, will never ever cease to amaze me.*

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*Freefalling. Do you know what it is like...Freefalling? To lose all sensation in your limbs, yet feel the blood rushing upward to your head. Your stomach sinks in, and you're falling...fast. Very fast. Like the Phantom in the old Indrajal comic books, plunging into a dark, purple valley. You just want to turn the page, to know what happens next, and then the story ends with a "To be continued..."*

*Like in my dream, so many times, where I'm falling, thrashing my hands about frantically, trying to find something to grasp, to hold on to something.*

*Anything. I simply drop. I never know when or where I land, because I always wake up with a scream stuck in my throat. I'm awake now. But that scream is still stuck in my throat. It tastes of disgust.*

*It is the memory of his hands on my skin.*

(2)

**Mumbai. June, 2004.**

The cellphone rang. It was Manu.

“You aren't asleep yet?”

“Did you call to find out if I was asleep?”

“No...uh..well...*Arre yaar*, Ambu, I was missing you.”

Ambilli relaxed. It wasn't fair of her to torment her husband for her share of problems. She put her journal aside, and reclined on her bed.

“No, Manu. I was writing. I wasn't feeling sleepy. How was your day at work?”

“It was fine. Like any other day....When will you be back, Ambu?” Manu's question came too quickly, before Ambilli had a chance to think. It made her smile even as Manu continued:

“You don't have to prove anything to me Ambu, or to anyone else for that matter. Come home.

Why don't you talk to me, pour your heart out and maybe I can help...”

Ambilli sat upright and interrupted him gently. “Manu, I'll be back soon. This much I promise. I just need to sort myself out first. And no one can do it but me. I will talk to you too. Soon. Who else would I go to? But, right now, I just ask you to trust me. Give me time...”

Manu and Ambilli were married a little over eight months ago. But unlike most Indian arranged marriages, one could say that they were slightly more acquainted with each other rather than meeting for the first time. At least for one of them, this was the case.

When Ambilli was in her final year of school, her parents had moved from the outskirts of Mumbai to a new home in the suburbs. Ambilli's father had always wanted to stay close to the Ayyappa temple – their family deity. There were many other like-minded Malayalee families in this progressive colony, he was told. Besides, both her parents had felt – especially with a young daughter – they needed to be in an atmosphere where they would have all the support and

security that the Keralite community could give them. Ambilli too looked forward to this new locality. She was to start her first year of college soon. The new accommodation, Ambilli found, provided shuttle buses to and from the train station making it very convenient for her commute. A bus that started from near the temple took her right up to the college gates. On the opposite side of the road, another young Keralite, Manu – about a year or two older than her – waited for his bus too. But she never really noticed him.

Manu's bus took him to the station from where he shared an auto with other co-students to get to his college. After his graduation, he still used the same bus to reach his new workplace. For a total of six years, Manu looked out for Ambilli on the other side as their bus schedules coincided. Sometimes she had one of her parents escorting her. Sometimes, she was with a friend. Seasons changed, and so did their lives. Manu had another new job, a new bike. Ambilli too, had graduated. She began working at a publishing house. Manu didn't see Ambilli every day as he did before; in fact, he didn't see her for over a year. But he thought about her frequently and wished he had asked her her name. Occasionally, he would spot her parents in the local market, or at the annual *Onam* event organised by the Kerala community. He knew that sooner or later, she would be back to see them. Then one day, just as unexpectedly as she had disappeared, she was back. Manu still maintained his silent distance. He let the months pass by. He let himself get used to just watching her again. Until one morning, when the Municipality sent its bulldozers and trucks to widen the road. The signboards and expansion plans had been put up for weeks in advance. The temple was to shrink. The area would have a new shopping mall. The bus stops would get separated by more than a hundred yards. That was when Manu first crossed the road. Ambilli moved to let him pass, but he stood right there in front of her. "Hi. I'm Manu", he started, a little nervous. He attempted a smile, and instead, spoke very fast. "You don't know me...and well, I don't know you either...but, I've been watching you at this bus stop since the past six years, when you first moved here. I thought I lost you once, but... you came back. And now the bus stops will change.... and well, I cannot watch you standing here...and well..." he stopped abruptly, and swallowed.

“Willyoumarryme?” he finally asked.

Ambilli did not know where to look. She was getting late for office; the bus stop was bursting with a crowd of waiting people. The bus itself was held up by all the dust, the noise and the traffic. Suddenly there was fresh confusion around. Her bus had just arrived. She did not understand why then, she heard herself saying: *Ambilli. Talk to my father.*

The events that followed took place very fast. Manu did talk to her father, who happened to be acquainted with his parents already. They even belonged to the same native town in Kerala. The horoscopes matched perfectly. Ambilli's parents were thrilled. Manu was content. Manu's young sister was over the moon. All at once, Manu's fate seemed to favour him too. An assignment that he had been struggling to get was sanctioned to him, and he would fly to the United Kingdom within a month. *Ambilli's stars have already proven to be good luck for Manu*, the families cheered. Astrologers were consulted for an auspicious wedding date. Even before Manu and Ambilli could think of meeting for their first coffee together, the pandal began to be set up. *Later, later*; her father beamed, *there will be lots of coffee after your marriage*. The best wedding venue, the elders determined, was the Ayyappa temple itself...

Ambilli was decked up in silks and jewellery, a puppet-bride in the hands of Time. She flew to London with Manu the next month, the way their families had wanted it. Some part of Ambilli had consented to this marriage too. Why else hadn't she turned him away at the first instance? And today, she was back in Mumbai alone. Why?

## (3)

**Mumbai. June, 2004.**

One minute everything was quiet as Ambilli waited, her back to Madhu's door. A few sparrows chirped among the *gulmohur* tree above. A car sped down the road so fast it hushed the fallen leaves and the silence to fall in place again. Even the morning breeze was still. The next minute, a door opened behind Ambilli, and all solitude disappeared without a trace. She was frisked into the house by an unknown force; when that force finally let go of her, she was enveloped by the steamy aroma of hot *idlis* and *sambhar*, filter coffee, and the sweet rolling smell of *ghee* and *rava* all at once, while the voice of M S Subbalakshmi played the *Suprabhatam* from an old cassette-player nearby. When Ambilli had taken a breath finally, her eyes wide, she saw Madhu laughing out loud, pointing a finger at her, jumping up and down.

“Aeeeeiiiiii! Look at her face! Get me the camera quick Ma, just look at her face! God! Ambu, you haven't changed one bit. Just look at you!!”

Ambilli hugged Madhu in a tight embrace. She had come to the right place.

“You haven't changed one bit too, you know, Madhu. And thank god you haven't!!”

Madhu's mother came out of the kitchen just then, her hands still warm from rolling hot semolina laddoos for Madhu's journey. “How are you *beta*? It's so nice of you to come...careful dear, my hands are oily- don't get it on your clothes! ...You know, now that I see you...I wish you were going with Madhu too. I would be so relieved...”

Ambilli returned the hug warmly. She noticed that Aunty did not wear the *sindoor* on her forehead. When she turned to her friend, Madhu nodded, and pointed to the wall, where a garland framed the picture of Madhu's late father. Ambilli gasped, stepping back.

“I'm soo-sorry! I -I didn't know.”

“Don't be, silly girl. How would you know? Daddy left us about six years ago now. We miss him, but we are fine,” smiled Madhu.

“Hmm. And, Makhi?”

“You still remember that name, laughed Madhu again. He's in the States. Married. Two kids. Happy family life. Green card and all.”

“Wow, so much has...”

“Wait, wait, both of you, are you going to stand here and talk all day? Come and help yourselves to breakfast while it's still hot,” Madhu's mother interrupted as she led them back to the kitchen.

A short while later, having had their fill, as the two girls made way to Madhu's room, Ambilli thrust a shiny box in Madhu's hands.

“*Chocolates!!!* You didn't forget!”

*Oh dear, not more*, moaned Aunty from the kitchen, mumbling away something else under her breath. Ambilli felt she caught the word 'marriage' but she was not sure.

“Why? Aren't you allowed to eat them?” whispered Ambilli, and Madhu simply waved her hand, to ignore the comment.

“Enter. I'll tell you why...”

Madhu opened the door to her room and Ambilli stood there with her mouth open. Inside were hundreds of chocolate-wrapper decorations of all kinds. Glittering strings, wrapper-dolls in all crinkly shades and sizes, shimmering and dancing with the slightest lift of air. The dolls clung to each other's hands, like a *toran* over the doorframe, and over the book-shelves. Some were stuck to the table-top, while some single ones were put up in tiny box-frames. There were bookmark-wrappers, and flowers made out of lollipop-gelatins.

“What is this, Madhu? A voodoo-doll factory?” laughed Ambilli.

“Shh, not voodoo, silly. They're my hobby. I just love making little dolls out of the wrappers, that's all. And soon, I'm going to miss them.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but not if you can help it,” replied Madhu again, a twinkle in her eye.



(4)

**Kerala. 1971.**

For the first two nights, the young bride didn't sleep. Visions of the big black cat, creeping on the teak-beams over her head as they had their dinner, kept coming back to haunt her. She had suddenly stood up, scared to the bone, while the others chuckled to themselves and continued to slurp and lick the *payasam* from the back of their hands. You should have never married a city-girl, they teased her husband. But by the third night, she was gripped by a fever that silenced everyone in the huge Nair family.

The young bridegroom hung his head down for most of the day, feeling helpless, yet somehow responsible for his wife's fate. She had never wanted to come down to his village in Kerala. The father sat in his reclining chair rubbing his hairy chest, sharing tea and the news with everyone who seemed even remotely interested in the affairs of the house. The sisters gossiped among themselves, greatly amused by the fuss created by this new sister-in-law-from-another-planet. Only one member of the family knew what to do. His mother. Without lifting her head from her prayer book, she threw instructions to the cook: give her a little pepper *kanji* with a drop of ghee. To the servant: *kunjimaluedathi*, don't take the cows out today, and ask that Sankaran Pillai to bring the paddy straight home. To her daughters: light the lamps of the *kaavu*, and the four corners of this house. Yes, I know it is not yet night.

And finally, almost whispering, to her son: Unni, waste no time. This fever is the evil eye itself and will take her away if we are not quick. Go fetch Bhaskaran Nair, the *manthravadi*...

Four nights later, when 21-year-old Indu finally opened her eyes, the tears wouldn't stop until Unni promised he would take her back to Bombay the very next day. The family had decided

not to tell her, but the servants weren't privy to the agreement. One by one, the cook, the sweeper-woman, the paddy de-huskers, had narrated to a disoriented Indu how the *manthravadi* had thrown the cowries on the chart, and invoked the spirits. Of how she was made to sit in front of him, albeit in a semi-conscious state, while he chanted and swore, and exorcised the fever that had possessed her. Then he had slit the throat of a hen over her head, and thrown it in the sacrificial fire. The last bit of information was too much to bear for a vegetarian and - not to forget - a brahmin girl from the city, who was more accustomed to doctors and needles, and not bearded quacks claiming to be holy men. Twice, she threw up.

On the two-day Cochin-Bombay Express, the young couple mourned the honeymoon that did not happen and looked out at nothing-in-particular out of the rusty train window, grateful that at least they were together. Unni's thoughts revolved around the place he grew up in, his wife's fever and the timely interference of his mother, coming back to a sinking feeling that Indu would never have the same emotions as him. He decided to wait until she had recovered completely and was in a better frame of mind, to tell her that incidents like these were normal in Kerala. That *manthravadis* and *velichhapaads* were indeed men chosen by the *bhagavathy*, the goddess. That, in Kerala, the *bhagavathy* ruled the air, and the serpents ruled the earth, and both had to be appeased if a house and its occupants were to remain healthy and happy. That his mind was brimming with his own secrets about the house that he wanted to share with her, and the next time they would go back, he would make sure she was better prepared for the occult customs and festivities.

Seated opposite her pensive husband Unni, was Indu, her face hidden behind a book, who batted another tear from her eye. How they had laughed at her, his sisters. No, she vowed. She would never, *never* again set foot in that house. Not until she was alive.

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**Bombay. 1983.**

Twelve years had passed. Like many other migrants from Kerala, Unni and Indu lived on the outskirts of Bombay. They never went back. Indu hadn't forgotten, nor forgiven the only memory she had of her husband's home. Unni loved her too much to let it matter or come between them. But he didn't want to lose his roots either. Through the Malayalee community at an Ayyappa temple in the suburbs, Unni kept in touch with the major festivals and activities associated with Kerala. Once, every month, Indu too accompanied Unni to the temple grounds, where sometimes Kathakali or Mohiniattam dancers were invited for low-budget performances. Indu liked this mini-Kerala, minus its dark mysteries. Two years into their married life, a daughter was born. Ambilli.

When Ambilli was ten, she woke up one morning very insistent that she wanted to visit her Achchamma's house during her summer vacation. "You can go alone if you want to," said an indifferent Indu, picking out the tiny stones from the rice as she pushed her spectacles up her sharp nose. "Count me out."

Unni patted Indu's shoulder reassuringly. "She's only ten. Her grandmother has visited us just twice in all these years, and her head is full of her stories...naturally she will want to go." He then turned to Ambilli and knelt down to face her. "I'll take you, little girl. I'll take you to my home, and to your Achchamma. Promise you'll do well in your school exams?"

Ambilli remembered that vacation for a long, long time. How for a month, every morning, she would unbolt the heavy wooden door that opened out to the lush green fields, and run through them till she reached the shortcut to the tar road that brought her back home. The cousins had

found her amusing and fun to play with. She'd often wander off in the hot sun, to climb the huge rock in the middle of the fields, or on the tall hay piles in the backyard of the house. At twilight the children would all be rounded up and made to bathe in the cool green waters of the pond. The lamps would then be lit and they would all sit around their grandmother, repeating the names of the Malayalam asterisms: *ashwati, bharani, karthika, rohini...*, and then the prayers: *achyutam, keshavam, rama naraayanam....* Achchamma would then narrate a story from the Ramayana, which would go on and on until dinner was served.

When Ambilli returned to her home back in Bombay, she grew popular among the friends of her apartment block. There were Maharashtrian, Gujarati, Telugu and Punjabi children of her age living in the same building, and none of them had ever heard stories like the ones Ambilli's Achchamma had narrated to her. "Achchamma can see through a person's soul, and she knows about the good spirits and the bad, and what happens to children who don't listen to their parents," she bragged.

"And what happens?" they would ask, wide-eyed.

"The *Odiyan* takes them," Ambilli would reply, lurching her neck forward for more dramatic effect, pretending to grasp at thin air...

"Really? And who is this *Odiyan*?"

"Don't you know? He is a magician from the big black mountains..."

Their mouths still open, seated cross-legged and clutching each other's arms and sleeves and lumpy cushions, the children would listen to Ambilli's description of the evil magicians of Kerala, who applied potions on themselves to turn into animals as they spied on houses. How they would then choose and possess someone and in three days, melt every single bone in that person's body...

It was at this point in her story that the youngest kid in their lot, Sonu, would start wailing for his mother, and Ambilli and the others would be shoed off to their own houses. On her way up the stairs, Ambilli would often wonder if Sonu would be able to spot an *Odiyan* if he ever came across one. Her Achchamma had said only young children can see them.

(5)

**Kerala. 1990.**

When little girls are at the threshold of adolescence, the *gandharvans* wait for them, hiding in the bark of scented trees. They are a *paavum* lot, the *gandharvans*: unfortunate spirits cursed and banished to earth for a certain period of time by the lord of the celestial devas, Indra. They can take any shape or form, and when a *gandharvan* spirit possesses you, Achchamma warned Ambilli, you fall in a love so deep that you have no memory of it when he eventually lets you go. A *gandharvan*, Achchamma secretly believed, came to her in her youth as a cat. Ambilli had burst out laughing at that point, unable to contain herself. She was 17 then, and although she was in touch with her Achchamma through letters and over the phone, it was only her second visit to Kerala. This time, her parents had travelled along with her too.

Indu's misgivings about her husband's family home had cooled down somewhat, and besides, Ambilli, her only daughter, had grown into a beautiful teenager now – she didn't dare risk losing sight of her for a minute. Ambilli was delighted to be back, even though it was a brief, 10-day holiday. But her enthusiasm was cut even shorter when she found that the fields had drifted farther away, and that the rock she'd climbed when she was little somehow seemed to have shrunk to half its size. There were no cows in the shed, and no chickens to chase. The cousins, like the birds, had also flown to make new nests for themselves. Alone, Ambilli, who was by now accustomed to the comforts of city life, found a lot of things inconvenient: using the toilet among the bushes like other village-folk, heating water for her bath using dry twigs and coconut shells and husk, entertaining herself without a television.

Unlike her parents, who went visiting every house in the village all day, Ambilli was bored and

found it increasingly difficult to use her time. One afternoon, she chanced upon a path she had never taken before, and set out to explore. She hadn't realised that four hours had passed when she got back home, where a search party of at least 15 new faces were assembled having failed to locate her. While Indu rushed to her side, scolding her for her carelessness and relieved at the same time, the others speculated about all the 'what-ifs' that they could think about. She could have fallen into a ditch and we wouldn't know, said one of them, or been bitten by a snake, or heaven forbid, kidnapped! Tch, tch, said another disapprovingly to one and all; girls these days need to be on a leash. Instead of coming to her grand daughter's defence, a visibly angry Achchamma didn't utter a word.

"I have been watching you," she said in the evening when Ambilli had washed and eaten and was ready to go to bed. "You have grown obstinate and stubborn, and you don't know what is good for you."

"I haven't done anything to make you so angry. I was curious to see where the path led," Ambilli retorted.

"You cannot always do what you feel like, Ambilli," said Achchamma firmly. "Mid-afternoon times are when *gandharvans* are waiting for virgins under the trees. Have you forgotten all that I had taught you? Haven't I warned you before not to wander about when the sun is above your head?" Ambilli rolled her eyes and shook her head. Even as she finally plonked herself in bed and switched off the lights in protest, she knew. Something had changed. The bond between Ambilli and her grandmother had snapped forever.

Despite the soothing sounds of the cricket that night, and the soft, green glow of the fireflies above her bed, Ambilli couldn't sleep. She tiptoed to her grandmother's room in the dark, only to overhear her mother sobbing quietly, and her father being warned:

“...she shares the same *nakshatram* as your great-great-grandmother, I had warned you earlier. Her mind is restless and therefore she is fragile. She needs to be restrained or she will rebel. This is what happens to girls who are born under that asterism. I had seen that spark in her even as she was a child, but you didn't listen. You wanted to bring her up in the city. Now suffer her fate, both of you.”

“These things don't make sense today *amma*.” Weakly, her father tried to reason.

“You still don't get it, Unni. She has to be tamed...let her stay here, and learn our ways...”

“I am sorry *amme*, I cannot allow that.” It was the voice of her mother, broken but still firm.

Achchamma was quiet. Ambilli could hear her own heart beating. From the corner of her eye, she saw a firefly light up a painting she had never seen before. It was of a woman with beautiful eyes that flickered at her and died.

“In that case,” Achchamma continued, resigning.... “Take her if you must. But until her marriage, you must not let her interact with the opposite sex. Our Bhaskaran Nair *manthravadi* is old now, but still loyal. I have called him tomorrow. We will conduct a small *pooja* to make sure she stays safe...”

Ambilli woke up late the next day, snippets of last night's conversation still echoing in her head. Who was my father's great-great-grandmother? What had she done? How am *I* to blame for the *nakshatram* I am born under?



That morning she found her mother extra affectionate towards her, *Achamma* cold and her father extremely busy. There were many cousins in the house too, and they all seemed to look at her rather pityingly. It all became clear to her when the white-bearded man entered their house that evening, held her hostage to his *mantrams* and loud incantations for about two hours, and left her with an amulet on a black string. Only then was Achamma at ease.

In the train that rocked everyone to sleep the next evening, Ambilli pulled the amulet out of her jeans pocket, and flung it out of the window. From now on, it would be her against the world.

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*University campus, London, 2003. Open Day.*

*I was twelve.*

*Biju had been waiting for me all morning. It was two-thirty by the time everyone had had their lunch and I had finished helping Amma with clearing the table and the dishes. Biju, my paternal cousin, who was very young at the time, had been pacing up and down the house. Finally he pulled me by my hand, making me run all the way down the three flights of stairs and to the next building, where we suddenly came to a halt right under the Batras' second-floor balcony.*

*“Look chechi, there... just by the money-plant creeper... a parrot!” The parrot was in its cage, which was swinging with a fresh gust of wind. Perhaps it had spotted us, for it started squawking angrily. I was irritated too; Biju had brought me all the way to show me this?*

*“But what's the idea, Biju?” I asked him, “It's in a cage. It cannot fly freely like the other birds.” Already squinting in the glare of the afternoon sunshine, my cousin frowned and looked up at me, hurt. I shook my head to say it was okay. “Come...”*

*We slowly made our way back to Biju's home. I decided that as an elder sister I should dissuade him from having any ideas about keeping a bird as a pet. He listened to everything I had to say, and then told me matter-of-factly, with all his authority of a six-year-old. “But chechi, those birds cannot fly very high, don't you know?”*

*I didn't know. “What do you mean?” I asked. We stopped walking. Biju told me that there are people who cut tails of birds so that they cannot fly, “and then they put them in shiny little cages.” I turned to look back up at the Batras'*

*parrot.*

*“Really?”*

*Biju pinched the skin on his neck to show he was telling the truth. “God-promise chechi, ask Shaji-Ammavan if you don't believe me...he had taken me to a shop where they sell hundreds of such parrots, parakeets and somanymany other birds. He told me these tail-cut birds are safer in a cage. He told me that 'even if they do attempt to escape, other big birds will peck them and eat them up.'”*

*I remember taking his hand, and we climbed up the stairs in silence.*

*I am 30 now, married. Today, when I see the youngsters here in this college in London, boys and girls mingling together, laughing and smoking together...I realise I am that tail-cut parrot. I feel jealous, and I know I am not alone.*

*“Things are changing too fast in India,” Manu tells me all the time. He says it is a good thing in a way. That with the dotcom revolution, with the increase in number of call centres in the country, youngsters barely out of their teens suddenly have access to a lot of money. With a lot of money comes a lot of freedom, he tells me. I think back to the 90s, just a couple of years earlier when we were younger and our own parents had routinely clipped our wings and tails, cutting short our flights. When they were young, their parents had clipped theirs. And so on. Nobody had bothered to ask why. It was Tradition with a capital T. We still tried to fly.*

*Some of us got bitten. But some of us really soared...*

(6)

**Ambilli's college staffroom, Bombay. 1992.**

Mrs Debjani came rushing into the staffroom, flustered and red in the face. She sat down on her wooden chair heavily, as if she were sinking into a sofa, her plump cheeks and flabby sides jiggling with the effect. Pulling the crisply folded handkerchief that was tucked near her waist, she dabbed at her neck, opened it and started to fan herself, shaking her head at the same time. “Uffffff...!” she blew, still fanning herself frantically. “What times we live in, what else is left to see...”

Round the huge mahogany table that could seat twelve were Mrs Rustogi, Mr Varma, Mrs Sahu and Mrs Iyer, all of whom knew Mrs Debjani to be a bit of a drama queen. They shifted in their chairs, pretending to shuffle their books or check their diaries or sip their cup of tea noisily.

It was a hot day. The two fans overhead did nothing except churn the warm air around the already stuffy room. Seeing a fresh arrival in the staffroom, the teaboy Ramesh hurriedly walked towards Mrs Debjani and offered her a cup of hot *masala* chai. “Thank you Ramesh my boy, this is just what I need right now.”

Sipping from the teacup, she put it down satisfied, but was unable to contain herself any longer. “Mrs Iyer, which is the next class you are teaching ...is it 102A?” she asked finally, leaning over the empty chair to her left.

The deputy head of the English Literature department looked up from book she was reading, and nodded. “Yes, Foundation Course... project time for the students. I was just reviewing last year's list of submissions...” Sensing that Mrs Debjani was restless, she folded her arms across her chest, secretly amused, and asked if anything was the matter. That was exactly the encouragement Mrs Debjani was looking for. She leaned forward, addressing all the four teachers in the room: “I have been to the Principal's office to report a misbehaviour in class

102A...”

Mrs Rustogi tried hard not to smile. Mr Varma cleared his throat and Mrs Sahu pretended to play along, winking sideways at Mrs Iyer. “*Arre*, Mrs Debjani, relax. What happened? Tell us *na*.”

“I had some photocopying to do before I went to class 102A. So, obviously, I was delayed by about 10 minutes. When I entered the class, the boys on the last benches - as usual - at least six of them...they were huddled over each other and laughing continuously. They didn't even realise that I had come in and was standing right next to them. And what do I see...?”

“What?” prompted one of the teachers.

“*Playboy* magazines!” she whispered theatrically. “At least half a dozen on their laps and under the desk. Totally unacceptable, I tell you. And there were the girls sitting on the other side too, responding to their comments and encouraging them. I told them the magazines would be confiscated by the Principal...and they had the cheek to tell me that he wouldn't be interested!!? This is a shame I say...these students must be suspended for at least three months.”

“Mrs Debjani, calm down...” said Mrs Sahu. “They are after all youngsters. I agree that they should have not been distracting the class but I somehow I am not really surprised by their behaviour. I don't see a reason why you should get so worked up.”

“I am coming to that, Mrs Sahu. That was not the only reason.” Mr Varma, who had his elbows on the table, sighed. He removed his glasses, exhaled a short, sharp breath on each lens and wiped them clean with a small tissue. Mrs Debjani continued, shaking her head sadly.

“Today is certainly not my day...Well, I then informed the principal and was coming down the stairs when I noticed two girls giggling and slipping away from behind me. When I turned around, there were more students looking up towards the last staircase that led to the terrace. The girls ran away when they saw me coming, holding *dupattas* over their mouths to muffle the sound of their laughter. I had to investigate, and walked up quietly. It was that boy, Anil, who is

always avoiding his classes and loitering near the canteen. And the girl - you know how some of these students seem so shy and awkward - I hadn't even noticed her in my class until today. She started crying and pleading 'please ma'am, please ma'am, please don't call my parents,' when she saw me. And what were they doing there? Kissing and fondling each other with all their passion!"

"Hmm..." said Mrs Iyer. "And what did you do next?"

"What possibly could I do? I scolded them and sent them off with a firm warning..."

The teachers were quiet. There had been such instances earlier - in the past two years - when students were found behaving against college rules and social norms, taking advantage of the fact that no family would be watching over them in an educational institution. On the other hand, there were some students, a majority of them being girls, who were also extremely naive.

Mr Varma was the first to speak.

"We are approaching the 90s. I have two young daughters who will soon be teenagers. If you ask me, I am concerned what college will be like for them five years on. Do you remember the case of that poor girl last year, who attempted suicide?"

"Her name was Hemangini. How can I forget...it happened in my class," said Mrs Sahu. "The poor girl did not even know she was being ragged by her seniors. A terrible prank to play. She rattled on about the entire procedure of sexual intercourse without batting an eyelid. And she was 18, mind you.

"I still remember her face when she came to meet me at the end of the class, and asked me why everyone in the class was unusually quiet while she was reading. A little prodding was all it took, about where she got the printed sheets she was reading from... and that's when the senior boys stood up, ashamed. Oh, she was devastated, and how much she had cried! In the evening I had a call from her parents. They were in the hospital and said she had attempted suicide."

Mr Varma nodded, continuing, "Fortunately for us, we could suspend the boys under the eve-teasing clause. I pity her parents... You see, no matter how much or how little information we

provide or protect our children from, the reality will come back to bite us one day...”

“But that shouldn't stop us,” Mrs Iyer intervened. “Our duty is to prepare them for the world, academically, and otherwise, by whatever means and resources available to us. Now that we have observed and are concerned with the behaviour of the girls and boys of this college, we must educate them accordingly.”

Mr Varma got ready to clean his glasses again. “And how do you propose we do that?”

“By making them aware about their bodies, Mr Varma,” said Mrs Iyer, just as the bell went off, announcing the next lecture. Pushing her chair behind to get up, she smiled and said: “By the way, I must thank you all and especially you, Mrs Debjani, for this discussion. I have just decided what project I will get the students working on.”

(7)

**At Ambilli's college, Bombay. 1992.**

“Tell them you can manage by yourself”

“What?”

“Yes. Tell them you know the way, and can go home yourself.”

“They'll never agree.”

“Ambilli, sometimes parents don't realise that their children have grown up...you're not a toddler to be dropped off and picked up from the college... and that too... each. and. e.very. day.”

“I know Madhu, but...you won't understand. It's a bit complicated. My *Achchamma*...”

“...who's over eight hundred and fifty miles away from you, probably enjoying a siesta after a heavy meal of rice and *morukootan*...Ambilli, wake up to the reality! After all, what is going to happen? And how many days will they be mad at you? Take it like a man, *yaar*! Stand up for yourself.”

That did it. It was a year since Ambilli had completed her schooling. Her parents, in their enthusiasm to protect her, ensured that at least one or both of them escorted her to and from her college. This not only embarrassed Ambilli, it was beginning to irritate her best friend too.

Madhu, whose roots lay in the same village as Ambilli's, was never asked what she was doing or where she was going and with whom. On the contrary, when Ambilli expressed her surprise at the support Madhu received from her family, she would laugh it off. “Freedom? Ha, I'll be grateful if my family even knows I am alive...they're all just too busy to notice me!” One reason Madhu's parents felt secure about her going out by herself everywhere was that Madhu's brother was in the same college, albeit a year senior. They knew he looked out for her.

If there was anyone who could speak for Ambilli, it would have to be Ambilli herself. She decided that today, it was time her parents learnt to allow her some space. She walked to the phone booth with a very excited Madhu by her side, and dropped a coin into the phone box with



her cold and clammy fingers. Fifteen minutes later, almost driven to tears with the effort of having to convince her parents, Ambilli hung up. Madhu hugged her tight and shook her hand. She had done it. For the first time in many years, 18-year-old Ambilli would make the journey home by herself.

After the last class for the day, Madhu and Ambilli walked out of the college campus together. They usually took separate routes from the gate where the autorickshaws queued up. But since she was travelling alone for the first time, Madhu dropped Ambilli at the railway station and wished her good luck. “Remember Ambilli, go home with a smile, and when you get there, pretend you've had the time of your life. Things will get a lot easier for you from now on...” She winked.

Ambilli waved her goodbye, and turned to walk towards the trains. She inhaled. A deep breath that filled her with a strange kind of confidence. *Yes, Achchamma need not know anything...I am going to have the time of my life.* She got on the train smiling. She was expected home in the next twenty-five minutes. It would not matter what road she took. She would not stop at the grocer's and the library like her mother always did; instead, she decided to take an old school route that she hadn't used in a long long time. It was only a slight detour, she reasoned to herself. She hadn't seen Shobhatai in years. And besides, a long walk was just what she needed. As a primary school girl, Ambilli, like many other little children of her age, was entrusted to the octopus-like hands of Shobhatai, an energetic Maharashtrian ayah with a tobacco-stained mouth. Shobhatai was about 45 at the time, but with her small-yet-athletic built she could sprint to catch a runaway child despite the nine-yard *navvaari* tucked from between her legs. She escorted up to seven children at a time to and from school, telling them stories to keep them together, yelling at autorickshaw-drivers who brought their vehicles too close to them. Holding hands and marching together, Shobhatai and the children must have made quite a sight: heavy school bags sagging from their shoulders, plastic water-bottles, dangling on long, chewed straps that dragged on the roads, along with the undone shoelaces, after a long day at school. When there were fewer kids, Shobhatai would take them through a shortcut – a hole in the compound

wall of a residential block, which led straight to the gate of their house – saving a good ten minutes. Ambilli was seven then.

Almost thirteen years later, Ambilli was on that unlit and deserted road again, looking for the hole in the wall in the fading, evening light. She also remembered that Shobhatai lived somewhere in the same area. Amid the sound of the crickets, bandicoots and strains of TV commercials travelling through the night air, Ambilli heard a strange whirring noise getting closer, and closer. She strained her eyes to see what it was, trying to place the sound, when suddenly, out of the darkness, a hand jutted out in front of her eyes and slapped her breast. Hard. Ambilli froze. The whirring noise faded away. Even as she stood there, trying to breathe as shivers continued to run down her legs, a man cycled away, hooting his triumph.

They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Neither Madhu, nor Ambilli, or her parents would have anticipated this. Nevertheless, Ambilli reached home on time, smiling vacantly, as instructed. She spent an hour in the bath, but no amount of soap would wash away the painful sensation on her chest, or the touch of that hand.

Ambilli had bought her first small piece of freedom, at an unreasonable price.

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Not even Madhu got to hear about the cyclist. A week passed, and Ambilli had already learnt to bury the incident. She never took the school route again, though – alone – or otherwise. Without realising it, she had plunged into the new project that Mrs Iyer had forced her to take up...for lack of any volunteers from the class. Ambilli had been spending time in the local libraries, researching magazines, collecting newspaper clippings and writing up reports for the topic: *AIDS in India: The call for Awareness*. The irony was that during this time, she too had found it increasingly awkward to approach her classmates to help or participate in compiling the information gathered so far. However, when she submitted the report, it was a winner; the

twelve pages were instantly put up inside the huge glass-framed noticeboard for all to see and learn.

Encouraged by the feedback from other teachers, Mrs Iyer and Mrs Sahu then agreed to have 'personality development' weekends for the students of their class off-campus, where they would introduce talk about sex education. For that, however, they would have to collect the right candidates first. And Mrs Iyer decided to begin with Ambilli.

(8)

**Ambilli's classroom, Bombay. 1992.**

“LOUDER, Ambilli, I cannot hear you.”

Ambilli gulped. At least a hundred pairs of eyes and ears were trained on her (not including the five boys who always bunked the 'BA - Introduction to Foundation Course' class).

She cleared her throat, shifted uncomfortably on her feet behind her desk, adjusted the frame of her spectacles, and began reading again.

“Class...you, there... Yes. You wearing the green *dupatta* on the last bench. Can you hear what Ambilli is reading?”

“No Ma'am.”

“Ambilli, once again. Louder please. You have nothing to be afraid of. Your project has been a winner, and I want the others to know more. Come on, from the beginning please.”

Ambilli hated reading aloud. She almost wished she'd never done a good job of the report, which was about the lack of AIDS awareness in India. She recalled the hours of research in the local libraries and how difficult it had been to find any old newspapers on the subject; how, in spite of the 'nobility' of the subject itself – which of course her parents had encouraged - she had to hide some of the photo-copied fact sheets just because uttering the word 'sex' was taboo in her house. And to read aloud the entire report? The embarrassment was melting her, causing her to mutter the s-word under her breath, while the rest of the sentence flew by unaffected.

“Ambilli. Stop.”

“Yes, Ma'am?” Ambilli looked up, nervous and cold. This was going to be difficult.

“I think I know what your problem is. I want you to repeat the word 'Sex,' just the word, 15 times. Now.”

The class gasped. Ambilli could not believe her ears.

“Now?” she asked weakly.

“Yes.”

“But...Ma'am...”

“25 times.”

“Y-yes, Ma'am.”

Not looking at any of her classmates who she knew were watching her with their mouths open, Ambilli, who had already resigned herself to her shameful fate, began...

“sexsexsexsex...”

She closed her eyes tight...

“sexsexsexsexsex...”

...and thoughts fought for space in her head.

*Why was she so afraid of that word? Why was it taboo in her house when other people like Madhu could freely talk about it? Why didn't her parents allow her to watch the movies that her friends had viewed at least three times, without any adults around? Why wasn't she allowed to even think of having any acquaintances, leave alone being friends with their species?*

“...sexsexsexsexsexsex....”

*She remembered her childhood and how carefree she had been. She could play with her male-cousins at will, climb trees with them, they all slept huddled together and they used to have so much fun...*

“sexsex... sex, sex...”

*Was it due to her 'coming of age' just a few years ago? Yes, maybe it was. That red signal that had stopped it all and turned spoilsport. It was never her fault, she suddenly concluded. It had to happen, but out went the playing with boys (even if they were brothers or uncles), the tree-climbing, or even sitting in the lounge watching TV when visitors were around. Why was she always told to go to her room? Why were her phone conversations increasingly being tapped?*

“...sex, sex...”

*No. She didn't need to feel guilty. And sex? It's just another word, a means to an expression.*

*Nothing more. Yes...just a word. Sex is just any other word...there was nothing bad-girly about it.*

*Why else would Mrs Iyer want her to chant it aloud?*

And with that, Ambilli's mind stopped chattering.

“Sex. Sex. Sex. Sex.”

She opened her eyes. Her hands were sweaty and cold on the wooden desk. The classmates around Ambilli still had their mouths open. Her own ears felt fiery hot with the enlightenment of having achieved something. She hadn't felt so light even when her project had won the award.

Ambilli looked straight at her teacher. Mrs Iyer smiled. Ambilli returned it, grinning from ear to ear. Right there, in front of the entire class, a bond was established between the two. A bond of understanding, of gratitude, that didn't need explaining.

Mrs Iyer clapped her hands. The entire class stood up and applauded. Ambilli had uttered the dreaded S-word, yet she remained a good girl. But she was embarrassed now, and giggled, hiding her face behind her AIDS-report sheets.

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*What is morality? How deep is conscience? In a society where every individual is different, who makes the rules? These are questions best left unanswered. Yet they always lured me. Teased me. Dared me to find out anyway. I, fattened by the morsels of morality fed to me by my family, was more than saturated soon. Somehow I was convinced there must be a better world outside. I rebelled. And I got out. Alone. On the way I met a young boy who told me I was right. He told me to trust him instead. That if I did, it would change my life forever. He told me my parents had been wrong all along. That parents can be wrong. That a boy and a girl can certainly be the bestest of friends. I believed him. He told me that morality and conscience are thick companions. That entire societies can be built around them. But the trick was, he whispered, that not one can do without the other. When one sleeps, the other snores. Then softly, one by one, he took off my clothes, drinking me with his eyes, while my own were tightly shut. Trembling. You are so beautiful, he had said.*

*And at that moment, that is all I had ever wanted to hear.*

(9)

**Bangalore. March 8, 1996.**

Ambilli unlocked the door to her room, removed her sandals and placed her shoulder-bag by the bookshelf. She rinsed her face in the attached bathroom, towelled it dry and came into the room again. Walking to the wide windows, she stared outside for a second or two, her expression blank, then she drew the curtains and slowly sat herself in the darkness.

Every day now for the last two months since Ambilli moved out of her parents' home, she had spent most of the evenings within the four walls of this 'paying-guest' accommodation. Her mother, Indu, had arranged this for her through a friend of a friend. It was the least she could do. It was the most Ambilli would allow her to do.

Indu had seen her daughter grow up quickly in the days following her graduation. The wedding invitations for her 17-year-old niece had just been distributed then, and Ambilli was shocked to hear of them. "Why! The poor girl must have just come of age...why did they even have to wait for so long!?" she had screamed in disgust. She was fed up with the hypocrisy around her. Of the fact that the girls in her family were instructed to shy away from matters regarding boys, let alone love or sex. And that a 17-year-old was getting married to a complete stranger eight years older than her, just because he was 'well-settled' and 'working in the Gulf.' Indu had tried to reason with her. But how convincing can a woman be when she herself does not fully believe in the argument?

"Sometimes Ambilli, there is no point fighting these traditions. For years and years they have been followed ...you just have to see them from a different perspective."

"I don't see the perspective here, Amma, enlighten me."

"Well...your cousin would have got married anyway, sooner or later. I agree with you that it is too early but maybe her parents just wanted her to have a good companion for life..."

"They could have presented her with a dog then... they are good companions too."



“Look at it this way. We are lucky the Nairs don't practise the 'Sambandam' custom any more...”

“And what is that...?”

“Ask your father.”

“AMBILLI!! You don't need to know.” the father snapped, when she asked him, and that was the end of the discussion.

Ambilli had not attended the cousin's wedding, and when Achchamma herself came to Mumbai with a similar proposal (the guy was very rich, in Dubai, and 'loved children'), the girl had first panicked, then revolted. Without telling her parents, she found herself a job at a publishing house, and had announced that evening, that she was leaving for Bangalore.

Sandwiched between her helpless husband, a mother-in-law obsessed with protecting her granddaughter from the moral evils of the present and the past, Indu had to let Ambilli go. They kept in touch over the phone once or twice a week. Today, Indu had finished all the cooking and cleaning; she had given her mother-in-law her evening medication, and she sat by the sofa next to the phone, awaiting Ambilli's call. But miles away in the Garden City of Bangalore, enveloped in the dark, Ambilli was hardly aware of the time. It had been an eventful day. She had witnessed what a lot of freedom and quick money could do to young men and women of an otherwise conservative society. And when they said this was what the original India was like, before it got plundered by outsiders, she had not believed them.

The eighth of March. *International Women's Day*. In the fast multiplying world of dotcom bubbles, every so-called global event had to be flaunted in the brightest of colours. Spend, Spend, Spend...like there is no tomorrow, was the new mantra. The cafeteria in Ambilli's office building had been turned into an exotic shamiana: long flowing pastel silks draped the length of the walls, the floor was carpeted and spotless, white *gaddis* lined the widths of the hall. On a low-rectangular table in the middle were hookahs, intricately painted vases filled with wine and rum and, standing out of all this ethnic arrangement, were the tall stacks of disposable white, plastic glasses. The marketing and editorial colleagues in her office normally dressed in suits

and jeans, were today walking around with robes casually thrown around their bodies. Ambilli, her mouth open, thought she was in another world. What had come over her co-workers? Were they really drinking alcohol, or was it sparkly apple juice? She would soon find out. For now, sinking into a corner on one of the white mattresses, she faced a not-so-sober male colleague's rapid-fire question-round: Why did you leave your home? Do you really stay alone? Don't tell me you have never had sex. Aren't you twenty-five already? Do you have a boyfriend?

Ambilli wanted to shut her eyes and scream, wishing the music and the questions to stop. Yet she just sat there, transfixed. She was always attracted to the unknown. Always the curious cat, her Achchamma had so often called her affectionately. So she waited. What more could happen, she thought, one part of her mind urging her to leave – leave *now* – another part refusing to budge. And that is when the DJ changed the track. *Dum Maro Dum... Mit Jaye Gum*. It was the latest remix of an old Bollywood *item*-number. The lights came on and flickered in various psychedelic colours, creating the effect of a discotheque on the canteen-turned-dance floor. The men and the women, their robes now slipping under the effects of the alcohol, inched closer and closer to each other as if following the instructions of the song: get high (on marijuana), forget your sorrows. Oblivious of where they were or what they were doing, one of the men poured a glass of wine all over himself. The others, as if taking a cue, followed the move and the women swarmed around them like thirsty honeybees, licking the wine off their bodies, rubbing against them, feeling their skins with their tongue. Suddenly a short scream pierced the thick air.

Ambilli, who herself was stunned by the way the evening had unfolded, instinctively felt her throat to check if it was hers. But it came from another young girl seated at the far end of the room. Not waiting for anyone, the girl fled the hall, crying and shaking her head. The music continued to play, the men and women swooning and swaying, blissfully unaware of anything apart from their bodies.

Ambilli raced after her. She remembered now that the girl was a new employee. In the women's washroom, she found her frantically filling her cupped palms with water from the tap, and splashing it on her face repeatedly. She turned around and looked at Ambilli with red, tearful

eyes, water dripping from her face as if draining it of all its colour, and then collapsed in Ambilli's ready arms.

Seated alone in her room, Ambilli searched for regret. She had dropped the girl safely to her guesthouse, ensured there was someone to look after her, and then came back home exhausted. She found that she wasn't attracted to this new world that she had seen, nor was she repelled by it. She wondered why her parents had always been so protective about her. And now, when she had chosen to leave, she found herself struggling to decide what was right and what was wrong. Or whether it even mattered to anyone except her. She didn't know any men, and whenever she did meet one she had no idea what to say or how to behave. The one thing she was sure of was the fact that the poor girl who was scandalised by the event that evening would perhaps never forget Women's Day as long as she was alive. She could imagine a Madhu (fully dressed, of course) dancing to the Bollywood beats, simply having fun and being herself. Then she imagined the horror-stricken face of her Achchamma in the middle of that Toga party, praying fervently to all her gods and demanding that she should turn back home this instant. It made her laugh out loud.

Womens' Day, indeed! Someday, thought Ambilli, getting up finally from her seat and switching on the light, she would want to find out what the 'original India' was all about. But she was hungry now. She decided to get some food from the take-away down the road. She would call her mother from the phone booth on her way back.

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*Ever notice how a man just pushes everything away from his mind when he wants to settle down in front of the TV, or have a conversation with a friend? A woman does just the opposite. She accumulates her joys, her apprehensions and her pains when she sits down with friends, treasuring them like a pack of cards inside her head. As the conversation warms up, and the coffee cools down, she throws her cards down, one by one. If the accompanying friends are women, they are carrying their cards too. They respond by flinging down their own card for the situation. The male-friends don't have these cards, but they participate in the best way they can. They listen. They advise. Diligently, the men create solutions for the women even if they are part of the problem itself. In most cases, they are.*

(10)

**London, 2004.**

During the six months that Ambilli stayed with Manu in London, she met many of his colleagues and friends. Some of them were already settled there. The eligible bachelors had turned into husbands and soon, young fathers. The women, away from the pressures of intruding in-laws, were content in their roles as wife and mother. They tried to fit in as best as they could: they learnt to drive, watched *Big Brother* and *Emmerdale* or *Coronation Street*, kept tabs on the Marks & Spencer and Debenhams discount seasons, and turned their noses up at any mention of going back home to India for their annual holidays.

“Don't even ask about my packing yet. I'm not going to start until *bablu* has had all his malaria injections. Already I am worried sick about the heat...and the mosquito bites!” said Bindi resignedly, wiping the snot off her son's nose and sinking into the huge rented sofa in Manu's house.

“Have you already registered with the GP?” she asked Ambilli suddenly with a lot of concern.

“Do that, else you will be down with a urine infection before you know it.”

“Yes, remember when I had come with Alok for the first time...?” said Sonal, touching Bindi's knee, “My god! *Cheee*, what a nuisance it was! So awkward to visit the nurse...”

“Indeed, it happened to me too...and the doctor had stated it as a matter of fact, 'all the Asian women coming to this country get it’” said Pramila in a mock-British-sing-song accent. Turning to Ambilli, she added: “You have to wait at least two days before you can see a doctor you know. Er...we call the doctor a GP here, General Practitioner, and what we call Dispensary in India, is called a Surgery here. Funny, na?” Sonal laughed spontaneously, warning her, “What she means is...You had better call the GP two days *before* you're going to fall sick...”

Ambilli tried her best to stay part of the conversation. She'd been staying in London with Manu for almost two months and had registered for the GP long ago. Yet she couldn't help observing

how, in her last three meetings with other friends of Manu's, the topics had revolved around the same lack-of NHS appointments, the incorrigible weather, or the latest Bollywood film - which website streamed it live, with an excellent print.

Even as the dry England air sucked out all the moisture from her skin, for Ambilli, the novelty of the marriage had begun to wear off. A whole new life lay ahead of her but, she was finding it difficult to forget her past. Away from her family and friends, despite Manu's attempts at pampering her with weekend surprises, Ambilli found herself isolated and all alone. She could not make new friends, nor could she connect with his. And she was mentally exhausted from having superficial conversations with women who saw her only as our-dear-Manu's-New-Wife. Sometimes she simply withdrew into her shell, lying under her quilt and staring emptily at the wallpaper until Manu was home from work. Other times she spent her afternoons walking around the town centres, or reading in the libraries or book stores, from where she finally bought a cookbook for beginners one day, and a black hardbound journal.

*A New Wife, she began writing in it that night, is neither a friend to anyone, nor a sister. She is not a daughter, not a teacher, nor a student. How is she in bed, is what they really want to know. Years of experience in any other subject don't count; at least not until the mehndi on her hands fade away and she's worn every outfit from her wedding trousseau and thrown it into the wash. Till then, for the world, she is just that. A New Wife.*

(11)

**Bangalore. May, 1996.**

Everybody thought it strange that the trio were a team. The unlikeliest people to come together. Amruta: well-educated, smart marketing executive trainee at one of the country's freshest and most promising crop of dotcom companies. True to her name, a sweet girl whose nectar-like words could instantly make anyone feel at ease. Yet when she saw her colleagues swooning over each other, drunk on alcohol and music at the Womens' Day-party, she had fainted. She had grown up in a large, extended family arrangement of 'Jain' Gujaratis – strict vegetarians who don't include garlic or onions in their food. However, Amruta's parents had always been keen that she be financially and emotionally independent before she gets married, which is why she was in Bangalore. Regardless of how ready she was for living her life alone, nothing had prepared her for what she now knew was a Toga party. She regretted having attended it; it took her almost a week to recover. But soon she had sought out Ambilli and the two had instantly become very close friends. And then there was Fiona.

The bubbly, sprightly girl was like a jack-in-a-box, always jumping up with bright ideas and ever ready to be part of any fun activity. Away from her family home in Goa, Fiona was learning to play the drums and the flute, making the best of her spare time at weekends when she wasn't reporting news and features for their company website. She was a travelling encyclopaedia and loved staying up late nights partying, or reading. The three young women had their lunch- and coffee-breaks together, discussing their dreams, the latest book they were reading, or Fiona's hilarious habit of changing boyfriends until she had found the One.

It was Fiona's idea to visit the local pub.

“Come on, just us and my boyfriend. Trust me it won't be anything like that Toga party. Except that maybe I'll teach you guys to handle a drink or two,” Fiona pressed, her eyes sparkling

already.

Amruta and Ambilli looked at each other, not wanting to be the first to refuse. It was this quality in Fiona that Ambilli was most attracted to. Her infectiousness. Almost instantly she had wanted to jump up and down and say yes-yes, why not. But it was Amruta she turned to for an opinion.

The mirror of her conscience.

“I won't drink,” said Amruta with a frown.

“Don't. Just come along then, and we'll have fun. You won't regret this, I promise.”

The three of them slapped their hands in the air as if to celebrate the start of a new, carefree life.

When the doors to the pub opened, the two girls could hardly keep from blinking. Their eardrums exploded with the boom-boom of the loud music. Ambilli and Amruta walked as if in a daze, holding each other's hand to the centre of the discotheque that had a glass enclosure for the bar. Everything that was white glowed like neon lights: their teeth, the white of their eyes, their bracelets, even the tip of their shoes. People all around them had jubilant faces as they danced. The bar was quieter – at least this was where they could hear their own thoughts. Fiona led the way, inviting the girls to take their seats as if she owned the discotheque. The girls, uncertain and yet feeling adventurous, felt obliged to follow her instructions. Fiona's boyfriend Alex had his own gang with him. Among them was Siddharth, a handsome-looking youth who already had Amruta in his sights. Secretly, she admired him too. Nothing more was said, and Ambilli instantly knew. This blind date set up very cleverly by Fiona was going to be very successful indeed. They all laughed and cheered as the two coyly smiled and exchanged handshakes for the first time.

Perhaps it was the ambience of the flashing lights and blossoming love, perhaps it was that time of the night, or perhaps it was that inviting lane that Ambilli could never resist entering, we will never know. But just thirty minutes into their newly formed camaraderie, when the salt-laced tequila-shots arrived along with the slices of lime, Fiona, Ambilli and Amruta, seated alongside each other and facing an audience of boys encouraging them to go on, shut their eyes and downed their little glasses in one swift gulp each. The liquid seared their insides, sending up



invisible steam through their ears and nostrils, real tears from their eyes, while shrill, excited screams escaped from their mouths.

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*I still remember that horridly-tasting liquid, that light-headed joy of being with friends. We laughed till our cheeks hurt, we danced till the music had stopped, and we were asked, very politely, to leave. Amruta, Fiona and I. The unlikeliest of friends. We walked home that night, jiving to the beat of some silly nursery rhyme, hands around each other's backs, our feet lifting and tapping on the tar road together. Left. Hop. Left. Hop. Right. Hop. Right. And when we reached home, still teasing Amruta about 'Sid'dhart, Fiona sat with her drums and played us a nice soft piece until our bodies cried out that we needed to hit the bed. It was four am. Just before switching the lights off, Fiona asked if we regretted going out with her that night. I said, yes. Both of them turned around surprised. Really? Ambilli, what do you regret, they asked together. And I replied: I wish I'd had just one more shot of that tequila.*

(12)

**Mumbai, May 2004.**

“Your parents have raised you well, child. God bless you.”

Madhu's mother was overcome with emotion when Ambilli touched her feet before leaving.

Ambilli smiled in gratitude. “Thanks Aunty,” she said. “Let me know if you need something - I'll be around.”

Madhu didn't let Ambilli linger at the door for a second longer. Pulling her by her elbow, she led the way to the autorickshaw stand. “You are going to make things difficult for me, understand!” Ambilli laughed heartily.

“Don't laugh now! You know I'm not like you. I can't go around bending and touching *amma's* feet...and now that you've done it, she's going to talk about it for ages and ages,” complained Madhu in a mock-melodramatic gesture. Ambilli was still laughing. “Come on, I'm sure Aunty was just overwhelmed. She'll forget about it soon. Besides, I doubt if she really meant that last comment.”

“What do you mean? That she doesn't think you were brought up well?”

“Yes.”

Madhu was surprised. “Well, of course she does, Ambilli! All my life I've had to listen to comparisons – Ambilli does this and Ambilli is that...the woman certainly meant what she said. You are the daughter she knows she will never have!”

“I think my parents did their best. But nobody asks *me* if they raised me well, so...”

Madhu stopped Ambilli mid-sentence, and pulled her aside under the awnings of the closed laundry shop. The sun would set in about an hour. The afternoon heat still hung in the air, although the early evening breeze was stirring roadside hawkers to shake off their drowsiness. About 100 yards away from where the girls were standing, an autorickshaw driver yawned and stretched out his arms. Spotting potential customers, he hopped out of his vehicle, pulled the

kerchief that was rolled under his shirt collar, and dusted the passenger-seat. Then he re-tied his kerchief around his neck, climbed back in and started the vehicle, driving towards them.

“Why did you say something like that, Ambu? Is everything alright?”

Ambilli did not know what had made her say it. It had been a few months since she had left Manu alone in London, since she had wanted to find answers for herself, but now she did not even know what she was looking for. All she knew was that she was tired of pretending to be a good girl when she knew she was not. She was carrying a burden all by herself, and in her heart she felt that somehow, albeit unintentionally, her parents had also contributed to it. And how it had changed her. From a person who was always proud to never have had any regrets in her life, she was now simmering with them...*If only I had been brought up like Madhu, so carefree and confident. If only I had been taught how to behave with male colleagues, rather than be threatened with exile to Achchamma's house if I ever got acquainted with a man. If only I could share my secret with Manu, or with you, Madhu...* Ambilli looked away, afraid she would not be able to control her tears.

Even as the approaching autorickshaw slowed down and began to stutter to a halt, Madhu tugged at her friend's arm urgently, wishing they had some more time to talk. “I am asking you now. Ambilli, tell me. Something has happened that you cannot forgive...isn't it? Your parents not raising you well...surely *you* don't mean that. You are not a girl to say that without reason... Wait, did something happen during the time we were not in touch...talk to me, silly girl!”

Ambilli managed a weak smile and nodded her goodbye. She climbed in to the waiting auto and pressed Madhu's hand as the vehicle coughed to life again. “I'll call you later,” she said, her voice breaking as the tears rolled down. Madhu stood alone until the auto had disappeared out of sight at the bend in the road. Then she slowly turned towards her home.

Ambilli reached her house with a heavy heart. Her parents were not in. She unlocked the door with her spare key, picked up the airmail-parcel that had been left by the door and walked in.

Stopping by the table to put her bags down and the package, she walked to her father's bookshelf to pick out the dictionary. When she had found the page she was looking for, she shut the book and put it back. She then came to the table, still preoccupied with her thoughts, and opened the brown packet. It was addressed to her, from Manu. Inside were a notepad and a pen. And a cuddly grey teddy bear along with a handwritten note: *My dear Ambilli, I miss you. Write to me.*

Ambilli bit her lip. The tears threatened to burst again but she held back. She sat down, flipped the cover of the notepad to write a letter. But not to Manu.

*Dear Shashi...*

she began, her hand trembling and willing the pen to stay in place...

*I am writing to you after many years. I hope you remember me. I was the one you used often, so often that you took me for granted. Every night. Yes, I was the one who let you sleep peacefully, after you had taken off all my clothes, and done your thing under the blue floral bedsheet. You almost never touched me – should I be grateful to you for that? I wonder. After all you said you were my best friend. And I trusted you. You told me, this would make me a woman. You told me, this would make me attractive. You told me about my curves, and how beautiful they looked. You told me I was very sexy. That I didn't know it myself. You promised you would let me remain a virgin. I should have told you to leave me alone. I should have told you, just let me be.*

*I searched the dictionary for a word that could describe our brief but memorable relationship.*

*Two came close. The third was a perfect match.*

**“Sexual abuse:** the use of a position of trust to compel non-consensual sexual behaviour without physical force.”

*I then looked up* “Child sexual abuse: when a person younger than the age of consent is used for sexual stimulation of another person.”

*'Age of consent' - I thought that was a tricky phrase... I was 25 – an adult. But you knew I was too naive. Something I realise only now, almost half a decade later. Why, Shashi... why else would you pick me? Why would you insist that I was “such a cute little girl,” and that you*

wanted to “make me a woman.”

**Acquaintance- or date-rape:** “...Victims of date rape contend that they were raped by an individual with whom they were acquainted. In many such cases, the establishment of guilt becomes difficult, particularly in cases where there is no physical evidence of violence and there is only the testimony of the victim.” *Hmm, very close. Only you and I know what took place. I am even beginning to forget the details; I read somewhere that this often happens with rape victims. But then, I am beginning to hate that word: victim.*

**Grooming:** “Process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of a child.” *This looked more like it. I read further. It said: “There is a four-stage continuum to the grooming process: stage 1: identify the vulnerable child/person, stage 2: socially isolate, stage 3: develop an emotional attachment, and stage 4: isolate and develop progressive control over the child.” Did you come across this manual, Shashi, before you picked me out, and diligently ticked all these stages? How did your mind work? How did you know I was the one?*

*For you, Shashi, I fought with my friends. They saw through you straightaway, so you poisoned me against them. I rebelled against my parents. I defended you. I told them you were my best friend. And when everyone had left me and gone away, too far away to call back, you showed me who you really were. You were a hyena. Triumphant over your steal. Yet, like a hungry child I held on. Gradually, I realised what you were doing to me. You were making me want a share of your sick pleasure. I felt paralysed with fright. With shame. Once, I even managed to get away. I travelled out of town alone. You followed. Your tongue sticking out. Didn't I mention this before... I was your ticket to blissful sleep. Until the day I fell ill and you left, afraid that my fever was contagious. I quit the job, the company of friends I had so loved. I packed my things and went back home.*

*It is the smell of petrichor I remember the most from that night. The earth, dry and parched, had sizzled when it began to rain. For a long time I stared at the mud, watching how it gradually softened and let the water mix with it. It looked like chocolate in the dark. Inviting. I stepped*

*into it. My feet were bare. I let the wet mud curl under the small of my feet and climb in between my toes. I let the rain soften me. It poured. I held my face and chin up and it washed my tears away. I was cleansed. The next day my fever had disappeared. So had my innocence. Just like that... it was gone. Without even saying goodbye. You were right, Shashi. You turned me into a woman.*

*I have been on the run ever since. The athletic kind who jogs every morning around my apartment block, her ears plugged in to music, shut out to the world. Mine are plugged into Guilt. Guilt for having met you. Guilt for being naive. Guilt for the tinted curtains behind which my parents had brought me up. A perfect child. A doll wrapped in lies. You, I don't blame. You were an animal anyway.*

*I hope you are a man now. I hope you are happy. And someday, Shashi, when you start a family, I hope you have a daughter. And I hope you worry for her.*

Ambilli straightened up and put her pen down. It was unusually quiet. She heard herself breathe, fill her lungs with a strange determination. *Enough*. She had had enough. She felt her face but the tears had all dried up, leaving her cheeks moist and salty. She looked out of her window. The clouds stood still, waiting to see what she would do next. Calm, she ripped the pages from her journal, held them for a moment before further tearing them apart into hundreds of little pieces. Under the breeze of the ceiling fan in her room, the tiny shreds spiralled out in all directions before twirling, floating onto the shelves, onto the sofa and then falling gently on the floor. It had been a warm day and the houseplants looked worn out. Ambilli filled up a jug and watered them. She then picked up the broom and duster from behind the kitchen door and hunted out most of the pieces of paper she'd torn earlier, taking care to scrunch them up into a ball before tossing them in the bin. Then she made herself a mug of dark and sugary coffee, sank into the sofa and switched on the TV.

(13)

**Mumbai. June, 2004.**

“I knew Vinod for six months, before we got married...”

Ambilli and Madhu were sitting cross-legged on Madhu's bed, each hugging cushions to their chests, hands on their chins – just like they used to during sleepovers in their school days.

Already, they had spent the entire morning laughing and re-living the childhood years they had spent together. Madhu's mother had to coax them into moving to the kitchen again to have their

late but sumptuous lunch and, at the table, Ambilli asked Madhu about her plans for marriage.

Even as Madhu continued her chatter, teasing Ambilli if she meant her own marriage or her mother's second one, Ambilli caught the resigned look on Aunty's face. Aunty continued to eat

her lunch in silence, never once falling short of her hospitality and ensuring that Ambilli had a second helping of everything she had so lovingly prepared. The girls pushed her out of the

kitchen later, insisting that she rest and they would clear up the dishes. Thirty minutes later,

Aunty had dozed off on the sofa with the TV-soap still running, while the girls had tiptoed back to Madhu's room, and climbed up on the bed.

“...he was on a photography course then. I was learning to play the violin.”

“You learnt to play the violin?” asked Ambilli, her eyes wide.

“Well, summer-vacation...lots of time to kill...*Makhi* was in his final year of engineering. My parents had to shoo me out of the house...”

“I'm not surprised,” teased Ambilli. “With your chatter, the poor guy would have failed.”

Madhu laughed. She went on.

“Vinod was a good guy. He came from a wealthy family and my parents were pleased with my choice. Until we got married everything was fine...”

“After his class and mine - he would wait till mine got over – we would visit the cafe next to the station. It was a hot spot for young couples you know...”



“Hmm...and then...”

“Well, then the dream was broken and we all woke up,” laughed Madhu again.

“Madhu! Don't you ever get serious? Come on now, where's Vinod then? I would like to meet him.”

“He's in Dubai, sweating it out...anyway that was the last information I had about him.”

“Last information?' What do you mean, last...?”

“We are divorced.”

Ambilli sat up, her hand reaching out to touch Madhu's. She now could understand Aunty's withdrawal and was intrigued that Madhu could be so cheerful despite what she must have gone through.

“What he wanted was another trophy, not a wife,” said Madhu finally.

“He had never had to earn a paisa himself, and he had loads of friends. When we got married, Vinod's parents bought us a cosy little home very close to where they lived. During the day he shuttled between his parents' place and ours, or visited friends and attended his classes. The long nights were for socialising. He got his friends home for dinner, almost every night and even during weekends, and just expected me to entertain them, keep the house tidy - like his parents' show-home - and wanted me to cook, cook and cook. And well...” she sighed finally, “You know I'm such a bad cook na.”

“You make up for it in more ways than one,” said Ambilli smiling.

“I couldn't continue as his wife...it wasn't a normal relationship - you know what I mean? Even his friends were making fun of him behind his back, and no matter how much I tried to make him understand he just wouldn't get it.

“It was his father who finally intervened. Vinod had begun to sense that it was not working for us. He became touchy...very irritable at times, and would scold and humiliate me, calling my parents names, and I just wouldn't take it. One day we were having a row and he tried to hit me. My father-in-law was at the door. He was the only one who could see that the boy was a good-for-nothing, a spoilt brat of a *lakhpati*. Despite the mother's pleas, he sent him off to Dubai to be

on his own. By then I had already decided to leave..."

"If he changes now, for the better, will you take him back in your life?"

"No. Never. I can never picture him in my life again. Vinod was a mistake. The divorce came through last year. Besides," Madhu shrugged, reclining on a few pillows for support while a soft breeze made all her chocolate-wrapper dolls dance in the air and the wind-chime tinkle, "I have someone else in my life now."

Ambilli opened her mouth to say something, but then changed her mind. Madhu patted her hand and laughed. "Too late. The question-mark on your forehead revealed it all..."

"Oh, well...I was just...just concerned that's all. Aren't you moving too fast, Madhu...didn't you say the divorce came through last year?"

"Yes, it did. Anand and I are more than good friends, Ambilli. Let's just say he stood by me throughout my ordeal with Vinod and now I am just letting myself pay him back for all his help."

It was evening. The muffled sounds of vessels and cups from the kitchen made them realise that Aunty was up and already making them a cup of tea. "Do you want to go for a walk later... let's just stretch ourselves a bit," said Madhu suddenly, back to her restless self.

"Sure! And I'll take an auto from the end of the road...I didn't realise it was past four already. I better start for home."

Over tea and some Gujarati *farsan*, Madhu recounted how her separation with Vinod had led her to go back to studies and do something full-time. She travelled between Mysore and Mumbai and, on one of her overnight bus journeys, met Anand, also a full-time researcher at the same college. "One thing led to another and we realised we were both looking for a house in Mysore. Next thing we knew we were room-mates..."

"I'm glad you decided to study...it is uncommon in India, don't you think? To get back to studies at our age, but in London I even saw a lot of senior-looking citizens filling up their forms, full

of enthu and all. What is your subject?"

"Well, it's about the women in pre-Victorian..."

"Talk some sense into her, Ambillikutty..." Madhu's mother cut her short suddenly.

"*You* tell her this is not the way for a young woman to spend her life." She placed her teacup back in its saucer, as if she was determined to have someone hear her out. "This girl married Vinod on her terms, she separated from him on her terms, now she is living with yet another man again...what is a mother to do?"

Ambilli was afraid to look Aunty in the eye. She could understand what she must be going through, but she also felt Madhu knew what she was doing.

"Oh, not again Amma...we've had this conversation so many times before! Tell me,

Ambilli...you have travelled a bit, you've lived alone yourself when you were working in

Bangalore. Haven't you heard of strangers sharing a roof...I mean, what can be wrong in that?

And it's not like Anand is my boyfriend or anything...we're just helping each other right now."

Madhu's mother slammed her hand down firmly on to the table, her voice choked with

helplessness and anger. "Madhu, that is enough! *Krishna! Guruvayoorappa!* To think that your father left me alone to listen to you talk loosely like this. What does 'helping each other' mean?"

She buried her face in her hands, shaking her head as she cried. Ambilli walked over to comfort her, her index finger on her lips, pleading with Madhu to stop the discussion.

"Aunty, it's alright, I'll talk to her."

Madhu's mother was in tears now. "This is India, not London or America. You are *my* child, not some wealthy man's daughter who can bury anything with money...our culture does not permit us to talk like this, girl. Where have we gone wrong, *Krishna!*?" She talked to herself between muffled sobs, pulling herself up and walking off to her room. Madhu looked at her teacup blankly, circling her finger around its rim, her other hand resting on her chin. Ambilli just stood there feeling awkward, staring at the toe-rings on her feet.

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*She was barely eighteen. A bar dancer. Perhaps even a prostitute.*

*I used to see their kind everyday around D N Road in Mumbai, waiting in the shadows for their 'clients.' Most of them would be wearing black, with a garish, contrasting dupatta pinned to either shoulders, or tied casually around the waist. How did I know they were prostitutes? Well, one could just tell.*

*In the building where I lived during my childhood, a visit to the then 'Bombay VT' meant a lot of excitement. A schoolgirl, my neighbour, had warned me to watch out for women in 'VT-town' who wore "men's goggles, and huge men's wristwatches." Gifts to beget more gifts. I was also instructed: "not to stare at them for too long." That tempted me, but I dared not to break that last rule. In my half-real, half-fantasy world, I would apply fairy-tale logic wherever possible. I empathised with the women in black. I thought of them as normal girls who perhaps had disobeyed...who had stared too long at the mens' goggles and mens' wristwatches and got turned into prostitutes themselves by a magic spell. Of course, I never mentioned this to anyone. Least of all to that well-intentioned neighbour.*

*It was way past 11pm. The night I met her – about seven years ago, I was held up at my office until late as a colleague had thrown a farewell party. Most of them later took a taxi back to their homes. I lived the farthest. The train was my cheapest and fastest option. So I waited alone, the huge digital indicators and the trademark white-and-black railway clock ticking above my head. I carried a first-class pass. But when the train did arrive, I got into the second-class ladies' compartment.*

*Midnight in Mumbai is no time to prove your status, especially if you are a young single girl coming back from work. Besides, the 'Ladies' first class' compartment – the only one on the train – at that time of the night would be a den for some of the policemen. On the pretext of duty, they sometimes stood 'guard' for the few first-class women travelling alone. About two stations and five minutes into the train journey, those few, first-class women would flee clutching their handbags and their honour, sneaking out of their own coaches and into the general- or men's-compartments where it was much safer. Or, like me, they would travel second class.*

*That night, I wore my best Lucknowi kurta to the party. A spotless, white one with light, mango-leaf embroidery. Another girl sat opposite, her head resting on the yellow-painted metal wall of the train. She wore a shimmery, envy-green dress that seemed to come alive whenever the dull lightbulb flickered above. Her chapped lips were clumsily botched with bright pink lipstick; even that failed to hide the dark stains of nicotine beneath. Her kajal was out of place, smudged towards her temples. Her bindi was equally garish, big and shiny with a red and green stone that glinted every now and then. Her sandals hung from a strap on her heels. She had let them slip - carelessly exposing dry and cracked skin caked with dirt and fading nailpolish on her toenails. Seated opposite, I wondered why anyone should make such an effort to look beyond her age. She was so repulsive. Yet I couldn't take my eyes away - there seemed an innocence, a sad aura about her as she slept.*

*The train started with a jerk. I smoothed and gathered my own clean white dress closer, stuffing the loose ends behind my knees so it didn't touch hers - any part of her for that matter. Thankfully, she didn't move. She was fast asleep.*

*I thought about her life, feeling a little sorry for her, and angry. That she should be dancing and entertaining men old enough to be her grandfathers, when she should be studying. Not realising it, I had rested my head on the wall too and, trying to guess what must have brought her into her profession, I drifted into a deep sleep.*

*I woke up to the consistent and far-away sound of 'didi, didi...' that someone was calling out. A little disoriented, I opened my eyes to find an empty train compartment but for the girl in green. I shrank back in my seat, feeling for the crisp, white touch of my dress again. "Kya chahiye?" I asked. What do you want?*

*"Aapka station chalagaya, didi, hamara bhi." You missed your station, sister, and I have too, she said, smiling. I saw now that she was just a child, and she had addressed me as her elder sister. Suddenly ashamed of myself, I looked around and out of the window.*

*It appeared that she had seen me travel on the same train before. And that she always got off at the same station as me, but I had never noticed her earlier.*

*"Chalo," I said. And we both walked to the doorway, balancing ourselves as the now-almost-vacant train swayed heavily and shook as it sped. For a while we were both silent, feeling the cool night breeze that made our hair fly across our faces, into our mouths. We both smiled, struggling to keep them behind our ears.*

*I thanked her for waking me up in time. Had she not done so the train would have taken me to the locomotive shed; a place where railway boys and urchins sometimes took over the trains, salvaging anything the passengers would leave behind. There had recently been an unfortunate case of a rape as well...I shuddered.*

*I asked her why she was in the train so late. She said she was a bar dancer, confirming my guesses. At times she had to entertain in bed as well. "Yeh kaam kyon karti ho?" Why do you do this kind of work? I asked again. She was half-expecting the question, for her answer was quick and quite matter-of-fact.*

*"I'm the eldest of five siblings, didi, uneducated because my mother is blind and my father is a hopeless drunkard. My twin sister cooks and looks after the others. I earn so my younger brothers can go to night school...they work too, but they don't earn as much as I do in a single day." She looked at me and smiled in return.*

*I was amazed by this brief rationale that summed up her young life. "Aren't you afraid?" I asked, "You're so young..."*

*The train was slowing down now. We had reached the penultimate station and we would have to be quick in order to catch the train on the opposite platform. She laughed. A girlish, defensive laughter that warned me not to interfere with her fate. The train had come to a halt.*

*"Aap kya karti, didi?" she responded, jumping off the footboard and running away before I could blink.*

*That night I didn't even ask her her name. But I think of her every so often these days. She had asked me what I would do in her situation. I didn't know the answer seven years ago and I still don't know it today. But here I am, betrayed by a friend, by myself for being so vulnerable and letting it happen...while she may still be making strangers look weak and wanting to touch her. I still haven't managed to put one association behind me, while she must be tossing them out of her mind like last night's leftovers. Hopefully, I think... she must have moved on to a better quality of life.*

*And then it occurs to me. The clue to her question lies in one little word. Choice.*



(14)

**Mumbai. July, 2004.**

A phone call interrupted Ambilli's writing. "It's Madhu..." her mother called out. Ambilli closed her diary and went out of her room to take the call. Madhu was at her college, and asked if she could meet her again that evening. Ambilli wanted to see her too. They agreed to meet outside Madhu's library and walk home together. As the girls chatted on the phone, Indu emerged from the bathroom carrying a bright yellow tub of freshly washed clothes to the balcony, and put it down with a loud 'Hmpph!!' She had folded up the ends of her saree and tucked them into her visibly damp petticoat. Still on the phone, Ambilli watched in amusement as her mother picked up the clothes one by one, angrily wringing them out and shaking the excess water off before spreading them out to dry, all the time mumbling about their maidservant whom she had fired just that morning.

Heera had been playing truant ever since she had found a better-paying employer in the ground-floor apartment. "Did you know they have a union now, the maidservants' association or something, or is it called an Employment exchange... I forget. But look at the cheek of that girl...telling me I should pay her more because there is an extra family member in the house...!" "Who is the extra...oh, me?" asked Ambilli, putting the phone back and coming forward to help. "Yes! As if it makes a difference to her! My OWN daughter! I just told her she could leave, and not come back again."

Ambilli loved the smell of freshly washed cotton. She inhaled deep and teased Indu. "Will you look for another *bai* at the 'Exchange' now? I won't be here forever you know."

"Well, that's what I was going to ask you next. Why *are* you here in the first place? Did you have a fight with Manu?"

Ambilli hadn't realised she had unwittingly walked into a trap. She had no excuse to be away from her husband, really; instead she was more than grateful to him for letting her go on a

whim. If she couldn't make sense of her decision herself, then what would she tell her mother?

Indu continued, the wet clothes making loud slapping-sounds as they struck the air forcefully, spraying tiny droplets of water all around. "The poor boy calls everyday...I find it difficult to face his mother too. You know she visits the *Guruvayoorappan* temple every morning...

Ambilli, you *can* talk to me, dear. What is it, why did you leave London?"

"It's nothing Amma, I just didn't feel it was right..."

"You aren't happy then. Your father will be..."

"No-no, I am very happy with Manu. He is so understanding and nice to me...I couldn't have been happier with anybody else..."

"Then what, *beta*? What is it that you cannot tell your own mother?" Indu put her arm around Ambilli and prepared to go back into the room to sit down with her. But Ambilli held up her hands and began to laugh. "No-no please, no emotional blackmail, 'ma. Things are very fine with us, trust me. It's just that...I can't say anything now...okay?" And with that, she gave her mother a quick hug and picked up another wet cloth from the tub.

(15)

**Madhu's college campus, Mumbai. June, 2004.**

Ambilli's face went red, her ears tingling with embarrassment. Madhu was closely examining an A3-size, deep blue-and-purple poster that was pasted on the compound wall outside her college library. *Pyaase Sapne*, Thirsty Dreams, it said, depicting a caricature of a woman undressing herself in front of a mirror. The laminated face of a popular female actor had been stuck on top of it – a prank by a male youngster, perhaps – no, definitely. The wall went straight on for a few metres before meeting at a corner – then extending to the right-side of the building. A few young boys shared their precious joint, sitting on this wall with their knees dangling. In their intoxicated state, they sniggered and passed comments at the young women in front of them. Oblivious to their lecherous teasing, Madhu studied the picture in front of her.

Ambilli recalled how as a schoolgirl, Madhu could stand for hours in front of any wall plastered with glossy movie posters, be it soft porn or popcorn. She would scrutinise every detail: the name of the film, the actors, the dress – right down to the shoes or colour of nailpolish they were wearing. Hindi was never her strong subject, so if the information was printed in the Hindi *Devnagari* script, despite the loud and bright fonts, she would take even longer to read. A painful experience for anyone accompanying her. And what's more, the majority of such posters were dark-coloured pamphlets like this *Pyaase Sapne*, showcasing the title of and venue for the so-called 'adult' movie.

Even before Madhu had watched the film, she would have predicted the plot simply by reading between the lines. It was a peculiar habit she had picked from her elder brother, Sumesh – aka, Makhi, and his friends. When she was younger she would accompany them on the trips back home from school. She had even picked up their jargon for X-rated movies, their signals and slang, their carefree attitude. By the time they had graduated and she was on her own, she was

independent enough to be elected as the class monitor, and quite a resourceful one at that.

For Ambilli, however, school-time Madhu was her best friend, and yet an eternal source of worry. With regards to social behaviour outside the house, Ambilli's parents had always maintained a strict and traditional mindset. She was petrified of what her father would say if he caught her standing in front of obscene wall-graffiti, with or without Madhu. Most movies, apart from the animated ones, were banned in her house, unless it was a family film already 'screened' by her parents. But talking to boys, or even glancing accidentally at a sleazy movie poster meant she would be sternly reprimanded for hours.

The fear of her father's severe warnings were so great that even today at the age of thirty – despite a *tali* around her neck, which certified she was married - Ambilli felt her cheeks flush with shame. She dragged an engrossed Madhu by her arm, giving the boys a bitter look before whispering back. “*Oh, come on*, Madhu! I cannot believe you still scan all these adult-film posters like you did when we were at school. Come on, those boys are laughing at us!”

“Wait-wait, this one's playing at the cinema just opposite our old school playground.

See! ...Hey, check this out, Ambilli...someone's given this film a two-star-rating, and even scribbled 'Watch Savita Bhabhi online for free instead' here...can you read it?” She laughed aloud, pointing at the text on the wall and enjoying her own private joke.

Ambilli nervously looked to her left and right, and tugged Madhu's arm again, pleading. “Come, *baba!*”

Madhu continued to laugh. “Are you still terrified of your father? You're an adult now, Ambilli, for god's sake! It's okay to *look* at graffiti *na?*”

Ambilli managed an uncomfortable 'yeah-right' impression and walked on, pulling a reluctant Madhu who finally walked in step with her. Madhu spoke first, shaking her head: “You know, I don't blame you. I knew how strict Uncle was when we were growing up. But the way I look at it, Ambilli - and it's related to what I am studying right now too. The erotic in India,” she continued waving the index and middle fingers on both hands to gesture a quotation mark, “...has begun to come full circle.”

Ambilli frowned. “What do you mean...?”

They finally sat down at the library cafe, bringing their cups to the table. Ambilli stirred in the sugar for both of them. Madhu sipped her coffee, and explained. “Look, our country was always liberal towards its women, to the point of respecting them, making sure they were literate in the Arts – be it singing or dance, or poetry. The works of Kalidasa, the Kama Sutra...and there are many more...if you read these carefully, you'll realise that they almost spoke a different language!”

“Yes, yes, I know...they spoke Sanskrit.”

“Not *Sanskrit*, silly,” Madhu laughed, then she touched Ambilli on her arm and continued: “I mean, yes, of course they spoke Sanskrit, but that's not what I meant. They spoke a different language. A language of *love*. Of...*hurve*. Of *pleasure*.”

Ambilli rolled her eyes at Madhu's dramatic inflections.

“*Nahi baba*, I'm serious. You must give it a chance – read one of the old plays...Bhasa, Kalidasa, Shudraka...pick any one. The shortest play. They're all excellent stories! *And* you'll be surprised to see that our ancient authors only elevated the position of the Indian woman. *Arre*, forget the authors... without the presence of the royal courtesans or *ganikas*, even our kings were insignificant! And there were the devadasis, who were married to their arts, and the gods or deities of these kingdoms. The beautiful Nagarvadhus...*Amrapali*? Haven't you heard of her? Khajuraho, Konark, Tanjore...visit any of these vast ex-kingdoms and you'll find the dancers and the courtesans still seducing the kings and devas, their dances frozen in time, sculpted on the temple walls. Why wait to visit? Just google them and you'll see what I'm talking about. When these kings and their kingdoms disappeared in the early 1900s, the devadasis too faded away, their beautiful dances filtered down to us in the form of Bharatanatyam, Mohiniattam and others...” Madhu stopped to take another sip of her coffee, grinning broadly and leaning back on her chair. “If you don't stop me I can go on and on...”

Ambilli was not sure what to say. Finally she frowned, mumbling: “Umm...okay. What does all this have to do with the obscenity on the walls?”

“I guess what I'm trying to say is... there is nothing that we should be ashamed of. The act, and expression of love was always of significance in ancient India. Did you know... a courtesan's profession was most educated and respected, just like the Geishas' in Japan. It was hard work too. Girls as young as five and upwards were trained in the skills written down in the Kama Sutra. From the courtesans and the temple dancers, the art of making love has been moving on...to erotic plays, stories and poetry, to films, and now... as comic strips like this Savita Bhabhi series on the Internet. Don't you find it interesting at all?”

“I find it all very uncomfortable,” said Ambilli, pulling a face. “Kama Sutra indeed. In the end it all comes down to sleeping with someone, right? Forget the past, tell me, what could be interesting for the life of a prostitute in this 21st century...baring her body in front of strangers every night, eagerly waiting for her next client because then she is sure she can have something nice to wear and good food to eat?”

Madhu was taken aback, even happy to hear Ambilli's change of tone. Ambilli was never the kind to debate or confront a situation. At last, here she was doing just that. She smiled.

“Ahh...you see. You see, Ambu, it is actually very simple. *You* are talking a different language, that's all.”

“*Again*, language? What do you mean, Madhu?” Ambilli asked.

“Yes! Language. Did you notice the words you used? '*sleeping* with someone'; '*baring her body* in front of strangers every night'...”

“*Han*, so? Isn't that what they do? How else do I put it then?”

Madhu placed her cup on the table. “Yes. Yes, that is what they do. But the *language* that I was referring to..what you told me just now... And indeed, perhaps what *everybody* and their mothers are talking right now, *MY* mother included...is the language of *Taboo*. *Don't do this. Don't do that. That is not appropriate behaviour. Keep your legs together. Our culture does not permit it. Don't talk to boys. Don't sit with boys. Don't smile at boys. Don't breathe...blah blah blah.*” She gestured a yapping mouth with her hand. “Isn't that the *Taboo* language? See how different it is from the language of pleasure! Even mouthing the two words, *pleasure*, and *taboo*, makes you

feel entirely different both times!”

Ambilli shook her head again. She went on to describe her meeting with the young girl on the train several years ago, and how sorry she had felt for her, how angry she was that the girl had had to opt for a life of a bar girl or worse, a prostitute, to make quick money in order to feed her family. “All this that you just told me... 'history' and 'pleasure' and 'taboo'... what can *your* history do to help the girl?”

Madhu thought for a moment before she replied: “History has many perspectives, Ambilli. It depends on who you are: the winner, the loser, or the bystander.”

“I don't get you...”

“What I mean is that – yes, history can definitely help the girl, or rather, her profession. You say it is unfortunate that she is a prostitute. What gives you the right to believe she is pitiful? What gives anybody the right to judge her choice of profession as a plain repellent? If history can help anyone it is people like you and me... by reminding us that we live in a country where what is amoral now was at one time considered *normal*. Did you try to imagine how her profession would be judged – *if* it came to that - say, three- to four-hundred years ago?”

Madhu paused for breath. The cafe had quietened down since the two arrived and started discussing. In a softer voice, she continued. “Look, I don't blame you for thinking of prostitution as such a lowly profession. Nor do I blame our parents for thinking of courtesans as mere mistresses, or even husband-snatchers as they're portrayed in some of our Bollywood films. But we have to remember that this is an impression that has been formed by the last few generations in India, thanks mainly to the Islamic invasions... after which the Victorians followed and gave us lessons in morality.”

Ambilli raised her brows and shook her head, laughing. “Oh-ho wait, wait... where are you taking this conversation... invasions? Victorians?” Noticing that Madhu's serious expression

hadn't changed, she patted her friend's arm and said softly, "Look. It's okay for you to say all this, Madhu. Your parents were always open-minded... remember how you used to bring your mother's library copies of *Mills & Boons* to college, harassing me by reading particular sections out loud?" She smiled again. "I would find it uncomfortable even today, in spite.... perhaps, because of some incidents that have changed my life..."

Madhu waved a hand interrupting. "Oh, come on, don't give me that excuse. Doesn't everybody who's alive got to experience, as you say, certain 'incidents' at some point in his or her entire lifetime? What is the big deal? What is important is to keep moving on...don't you think so too? Your parents taught you what *they* believed was right. It is your turn now. Don't tell me you're still going to stick by their views of what is right or wrong...."

Ambilli kept quiet; Madhu had a valid point. All these years she had been nursing her feelings of shame and guilt for a relationship that should not have happened. But it had, and this could not be denied. It was time to move on. But how? She sipped the coffee that had gone cold on their table, idly flipping open one of Madhu's library books. Madhu watched her in silence, studying her. Had she perhaps unintentionally hurt her friend? She whispered, "Is that why you have come away from Manu? Is it because you haven't been able to move on?"

Ambilli pretended to not have heard her question, trying to smile again but suddenly finding it a struggle. She wanted to disappear. She placed her cup down, glancing around, unable to look at Madhu. Finally she said "Sorry, Madhu. You're right. I...I must confess, I do need to get over my past and move on. But it's just that...I don't know how." She looked away again. "Anyway, forget all that, tell me about your project again. This," she nodded towards the open book next to Madhu, "looks like interesting stuff."

Straightening her posture and draining all the coffee in one big gulp, Madhu collected the rest of her books and suggested they leave. "Ambilli, my friend, I am going to do much better than that. You said you had no idea about when you were going back to London. Am I correct?"



Ambilli gathered her bag too, puzzled. They began to walk in the direction of Madhu's house close by. "Yes, I did...but..."

"Listen!" said Madhu, suddenly inspired. "Anand is going to be away for two months and I am going to be all by myself in Mysore. You know I need someone's brains to chew on, don't you...why don't you come along and help me with my work? No, and don't even suggest that I take Amma with me....*you* come, I insist!"

"Me? But I hardly know anything about your subject, Madhu...I am not even qualified to..."

"Don't worry. You are the perfect candidate to be my new research assistant. The only requirement is an open mind..."

They reached Madhu's house where her mother was waiting. "Come in Ambilli dear...I wanted to apologise for the other day..." She patted Ambilli's cheek affectionately and then turned to Madhu, "*Kya hua?* Did she agree?"

Madhu grinned, triumphant. "Of course, she did. I knew she would even before I had asked."

**End of Part 1.****(16)****Achchamma**

*“Ela mullinmel veenaalum, mullu eleyinmel veenalum, kedu ellakku thanne.” My grandmother used this pazhanchollu very often. Ahh, how true it rings even today...*

*Yes-yes, have patience. I will tell you what the old proverb means. 'Regardless of whether the leaf falls on the thorn, or whether the thorn falls on the leaf, it is the leaf that gets damaged,' that is what it roughly translates to in your English language. Now you will ask who is the leaf here... No one in particular – I remembered it now that's all. There is no reason for it. We old women are like that. We remember some things. We forget some things. Everything at the wrong time. And for no reason.*

*Ahh... now, before I speak any more, did I forget to say who I am again? My name is Saudamini. You know Ambilli...yes? She is my grand daughter. A very simple girl. Very proud. Orru paavum pennu. Naive, in your language, yes? Here, why don't you take that chair and sit close to me. I cannot see very well these days; the light behind you hurts my eyes.... How long is it since someone sat by a wheezing old woman like this...let alone listen to her? I know...I must smell. I am sorry. It is the smell of my rotting body, child, what can I do? No amount of elekkya helps. Here, you have one...I always carry some in my hand. Just pop it into your mouth. Bite it now. See? Cardamom is good for everyone. Or, wait. I will ask Kunjumalu edathi to get you a cup of ginger tea. Till then just let me take a deep breath and talk to my heart's content.*

*Sighh...*

*I was born in 1915 in the month of December. My memory has faded away, like that cloth you*

*see left out in the sun for too long. Long ago, it had been colourful too, with lovely intricate patterns woven into it. Veliyammaaman got it especially for me from Burma. He missed my wedding day and this gift was to compensate for it...*

*Wait. What were we talking about? My failing memory, ahh yes.... And yet, how well I remember the festivities when I first walked into this house. I was barely eight. My husband was eighteen. He was shy. I was not. Instead, I was sent home within two days because of the vikritikutti that I was, a very mischievous child. I didn't mind the punishment at all. I got to stay with my mother for a few more days. 'Till you grow up' she smiled and said. And then she taught me everything I should know as a wife. They told me my husband belonged to a wealthy family; 'the best match there will ever be,' the old astrologer had exclaimed, rounding up his cowries. My mother was very happy for me. When we were alone later, she told me I should be too. 'At least your children will know the name of their father,' she had whispered before she withdrew into her room.*

*That was the way everybody lived in those days. Why, you ask? It has been so since this land was born. According to the legend, when Lord Parasuraman threw his axe from Gokarnam – the Western Ghats of India, as you know it now - into the sea, it fell at Kanyakumari. All the land that was under the sea was reclaimed as his own. Thus formed Keralam. He then divided it among seven Namboodiri families. Now, the Namboodiri community was the most respected in the land already, thanks to their Brahmin status. Only next to God, mind you. Add to the fact that they were landowners by default. But look at their fate. They were blessed with name and learning and fortune, but not with half as many girls. They turned to the Nayars – warriors and keepers of kings, servants for Namboodiri brahmins - to fulfil their physical desires.*

*For the Nayar community too, there was never a 'marriage' in the way you know it today. An elderly man tied the golden tali around a girl's neck when she was five or six, blessing her with a long, prosperous and fertile life. He would never see her again. When the girl came of age, she would have several suitors arranged by her own tharavadu, or family members. The Namboodiri brahmins were always on the lookout for good-looking Nayar women, and when*

*they did get in touch with the girl's family first it was considered an honour. I don't know if you know this already...only the eldest of the Namboodiri brothers was allowed to take a wife from his own community. The younger sibling visited blossoming Nayar women - like in my mother's situation. After the much-announced sambandam – the night of the union - he would leave, filling the girl's hands with gold and silk veshtis, and gifts for the family. Ahh, what an honour it was considered to be...and, he would come again, but only if the girl so desired. She was free to choose from the royal castes and wealthy Nayars to have sambandam with, or even refuse them at any time. Children? Of course there would be children. But they would be raised by her Nayar brothers alone. This was the way of the marumakathaayam, the matrilineal society in Kerala.*

*When I grew up I learnt that my mother had had about three sambandams, one of who was a brahmin Namboodiri landlord. By the time I was born, there were new rules. Young, English-educated Nayars were beginning to question the ancient traditions. This is what their education had created: a strong river of moral discontent that flowed throughout the state. It bubbled and frothed in places, at times flooding homes and soaking every Malayalee with shame. Youngsters loathed the practice of sambandam, ridiculing it in front of their grandmothers and uncles and holding them responsible for the confusion over land-rights, the castes and the system of matrilineality itself.*

*The third man my mother had slept with was one such rebel. My mother, afraid of his embarrassment, his temper and his expanding group of like-minded friends, accepted his conditions and did not see another man again. Veliyammaaman - my mother's brother, refused to join their ideals and sailed away in a ship to Burma, where they were recruiting young railway workers...*

*Kunjumalu edathi...get me some chukku vellom will you? It feels like there are thorns in my throat and I cannot swallow.*

*Old age. Every day I look out at those big iron gates to let Death in and take me. But even He will not come. Only illness does. Mmm, come, Kunjumalu edathi...yes, warm water. Thank you.*

*And look at her, this Kunjumalu edathi. Who would guess we are the best of friends, or that she is older than me by a few months? She came with me to this house when I got married, and she still works like a stubborn old mare. How we loved running through the various rooms and its secrets...she, a servant, and I, the newly-wed Nayar girl. I knew her long before, though, when her mother and my mother were friends. When I grew up, I was forced to wear a melmundu, a clean white cloth to cover my swelling breasts. Servant girls didn't need to, but this woman here, Kunjulamedathi, would mock me to tears. Sometimes hidden away in the dark of the pathayam, where the grains were stored, we would exchange our castes. I would wear her huge gold earrings and she would drape my melmundu on her bare upper body. It felt a relief to get it away from my chest in the heat. Sometimes Kunjumalu edathi stood behind me and held up my thick hair, while I fanned my torso and neck with that thin piece of cloth. I don't recollect when or how, but it was in that pathayam that we found her: Paarvanendu. Yes. I remember now. On a canvas sheet set in a huge frame, she lay sideways behind the heavy wooden dividers. Even the droopy cobwebs could not hide the brilliance of her gaze through that heap of paddy grains. How we struggled to get her out – after all we were young girls, barely thirteen. All that grating noise and the paddy raining outside the pathayam-door brought my mother and grandmother running to us. At first they scolded us, but then, just like you are listening to me right now, I listened to my grandmother narrate Paarvani - Paarvanendu's story. What a tale it was.*

*My grandmother taught me that when life presents you with situations that are beyond your control, you are allowed to make one choice. “No matter what you choose,” she had said, “there will be no one to thank you for it. Ela mullinmel veenaalum, mullu eleyinmel veenalum,*

*kedu ellakku thanne.”*

*Many hundreds of years ago, Paarvani had to make a choice. Three generations later, my mother stood at the crossroads again. And now, child, it might be my grand-daughter's turn. It might well be Ambilli's turn.*

**Start of Part 2****(17)****Mysore. August, 2004.**

7 am.

Ambilli stared at her mobile phone. For the fifth time that morning, she had cut off the sound of the alarm to 'snooze', as if that would make the dawn stay a little longer. Outside her window the sparrows chattered brightly and rapidly. A cycle whirred away, its bell tinkling on the bumpy road. An autorickshaw stuttered and squawked aloud, provoking some outraged chatter among the passers-by directly below her window. Then, just as it had started, the chatter died down. Ambilli's mind wandered, racing at times like she was in a strange dream, and yet sometimes still and content to be who she was. To be where she was, in this state between the end of sleep and waking up. She pulled the thick *rajai* closer to her chin, smiling. When was the last time she had felt this lazy, not wanting to get out of her bed. She stayed there with her eyelids still shut, waiting for more sounds.

The street outside was quiet now. Instead, the noises seemed to be coming from within the house - from the kitchen below. Ambilli blinked, now wide awake, and turned to look across the room. Madhu was not in her bed. Taking a deep breath, she exhaled, stretching her legs one last time under the warm and cosy blanket, before she finally tore herself away from it and sat upright.

Madhu and Ambilli had arrived the previous night in Bangalore after a 24-hour train-journey from Mumbai, and from there they had continued on a rough, three-hour ride in a state bus to

Mysore. Tired, their bones still creaking from the travel, they'd crashed into their beds without a word to each other.

Now in the morning light, Ambilli noticed the room was spacious and tidy. It was bare, but clean. Some of Madhu's signature-chocolate-wrapper-dolls hung next to the silent wind-chime, waiting for a hint of a breeze. Feeling for her slippers with her bare feet, Ambilli slipped them on and stood up, straightening her pyjamas and then her hair, and made her way down the creaky stairs where she thought Madhu was making coffee.

*“Nidde Aaita? Coffee Beka? Tea kuditira?”*

Ambilli gasped and almost jumped, startled out of her breath. In front of her stood a skinny little boy, perhaps eight or nine, in khaki shorts, his sharp collarbone and rib-case jutting out of his loose, hole-riddled and yellowing vest. There were scars on his knee and the oversize rubber-chappals he wore were caked with dry soil. She noticed mud-spray all over his calves, and shorts, which also needed some urgent hemming. But most spectacular of all was the boy's wide smile and his bright, friendly eyes. Sensing Ambilli's fright, he laughed even louder, then patted his chest that made a hollow sound: “Husain, Husain. *Neevu?*”

Ambilli's hands instinctively flew to her own top to check if her buttons were done up.

Reassured, she hesitantly smiled. “Where's Madhu?” she asked, gesturing with her open thumb and fist, trying to recall the most universal south-Indian sign for the Who-Where-How-Why-When questions.

Husain shook his head. *“Madhu-medam illa.... belige hogidaare...nimm hesre yaenu, medam?”*



Another question. Ambilli plonked herself down on the second-but-last step and decided to try and communicate with the boy. She felt reassured – now that she realised the boy did know Madhu – that she was not in the wrong house after all.

“Err...Tamil? English?”

The boy shook his head, pouting dramatically and flipping his open hand sideways. Suddenly his eyes lit up again. “*Hindi? AmitabhBachchan flim?*” he asked brightly.

Ambilli laughed. “Hindi! Yes!” She held out her hand. The boy shook it and nodded, as if they had agreed on a life-saving decision. “*Hindi-swalpa, Kannada-swalpa, English-swalpa. Okey-a?*”

“OK,” replied Ambilli smiling, amused by the way the boy simply took charge of the situation. So they were going to converse in a little of everything, and hopefully understand one another. “But first,” she gestured again with her thumb and index finger, “*swalpa* coffee, please?”

Husain grinned, giving her the thumbs-up sign and excitedly nodding his head from side-to-side as if to say 'well done'. He disappeared into the kitchen, promptly bringing her some steaming hot coffee in a stainless steel tumbler and glass, and some *jeera*-biscuits hastily arranged on a little plate.

By the time Madhu returned that afternoon, Ambilli had freshened up and she and Husain had exchanged a lot of information. Ambilli had learnt, for instance, that his mother was officially

the cook in Madhu's rental accommodation but that Husain sometimes dropped in to help. That he worked as a tea-boy near the Chamundi-Nandi Hills' temple-town in the evenings, and went to night school there. He also loved watching Hindi 'flims' in his spare time, and that is where he'd picked up his Hindi from. When Ambilli asked about his father, he smiled again and shook his head. *Illa*, he said. And went on to add, very matter-of-factly, that he was in fact an orphan whom his mother, a Hindu, had chosen to adopt and bring up.

“Aha!” sang Madhu as she walked in, playfully patting Husain on his head. “So the two of you have been busy too.” Madhu rattled on in fluent Kannada with the boy, asking him about his studies and whether his mother could make it the next day. Finally, Husain shook his head sideways again and waved at Ambilli, “*Hogebittu bartini, medam,*” and ran out of the open doors. “He says he'll see you soon,” smiled Madhu.

“Wow, he's taken a liking to you already,” she added after he was out of sight.

Ambilli laughed. “I guessed so. And where did you disappear so early in the morning, Madhu-*medam?* she asked, imitating Husain.

“Well, I'd promised Anand I'd see him off before he left. Then I went off to see one of my lecturers at the university...to ask if and how I could use your help in my projects...”

“That's great! When can we start? What do I have to do?”

“First, we're going to get out and have some lunch. I'm famished.”

The two girls had barely got to the main street when a woman crossing the road waved to Madhu. Madhu waved back energetically, and the two exchanged pleasantries as if there was no traffic on the busy road between them. Ambilli smiled to herself. This was so like Madhu, she thought, checking to her left and right in case motorists were laughing at them. But no one bothered. Finally, Madhu waved goodbye to the woman and, putting an arm around Ambilli, continued walking cheerfully. “That is Husain's mother and our cook, Rajeshwari Amma.

I have asked her to make some *ragi mudde* and *sambhar* for us tomorrow. Mmm...my mouth is already watering...”

Ambilli looked behind again, shielding her eyes against the afternoon sun. “It is so admirable, isn't it? I mean... in this age when the two religions have such a thin line of tolerance between them? I got goosebumps when Husain told me he has a Hindu mother who adopted him...”

Madhu nodded her head. “It is strange to us, because we are fortunate people. We come from sheltered families and lead well-protected lives. But in my opinion, when you have to change your whole identity just to survive and lead a decent life, nothing you do will be strange.”

“Who do you mean...this lady...our cook?”

“Rajeshwari Amma. A devadasi by birth, and a woman of many talents. Singer, dancer, and a wonderful human being. Sometimes when I have her by my side, even if she is doing her own thing, she feels so pious to me that I just *know* nothing in the world will go wrong.”

“Wow, really?!” Ambilli exclaimed. “I've never come across a devadasi before.”

“You probably never will. Of course, at least not in Bombay or, as they call it now, Mumbai. And since the Act banning them from all performances was passed a couple of decades ago, most of them have taken to a life of prostitution. 'Sacred sex workers', someone recently labelled them.”

They crossed the road and reached a small vegetarian hotel, where Madhu handed the menu over to Ambilli and took her seat, still talking.

“As a respectable devadasi, say, a few hundred years ago, she would probably have owned a few temples, or have a few roads, cities or at least a few *ragas* named after her. She would have had a daughter of her own from one of her many 'spiritual' visitors, whom she would initiate into the same profession, and a Guru and many disciples. Or, she would have used her power to defend other Devadasis, like Bangalore Nagarathnamma did, by translating the entire 17th century-erotic verses of Muddupalani's *Radhika Santwanam*...and fighting for it to get published in the 1900s. Rajeshwari Amma, instead, adopted a Muslim baby. A boy...”

A young waiter approached their table. Without looking at the menu, Madhu ordered a rice-plate for herself. Ambilli pointed to Mysore-masala dosa on the menu. The waiter returned to the kitchen to place the order. Madhu smiled and shook her head. “You are a typical Mumbaiite, aren't you? Ordering a dosa wherever you go.”

Ambilli smiled back. She put the menu aside and asked Madhu to go on. “You didn't finish Rajeshwari Amma's story ...”

Madhu brushed her aside, grinning and rubbing her hands together. “*Arre*, Ambilli...wait until you taste her food tomorrow...”

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*1978. The dance teacher.*

*A sore toe is what I mostly recall when I think of her... my seventy-plus dance teacher.*

*I don't remember her name. In fact, I never knew what it was. To me, and to everyone else who was acquainted with her, she was simply called 'dance-maami'. Her small frame wrapped in nine-yard Matunga-Lakshmi-Silk koshaa-sarees – always the small-checked dark greens or deep maroons with thick yellow borders – she looked like a comfortable tortoise wherever she went. Thick 'soda-bottle' lenses sat on the bridge of her nose, which itself was pierced on either side with star-shaped diamond nose-studs that sparkled with mischief. On hot days, she walked under a big black umbrella, making her the perfect 'tam-bram' figure for a caricaturist.*

*The dance maami lived close to the large south-Indian colony where I lived, as did dozens of other families with daughters under the age of 10. Every day, milk cookers sounded off their whistles from the fifty or so open kitchen windows, acting like afternoon-roosters to mark the end of the siesta hour. That was when my dance teacher walked slowly past the big iron gates. The watchman would be smirked at as if it were a custom, though I suspect that: had he not been a lowly Gurkha she probably would have stopped to ask him about his welfare. Or whether he had any young girls she could teach.*

*At random, she would visit one of the ground or first floor flats (she couldn't climb many steps). Sampling nothing more than freshly brewed 'filter coffee' there, she would nod her head, in approval of its strength and then ask for her students to be called. In the time she would take to drain her hot drink, word of her presence would spread quickly through the sleepy building. Soon, footsteps would rain down the stairs and in through the front door. Dance-maami's students. Bundled in their little hands were pairs of crude-sounding 'selangai' or leather-ghungroo-anklets for their feet – weighing at least 800 grams each - jingling with energy.*

*I must have been five then. It was to wear those lively ghungroos that I lied to my family every day, and stood among the half-dozen girls my age in front of the old Bharatanatyam teacher. Of the others, some were there by choice, some forced to attend the lessons by their mothers or doting grandparents, one or two even rudely ruffled and dragged out of their sleep. Seated cross-legged on the cool mosaic floor of a well ventilated room, dance-maami would eye all her students with a mock frown, her worn out brown leather pouch still wedged under a sweaty armpit. Without shifting her gaze away from the children, she would place the pouch in front of her on the floor and plunge her free hand inside to remove a crumpled handkerchief or two, a tiny purse, a little notebook that listed the names of her students and what they owed her, and finally, a lean, six-inch wooden rod.*

*“Taiyya-tai, taiyya-tai..., taiyya-tai, taiyya-tai...” her strong, almost masculine but well-trained voice would order our feet. And the latter would humbly obey. Tap. Click. Tap. Click. The wooden rod would beat to a rhythm on the tiled mosaic floor, and then onto another tiny piece of wood. Selang-selang-selang, the bells on*

*our feet would dance to the beat.*

*It was that tap-tap-tapping of the rod that unnerved most of us. Dance-maami's alert ears were tuned to our ghunghroos for any false rhythm or missed-step, so alert that the wooden rod would at once spring to life and land hard on the defaulter's big toe. About twenty minutes into the class, age would catch up with the old woman and her head would begin to nod with sleep. The lips would pout at an angle, the big eye would be half-shut revealing the white through her bifocals, and the rod...still tap-tapping with the kinetic energy of the dance... would slip out of her hands and land on one unlucky toe again.*

*I loved to dance. And I loved my dance-maami regardless of how talented or clumsy she was. But I had erred in that I had grown from a rhythm-defaulter into one of her favourite students in a very short time. I had progressed enough to be chosen to train for the traditional Arangeteram – where a student performs on stage in front of her first live audience after seven years of Bharatanatyam practice.*

*But of course, there were the unpaid fees. Dance-maami had been very accommodating for so long. But she couldn't be generous for the next seven years as well. Eventually, she asked to see my parents and I began to avoid her classes. For the past six months, to my family I was merely a 'spectator' at a friends' house – in whosoever's house Bharatanatyam was being taught that day. One of the mothers had offered me a spare set of anklets on one such afternoon. They were shiny, brass bells stitched together carefully and tightly against a well-padded blue denim and leather strap. I had fallen for them instantly. “Go on, wear them and*



*dance,” the nice Auntie had encouraged. I did just that, and six months had already gone by.*

*The truth was that I was forbidden to dance by my family, but they didn't once imagine that I would lie to them. After all, “she is only five,” my mother would say, defending my repeated wish to go and 'watch' against my father's protests. “Let her go...it's not that she's going to become a dancer by simply watching,” she argued. After the lesson my borrowed set of ghungroos would be strapped along with a friends' pair, so I could use them the next time ...*

*One morning, when my unsuspecting father opened the front door to a very concerned-looking old woman wearing a nine-yard koshaa paduvai, I knew my secret was out. It was the last I would get to see of my dance teacher. I wonder now, after all these years, if she is still alive*

“Not bad at all, Ambilli...how long have you had this?”

Ambilli turned around sharply, startled. The move caused a piercing crick up her neck and she winced in pain, annoyed. “Aaa-Ouch! Ouch! What do you ...? When did you come, Madhu? And don't you EVER do that to me again!” She turned to look away, still massaging her neck and shoulder, while Madhu came round to face her and apologised. “I'm *so* sorry, Ambilli, I really didn't mean to! Can I get you something to make it better? I shouldn't have sneaked up from behind you like that. Sorry, dear.”

“It'll get better. Don't worry,” said Ambilli calmly, still massaging the back of her neck but

laughing now. "It's alright, don't look so worried. It doesn't suit you... that expression..."

"I came upstairs to tell you that lunch is ready. Rajeshwari Amma has made us some *ragi mudde*, as promised. And then you were so engrossed in writing I just had to peep ....it didn't read too personal to me, from what little I have seen...and I read all about your dance-*maami*."

"It's from my personal journal, yes. Am I too possessive about it, no. But had you simply asked we could have avoided this pain in my neck," teased Ambilli.

"I wasn't joking about what I said earlier about your writing, Ambilli...I used to be an editor you know... Hey! You could write a novel!" exclaimed Madhu suddenly, her eyes twinkling again.

"Now you're being silly. I can smell some lovely food now, come on. Let's go, Madhu."

"No wait, I'm serious. Look, here's the plan. You and me, we go to the library together to research and collect information. I'll write up my thesis while you use the same material to cook up a novel. I'm sure you can do it, Ambilli."

"Hullo...wait, not so fast. This journal here," said Ambilli, laying her hand on her notebook, "...this is my life, my story. I can't make a novel out of air...there has to be a story in it."

"There will be...make it a short story then. One story first. Then two. Then three. Okay...," said Madhu getting up from her seat and walking towards the stairs. "We've talked enough about this now. You think it over tonight. Tomorrow, we'll give it a shot. Just accompany me to the library this evening. You can decide later what you want to do..."

True to her word, Madhu didn't bring up the subject for the rest of that day. Rajeshwari Amma had left by the time the two girls walked down to the kitchen table, leaving them to relish the steamed, savoury-millet-dumplings in a spicy dal, rich with beans and root vegetables, alone by themselves.

“Mmm...I like this. I've never had anything like this before,” said Ambilli with her mouth full of the sticky dumpling.

“You do? Not everyone likes it you know...not the first time at least. You either hate it or you love it...”

“Like Marmite?”

“What's Marmite?”

“Ugh...it's something Manu had made me try in London. But never mind...this *ragi mudde* is good.”

“In that case we can have more and more of this. I'll be sure to tell Rajeshwari Amma tomorrow...”

And as Madhu began to narrate the nutritional benefits of the recipe... about how millet seeds are first soaked and sprouted and pounded into a fine flour, and how the dumplings attain their stickiness, Ambilli's mind drifted to Rajeshwari Amma's life.

*What must it feel like, she wrote in her journal that evening, to be born a dancer, and then to live a life doing everything else but that.*

***From Ambilli's journal...***

*Samjhauta. Compromise. The dictionary defines it as: coming to a mutual understanding by an effort taken by both the disputing parties. To meet each other halfway. To reach an agreement.*

*That is a lie. Every time I've heard this word since my childhood, it has only implied a single side. My mother 'compromised' her job to look after her family. My bright cousin 'compromised' a scholarship-funded education abroad as her ill father wanted to see her get married before his death. She now supports her husband's ailing old parents, and tutors children at home; her scholarship certificate is prominently displayed in a golden frame on a wall. Samjhauta.*

*Marriage is a compromise, my mother tells me often: you have to let go of some of your interests, you have to accommodate some of his. On her twentieth marriage anniversary, when a guest had casually asked my mother to play her favourite audio CD, she realised she had no song. Listening to my father's preferred music all those years, Amma had simply 'forgotten' her own. When she tells me this, often, many times, I sense in her voice not the satisfaction that comes from an agreement over a couple's differing tastes in music, but the shadow of an unidentifiable, irretrievable loss. Compromise: You let go of yourself, a little bit at a time, until you can no longer remember who you really were. This, in my opinion, is compromise.*

*I have never seen or heard of any of my male cousins or my father make compromises. Of identities or interests that they have had to forego for their wives. Except... perhaps, now, Manu. His marriage to me, out of love. And yet, with none of the physical intimacy that is supposed to exist between a husband and his wife...*

*No. I will not allow this compromise.*

(18)

**Mysore. August, 2004.**

“...our flat got burgled last night.”

“What?! Oh no, Manu... Are you alright? Where are you now?”

“At the office. I'm still a little shaken, but fine, otherwise. Lost the camera, our savings box, which by the way was full to the brim. It's not the money, you know.... But to think that a complete stranger broke into the house, entered every room and emptied every cabinet and drawer onto the floor – and he also left his muddy shoe prints everywhere – I'm... not really looking forward to go back home this evening.”

“What did the police say? You did inform them, right?”

“Yes, and it was an interesting conversation, Manu laughed, continuing, “According to the policeman, it was our *toran* – the one that's hanging out over the front door - that lured the burglar in.”

“Eh? What does he mean the *toran* lured him in?”

“Well, apparently only Hindu-Indians living in the UK are known to adorn their front doors with these ethnic looking prints and images of the elephant-god, and... again, according to the policeman, 'if the house is occupied by an Indian, there must be gold in the house...is what the burglar must have thought,' before he broke in.”

“So?”

“I know, it doesn't make any sense to me either. This *toran* itself was not made of gold – just a fading patchwork of coloured cloth and cheap tinsel. Anyway, don't think about it now. We might as well say goodbye to what we've lost.”

“You sound really low, Manu. Are you alright? Do you...do you want me to come back?”

There was a moment's silence at the other end, then Manu relaxed. “I would love it if you would return, Ambilli, but only if you won't ever talk about going back again alone.”

Ambilli didn't reply. She had been feeling the pangs of separation too. Her relationship with Manu was one she could never explain to herself. It was he who proposed to her first, an offer she did not decline. Like a true friend, he let her have her space when she asked for it. Every alternate day over the past four months they had spoken over the phone, updating each other on events and information about their lives 5000 miles apart. In her heart Ambilli had realised that they had indeed grown closer, yet the answer she was seeking from her past remained elusive. And now that Manu had uttered those words, she suddenly felt responsible for bringing this situation upon them both. She felt guilty, annoyed that the burglary had to happen while she was away; annoyed that a policeman in England should tell them how to decorate their house and thus wash his hands of his duty to them and even the crime itself. She swallowed hard, not knowing what she could tell Manu to make him feel better. He was silent too, searching for something else to talk about.

From her window, Ambilli spotted Husain and his friends playing cricket on the open ground nearby. He waved to her. She smiled and waved back.

“Madhu wants me to write,” Ambilli finally said. “I thought she was pulling my leg at first, but she seems serious.”

Manu suddenly sounded interested. “Why not? I think it's a great idea, Ambu. I've seen

your journal...well... okay, some of it, when you had just started – you know I'm a lazy reader, don't you. And, who knows, it might take your mind off things that are bothering you. I-I think you must give it a shot.”

“It's not going to be that easy. You don't even know about my past...”

“And I don't want to know,” he replied calmly. “Not unless you want me to. All I'm saying is, there's something in your life that needs closure. You need to forget - or forgive - something, or someone in your past and unless you do that you will not be able to move on. *We* will not be able to move on. Call me selfish, but, if Madhu's research helps you find a voice, I'd just say listen to it...”

“*Madhu's research?* How do you...? Wait a minute, Manu. Have you been talking to Madhu?”

Manu did not lie. Ambilli learnt that the two had conspired to get her to open up 'whatever it takes'. She knew it was only out of their concern and affection for her but she felt cheated nevertheless. Or perhaps she was angry with herself that they had had to do this. Once again she felt the need to run away, rather than confront the devils that were nagging her. Taking nothing with her but her journal and a pen, Ambilli walked out of the house. She walked for a long time, past the open grounds where Husain and his friends were playing, past the derelict bungalows that lay open to wandering stray dogs and people. A school of parrots flew overhead like a warning and, within seconds, it began to pour.

Clutching her notebook under her *dupatta*, Ambilli rushed towards the entrance of an empty bungalow, which was now filling up with more locals seeking shelter from the rain. She waited, her hands crossed against the journal on her chest, still as a pole. She



thought of Manu, and how he might have spied her at the bus-stop when they were very young...eventually asking for her hand in marriage six years later. How, on the second morning of their honeymoon, he had caressed her face gently, her hair, her arms, thinking she was asleep. Ambilli had felt guilty for her pretense all day, even as they walked along the beautiful tea estates of the hill station, Munnar. She had resolved to put away her defenses for Manu. *He is my husband*, she had reminded herself. But, that night when they lay together in bed, Manu had begun to inch closer and closer to her. She had softly blurted out: Manu...I have my period. S-sorry. He had instantly sat up and apologised, insisting that he should have known better, wanting to know if he could make her more comfortable in some way.

The rain continued to pour. A woman and her little girl jostled for space among the others under the broken asbestos sheet overhead. The girl complained of water entering her eyes. The mother, drenched to the skin, smiled at her daughter and wiped her face with the end of her wet saree. She moved her closer to Ambilli. "There. *Illi nintuko, kane*. Stand here, next to this nice aunty. This will pass soon."

*This will pass soon*. Over three months after her marriage, Ambilli had finally found the courage to tell Manu that she needed more time. She recalled his calm expression when she confessed that she had lied to him on the honeymoon night. That she didn't know why, but her body seemed to recoil at his touch. He had stopped her mid-sentence and said that it was okay. "I understand," he had said, "...don't worry, it probably is a natural phase...this will pass soon." He had then held her by her shoulders. "Remember, we are friends first. I'll be ready whenever you are," he had winked, grinning. Ambilli recalled how she had wanted to fly into his arms then, but she had stood as still as a wooden statue. *When? When will it pass?*

She felt a tug on her dress. It was the girl. “Aunty, your book is so soaked now, will it tear apart?” Ambilli looked at the girl, pursing her lips in mock-disappointment and nodded. The mother laughed. She told Ambilli that they were really from Bangalore, and just visiting her mother in Mysore for a few weeks. Just then a car drove close to the gate and briefly honked. “Nana! Nana!” the girl shrieked in delight, rushing out in the rain. Without turning to say goodbye, the mother followed after her child. They sat in the car and drove off.

Ambilli smiled at their hurried rescue from the rains, which seemed to have intensified. She thought of Bangalore – her carefree days with Fiona and Amruta and Shashi.

Shashi.

The very name made Ambilli shudder. She shut her eyes, wishing the noise of the furious rain would drown the chaos in her head. She felt she had blamed herself enough, and that if anyone else deserved a share of punishment it would have to be Shashi. And yet the very thought of crossing his path once more disgusted her.

A cackle of boyish laughter made Ambilli turn around. Husain and his friends were drenched and dripping wet. Throwing their cricket equipment aside, the boys rushed forward, racing each other to jump in and out of the puddles of water and annoy those standing nearby.

“Ay, Akka!” Husain exclaimed when he saw Ambilli among the huddled crowd and ran

to her. “Umbrella *illava?* ...wait-*madri*, okay?” he said all at once, gesturing her to stay where she was and not allowing her to answer any of his questions. Soon, he was back with a huge black umbrella he had borrowed from one of the helpful locals. “*Chalo, Akka,*” he said taking her hand with an authority that Ambilli thought was greatly amusing.

“It's alright, Husain, we'll wait till it stops to rain,” she said laughing. But Husain had already pulled her away from under the roof of the bungalow. “This rain,” he said, pointing to the clouds, “...very bad for *Bombai* girls. Cold...you will get.”

The heavy unseasonal rainfall had stalled the evening traffic and it was also getting dark. It was too late to refuse Husain's well-meaning demands now; he was already pretending to be Ambilli's tour-guide.

“...And that *roadu* there,” he shouted above the pouring rain, “...Srirangapatna. So many stories in that place...”

“*Achcha*, so you know about Srirangapatna and Mysore? Who tells you all these stories?”

“My Amma – she know all about Mysuru-history. Wodeyar *rajavu*, Haider Ali, Tippu...”

“Tell me, Husain, who is your hero?”

“Hero-*va?* Haider Ali! Doubte-*illa!*”

“Why?”

“Haider Ali – very clever, Akka. Like a fox, see what he did to Khande Rao? My favourite story...”

“Sorry, Husain,” Ambilli laughed, half-embarrassed. “You'll have to first tell me who was Khande Rao – very poor in history, your Akka.”

The dark clouds that caused the downpour had now drifted away. So had Ambilli's reasons for her brief withdrawal. Husain animatedly narrated the stories of the Wodeyar princes that his mother had brought him up with. The story of Haider Ali and how he was adopted by the then Maharaja for 10,000 varahas, and how Haider, when he grew up, turned against them in the most shrewd manner; how the Maharaja's most trusted minister Khande Rao tried to give him a taste of his own medicine and failed, ending up in an iron cage on a diet of rice and milk for the rest of his imprisoned life.

“Why, do you know? You see,” continued the nine-year-old laughing, completely oblivious to the fact that he had reduced – or raised – one of the most significant periods in India's history to a Bollywoodised play of pretend characters. “the Maharaja *parivaara* wanted Khande Rao to be treated with care as he was their most loyal subject...and Haider Ali had assured them...” At this Husain swelled his chest and altered his voice to that of a mock-ruffian: “I will look after him as endearingly as I would look after my own pet parrot!...”

Madhu's suggestion that she accompany her to the library, and Manu's insistence that she find an outlet for her nagging guilt, could not have come at a better time. Now, Husain's constant chatter and enthusiasm had not only succeeded in distracting her from her broody moods but also, for the first time in many years, Ambilli was beginning to engage in the world outside herself. She was not sure if writing would help her, or if she would ever be able to forget Shashi, but perhaps it would enable her to start a new life with Manu.

“What time tomorrow?” she asked Madhu that night.

“What time for what, Ambilli?”

“What time can we leave for your library?”

Madhu threw down the book that she was reading and let out a whoop of joy. “You won't regret it, I promise,” she said squeezing her tightly.

“Maybe I won't,” said Ambilli, returning the warm hug. Later she went back to Madhu's desk and borrowed a new notebook, dividing it into two sections. In this new, second half, she penned the title for her first short story: *The unfortunate parrot of Srirangapatna...*

(19)

**Mysore. August, 2004.**

“No woman can live in her mother's shadow. The sooner mothers and daughters realise this, the happier they will be.” Rajeshwari Amma smiled as she broke open the last pea-pod, deftly pushed out three glistening peas with her thumb into the waiting aluminum colander, and threw the empty pod aside along with the rest of the discarded ones.

Madhu and Ambilli sat next to their devadasi cook, helping her clean the vegetables as they interviewed her about her past. Ambilli, after much deliberation, had asked Rajeshwari Amma why she had adopted a son and not a daughter (assuming quite correctly that girls continue the devadasi tradition, not boys), and this had been her somewhat-cryptic reply. The girls looked at each other, not sure of what to make of it. Rajeshwari Amma continued, the natural dancer in her emoting with her eyes as she explained. “My mother used to say: 'the kind Goddess has packed a lot of complexities in the female sex. We are *shakti* - power, yet we are gentle and compassionate. We have the humility to accept what cannot be ours, yet we can be fiercely jealous.’” She continued, smiling softly, “Perhaps you girls are still too young to recognise this...but, at some point in your lives, you will.”

While the girls still looked on waiting for more, Rajeshwari Amma collected the peas from their hands into the aluminium pot, rinsing them along with some rice and dal. “I grew up with women all around me, so I know. Mothers and daughters are natural rivals of each other. If left unchecked, there grows a bitterness in their hearts that can sometimes make them forget how much they really need each other. Why, not only dancers and devadasis, second-generation-singers and actors too are tormented by their mothers' successes - or failures - wherever they go.

Are they not?" Squatting down in front of Madhu and Ambilli, Rajeshwari Amma then placed her knee on the wooden base of the crude-looking *aruvamani* – an upside down sickle-knife instrument – chopping the onions and potatoes into big chunky pieces, along with some carrots and beans. She put all the ingredients into a big pressure cooker, added a spoonful of turmeric and salt and then covered it with the lid.

"I was fortunate: my mother did not want me to have any of this. Yes, she let me walk with her for a while, but then she let me go. I was free to choose..." said Rajeshwari Amma, switching on the gas and wiping her wet hands on the loose ends of her cotton saree. Leaning on the wall behind her, she continued. "My mother trained me in the art of music and dance herself, but the new laws drawn up soon after India's independence in 1947 forbade the practice of dedicating girls or dancers to temples. Temple dances and dancers were both banned...and look what happened to all that competition between mothers and daughters? Both of them landed up as prostitutes and sex workers. Those who had sons had a lesser worry, but they had to struggle just as well, in order to keep their fatherless sons out of trouble. Perhaps at that very young age my destiny was written for me. I vowed never to have any children. I feared the wrath of the Goddess, yet I stayed away from my community and offered myself into another kind of service. As a cook, as a dance teacher, sometimes as a nanny."

"Ten years ago - at an age when most grey-haired citizens celebrate sixty years of their life - I was hired as an ayah to look after a pregnant Muslim girl. The girl was very weak, she only had her ailing grandmother to look after her. Strange are the ways of the Goddess...the poor old woman died in her sleep within a few months. The young mother died soon after, leaving two-day old Husain in my hands. There was no one I could take him to. But... I knew I had saved enough – at least he would not starve if he was with me. I decided to keep him..."

While the old pressure cooker rattled noisily, steam and aroma escaping its vents in regular bursts of energy, Rajeshwari Amma kept up with its rhythm - roasting and then grinding a spoonful of chana dal and urad dal, an inch-long piece of cinnamon, some fenugreek and coriander seeds, and turmeric, Madhu and Ambilli her only audience. “It was the best a woman from the devadasi community could have asked for. Deliverance. Husain, an orphaned, tiny little boy then hardly measuring the length of my elbow, gave me that without my even having to try.”

The afternoon with Rajeshwari Amma transported Ambilli to the many hot afternoons spent – it seemed so long ago – in the company of her grandmother in Kerala. Of the telling and retelling of stories and legends, her grandmother seated on the verandah, while the quiet Kunjumalu *edathi* went about her daily chores that soon brought in the dusk. Ambilli's eyes would follow the frail servant as she walked to and fro, absorbing every word that her *Achchamma* had narrated, correcting her at times, adding some detail, even urging her to go on. And Ambilli would be full of questions. Just like she was today. *How did the devadasi tradition originate? Why had it been so difficult for these women? Why were their stories meant to be hushed?* But for now, though, she thought it best to keep them to herself. Madhu looked pensive too. Madhu had known Rajeshwari Amma for over a year, but this was the first time she heard about Husain's past as well.

Rajeshwari Amma, in the meantime, had cooked the ground powders in a dark tamarind sauce and was now mixing the fresh aromatic paste with the cooked dal, rice, and vegetables. “*Bisi Bele Bhath*. I hope you will like it,” she said, without turning her head to the girls, as if she were talking to the cooking pans and not to them. “Sit down and eat. It tastes best this way...*bisi-bisi...hot-hot.*”



That night for a long time Madhu sat alone in her room. Rajeshwari Amma had left soon after making their dinner. Ambilli had finished her bi-weekly phone updates with Manu; it was when she walked up the stairs to get her journal that she saw Madhu deep in thought. She sat next to her, touching her shoulder lightly. Madhu shifted a little, letting Ambilli have more space.

“Tell me something about the devadasis, Madhu...why were they banned from dancing at the temples? Do you think we can see their dance again somewhere?”

“*Sadir. Sadir* was the name of their dance,” replied Madhu, almost apologetically. Then she sighed and sat up straight. “We Hindus have been a strange lot. Some of us are atheists, some of us theists without a god. We love to philosophise about renunciation and the ability to not-have any desire. We take spirituality to the extremes: we bargain with the idol sitting inside the temple, offer it money and sweets as bribe in return for a favour. 'Let me pass in my exams and I'll offer you a coconut. Help seal my business contract and I'll feed ten hungry cows. Give me children, and I'll offer you my first-born...' From what I have read so far, and understood from Rajeshwari Amma, this is how the community was born, although I'm sure there may be many other versions or explanations for their origin. So girls were simply offered to the goddess, to the services of the temple - as early as the third- or the sixth-century - as exclusive temple dancers, as wives of the gods. *Nitya-sumangali* – forever married. As they could never become widows, their presence in the Hindu society was most auspicious. A devadasi girl was taught to sing and dance and, when she attained puberty, the mother and grandmother arranged a suitable brahmin and high-class 'patron' who would be her sexual partner. In return, this patron filled the temple hundis with his riches...”

“Something like the Geisha...?”

“Well, yes and no. A devadasi was tied to the services of the temple...cleaning, making garlands for the lords and so on, unlike the Geisha who entertained her guests. But both were skilled

artists in music and dance,” replied Madhu.

“There is evidence now that, during the reign of the Cholas – sometime around the tenth century – entire streets around the Brihadeeshwara temple in Tanjore were lined with houses especially built for these women. Four hundred houses for four hundred devadasis. Imagine the kind of money in those times. And these temple dancers also received generous allowances. *That* was the kind of almost glamorous image and respect that they enjoyed. What happened to them after the Islamic invasions in the North...?”

Madhu stopped abruptly and shook her head. Where should she begin...? She recalled the time when, during the course of her own research, she had first read about the Muslim and Turkish invaders who attacked Delhi from the tenth century onwards, and moved South to continue their exploits. How Mohammad bin Tughlaq's ascension to the throne in 1325 had hastened the massacre of the Hindus and their culture: temples were looted and destroyed, the terror and threats lasting for over three hundred years of a tough battle between both the armies. Madhu relived the recent shock and disbelief she had experienced on learning all this history, and more so the deep feeling of injustice on realising that her school had never included these details in the course of her study. Perhaps it was in their interest to remain neutral – if that was indeed their intention – but the fact remained that it had ended up being a one-sided version of history. Something that continued to this day. Had the ups and downs of the Indian subcontinent been recorded early in the minds of its children, she believed, they would have grown up to be more tolerant and more accommodating of each other's differences in cultural and religious practices. Much unlike the present age, where Hindus and Muslims were still being judgemental and repeating old attitudes, and rioting over minor issues. Becoming a fanatic, whichever side you were on, was thus very easy. She shuddered.

“Well, what happened to them...you suddenly stopped.”

“No-nothing. I just remembered one of the dark chapters of Indian history that we never studied in school....umm, where was I? Yes. The foreign invasions ... the majority of our rich temples across the country were destroyed. There were no patrons for the 'wives of gods' anymore, neither was there any audience for the dancing girls. Gradually the devadasi community began to diminish. Hardly any remained dedicated to music and dance...like Rukmini Arundale of Chennai and later, Balasaraswathi Amma, who revived the dying Sadir and renamed it Bharatanatyam. Odissi and Mohiniattam all the other forms were born in the same way.”

“Wait a minute, Madhu...Mohiniattam came from Sadir?”

“Of course, yes. You've heard of the 19th century King of Travancore - Swati Thirunal, haven't you?”

“Yes...that he was a great composer of music...”

“Well, one legend says that Swati Thirunal also had a secret consort... rather, his muse: a devadasi in Tanjore named Saughandhavalli. When the scandal eventually broke in Tanjore, Saughandhavalli already had a palace to stay in Kerala. *Mohiniattam* is the name for his music compositions and her dance. Come to think of it, it was only in the 1930s that Mohiniattam finally found a place again in Kerala's reputable Kalamandalam institute, and the dance is being taught there once more by renowned teachers.”

“Wow,” whistled Ambilli. “So much that is around us is taken for granted...”

“It is, Ambilli. But it is what one chooses to do with the facts that really matters in the end. You could, for instance, continue listening to M S Subbalakshmi's *suprabhatam* dutifully every morning like my mother does, or even fill your heart with Lata Mangeshkar's melodious voice through your CD or MP3 players. Or you could listen to them *knowing* that both these artistes come from the devadasi lineage themselves.”

Ambilli's eyes widened on hearing their names. “Really?”

Madhu smiled. “There. The next time you listen to either of them...your view about them and their music, won't it be different?”

The girls were silent for a while. Ambilli couldn't remember the last time she had seen Madhu in such a contemplative mood. Suddenly, she thought she knew why. But Madhu continued.

“...like the chicken and the egg equation, I think we will never know what eventually tilted the balance among the devadasis. Was it a lack of dedication to their music and dance, or was it a lack of appreciation for the same from their so-called patrons? At what point did the sex - which was a seldom-mentioned activity necessary to fulfil their physical needs as well as promote them as artists – turn into a source of lust, labelling them all as prostitutes? Then again, at what point did the money gain more importance over their primary duties? What turned them from servants of gods to “sacred” sex workers...all this is interconnected, Ambilli. Everything.”

Ambilli smiled and laid a gentle hand on Madhu's shoulder. “It was Rajeshwari Amma's story, wasn't it? It's reminded you of your own life – your divorce – and of Anand, and what your mother always keeps warning you about,” asked Ambilli softly.

Madhu was quiet. She smiled, without lifting her eyes to face Ambilli's. “You know me very well now...that is not good news for me.” Ambilli waited for her to go on.

“You know Ambilli,” said Madhu, finally shrugging her shoulders and coming back slowly to her analysing, practical self, “...there was this academician whose lecture I once attended. It was about the Ramayana. This man had scrutinised and examined his subject for well over half of his life...he was so passionate about it, and all this was evident from his talk itself. At the end of the lecture, I was curious and asked him if he could ever bring himself to worship Rama, the avatar he knows so well. And the professor smiled. 'No,' he replied, straightaway. I guess... it's the same with me. As a twenty-first-century woman in India I can admit to myself – and I know I'm not a courtesan or a devadasi - that I do have certain emotional and physical needs, just like men have always admitted so casually to their friends. Our ancient literature and history - that I'm studying - show that our women in the pre-Victorian era did it too...without having to say so

in half as many words. Queens, courtesans, *nautch* girls, even devadasis: they had the means to fulfil their bodily desires, they were all free to choose or reject their partners... and no parent spoon-fed them with guilt for fear of what society would say.

“I envy Rajeshwari Amma – that she had a community to fall back on, yet she had the courage to turn her back on them. That she passed the prime of her life with dignity, and nobody can raise a finger to question her.”

Madhu finally looked up at Ambilli. Headlights from the odd car passing below their window threw eerie shadows on both their faces. “My mother is both right and wrong. It's not mandatory that I should agree with her...not *in front of her* at least...if you know what I mean. She's right that a woman needs a male companion. But I don't agree with the marriage part of it. Ambilli, it takes a tough heart and thick skin to stand up to the world. I'd love to pretend that I have both, but sometimes, even I can't lie to myself. And that's the time... when I miss Anand the most.”

**From Ambilli's journal...**



*Mysore. August, 2004. Ramaswamy Naidu, 'Three Sudra Girls', oil.*

*Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, by Partha Mitter. Late 17th-/early 18th-century painting.*

*It's her gaze that always catches my eye. The girl on the left, the only one with the white-and-gold-bordered mel mundu. Her eyes seem to want to say something... no, a lot to me. She looks unsure and timid, silent yet defiant.*

*Clasped in her half-fisted hand is a golden kashumala. A tiny jewellery box – no doubt, with the most precious ornaments – lies open in front of the three girls.*

*The girl in the centre is carving something... a message, perhaps? I can see a palm-leaf manuscript in the hands of the third girl. The mood is serious, like the three are plotting something together. What could they be up to?*

(20)

**Mysore. August, 2004.**

Three days had passed since Ambilli had seen the 17th century oil painting. Madhu had teased her that one of the girls in the painting resembled Ambilli (“...that sad, moon-faced, confused-looking girl on the left”), and had kept a photocopy of the page to prove it to her. The painting indeed was beautiful, whether or not one of the girls had any likeness to her. Nevertheless, Ambilli was certain that she had seen those eyes before, or perhaps the painting itself, but she couldn't remember where or when.

Ambilli and Madhu had been visiting the library everyday, discovering old photographs and paintings that revealed the lives of courtesans, Devadasis, common *nautch* girls and queens. All the stories that Madhu had been narrating to her so far, the debates about Devadasis and the morality vs immorality issue, the history of Tanjore and Mysore and tales about its rulers and her own feelings for Manu...all seemed to be pressing on her now. The girl in the picture seemed to be holding all these secrets in her too, as if they were sharing the same fate. When Ambilli told her this, Madhu laughed out loud.

“I think you're reading too much into the painting now...what makes you think the girl might have had an eventful past?”

“Maybe...why not?”

“Next you'll say they were plotting something big with all that gold around them...,” said Madhu, cutting her off again.

“Well, I...”

Madhu dismissed her again and went back to her book. Ambilli continued.

“I cannot explain, Madhu. You know, sometimes when you visit a place in your childhood after many years, you're somehow able to connect to it very smoothly. As if you had never left. *That* is the feeling I get when I think of this girl. Her eyes...they are so intense, so full of the fire of life. Look, she's hiding something from us, yet she dares us to find out what.”

Madhu nodded, considering this while looking at the painting, and then suddenly exclaimed.

“Hey, I know...you must give her a name!”

“Alright, I get it. I'll stop if you don't want to talk about it anymore,” said Ambilli and prepared to leave, murmuring under her breath: “First, you fill my head with ideas and when I have an opinion you laugh at it...”

“Oh no, you moron. I'm serious...”

“About what? That I give her a name?”

“Yes of course. Look, you have been accompanying me to the libraries here... You've been doing some exploring on your own too, so you have complete access to all the research you'll ever need. I'll write my paper. But you write a story. It's perfect! All this girl needs now,” she took the paper from Ambilli's hands and quickly pinned it to the softboard in the room, “...is a name, and a past. Imagine she's your long-lost relative. What if you are a descendent of hers? Write all that you want to know about her. Just start writing and let go.”

Ambilli thought for a while. Her heart was racing. In her hands now was a story waiting to be told, and it would belong to the girl in the painting. But she had a problem.

“What can I call her, to start with? I don't know any 18th-century names or...”

“Paarvanendu,” interrupted Madhu, without batting an eyelid.

“Paarvanendu...hmm. That is a nice name. How did you come up with...?”

“*Arre*, Ambilli, you think too much. I have come across a hundred beautiful names since I've been reading on my subject. This name just popped in my head from a song I heard playing somewhere. Incidentally, it means radiant-faced, like the full moon.”

Ambilli laughed at last. “It suits the girl. I will call her *Paarvani*.”



(21)

**Paarvani**

**Karnataka, Mysore. 1777.**

There was celebration in the house that day: 12-year-old Paarvani had come of age. While she herself didn't understand much of the commotion around her and was confined to a room, female relations from all over came to congratulate her mother Pankaja Amma and to bless the young girl.

As the evening progressed, though, the festivities came to an end.

Paarvani's mother entered the room with a bowl of some warm hair oil, a mirror, and a comb – part of their everyday routine. Paarvani happily made way for her, folding her knees to her chest. Pankaja Amma seated herself on a low stool behind her daughter. The strong scent of the hair oil bounced off the walls of the small room and then gently wafted around them both. Pankaja Amma poured a small quantity of it into her left palm, pressed her other hand to it and then applied it to Paarvani's hair. Gently but firmly, she massaged her scalp, pulling at the roots so they would remain strong, then running her fingers through the rest of the lustrous black hair that tumbled down in gentle curls to well below Paarvani's waist.

Paarvani, her chin on her knees, played lazily with her new anklets while her mother oiled her hair and talked to her. She told Paarvani to sleep well

because there would be another function in the house the next morning. Dressed in the finest of silks, Paarvani would be led to the Goddess's temple where she'd be taught to worship her all by herself. Like her mother and her grandmother before her, she would be allowed to participate in all the duties of the temple from then on. She would also appease the Goddess by offering herself to the head priest, who had already in the past enquired about her. "You will see, Paarvani," her mother said, combing her hair, "We devadasis have been blessed by the Goddess to have you in our midst. You are of many talents, and you are beautiful. You will make her proud, I can see."

But Paarvani wasn't listening. Sitting in front of her mother below the open window, she played with the reflection of the full moon in her oval mirror. Every time her mother ran the comb through her hair, Paarvani's head jerked forward and the moon jumped out of sight. She would seek out the moon again, tilting the mirror to the left and right until she found it, and then the comb running through her hair would throw it out of sight again. Like a white, patchy old ball on a hand-held, black playground...dhim, ta-dhim, ta-dhom. Paarvani giggled.

Pankaja Amma stopped talking and smiled. "You weren't listening to me at all, were you?"

Gently, she held Paarvani's shoulders and turned her around to face her. Paarvani glowed with the beauty of youth. She had large black eyes and full lips on a face that was just waiting to blossom into womanhood. And

yet she was but a little child. Pankaja Amma suddenly shook herself away from her thoughts, touched the kohl of her own eyes with her ring finger and quickly smeared it on Paarvani's right cheek. "May you always be protected from evil," she said, and kissed Paarvani's forehead. Then she straightened up and asked her daughter, smiling, "Tell me Paarvani, what do you want as your growing-up gift?"

Paarvani pointed to the window behind her mother. "Amma, I want the moon."

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*I never really felt I was bored, ever. Empty? Yes. It's that strange emptiness that drove me away from the man I married. It brought me back to Mumbai, to my home, and yet when someone asked me why I was here, I had no answers. Like a leaf being pulled along even by the slightest breeze, I found myself in Mysore, with a friend who understood me more than I ever did. She introduced me to an idea. A tiny drop of interest that suddenly spread and tinged all my insides a different hue. Straight away I knew: this was the change I'd been waiting for. That emptiness is filling up now. Perhaps it has something to do with the colours of Paarvani. Every time I think of her... my canvas is white and fresh, and I just let her story spill out.*

(22)

**Paarvani****Karnataka, Mysore. 1775.**

Paarvani raced past the wooden doors above the grey stone steps, the tiny bells on her anklets dancing, jingling to the thump-whoosh-thump of her bare feet on the earth, and her petticoat filling up and flushing out air with the movement of her thin, fast legs. She ran past the path that led to the riverside, past her grandmother who quickly stepped aside muttering warnings and threats, jumping over the fence that separated their land from the neighbour's, through the undergrowth of bushes and tall, thick grass... only to stop and hide behind the mango tree facing the Kaveri, panting, watching....

There she was! Rati Kumari: the pleasure-giver, so named after the wife of the god of love, Kama himself. Accompanied by at least half-a-dozen maid servants fussing over her. Some whispered that, banished from her home-town, she could be a jinx. Others insisted she was the new courtesan's daughter, who had travelled all the way from Lucknow. 'Can't you guess? Look at her airs! The lazy brat.' But many, many swore she was so beautiful: like you want to not-look at her and you cannot take your eyes off her at the same time. 'Shiva-Shivaa! Such beauty only brings bad luck...'

The new girl had moved into their village thirty days before and, every morning since, Paarvani observed Rati Kumari's bathing ritual:

First, they bring her down gently, the palanquin barely raising a speck of dust from the ground. Next, the girl throws a tantrum, refusing to step out.

They coax her, bribe her into getting out, to stretch her limbs, to feel the warm sun; they sing songs praising her. She gives in. Left leg first, then the right. A skinny girl who has the world dancing around her little finger. They oil her body – naked except for a muslin sheet around her waist - to make it shine with health. They massage her limbs to make them supple and strong, and her curves, urging them to mature and seduce. They bathe her in the cool river waters with herbs and scents. Then, gently, they dab her dry with fresh towels and wrap her in silk sheets. At last, the luxurious routine has come to an end. Or has it?

While she rests on a mat, her attendants spread out her long hair on an overturned basket behind her head, the incense and coal underneath mingling with her black tresses. She is then clothed again, seated back in her palanquin, and made to drink a tall silver glass of warm milk with crushed saffron and almonds. Only then do they all prepare to leave – but not before one of them, a eunuch, carries something in his fist and circles it over the girl's face three times. The contents of that fist are thrown far away into the river which suddenly ripples...a hundred circles of fear and awe mix together and merge again. There, may you forever remain free from the evil eye, he says, clapping his hands thrice. The girl now bodily and spiritually rejuvenated, the waiting palanquin-bearers are called back, and the procession returns to her mother at the palace.

Hiding through all this behind the mango tree, ten-year-old Paarvani stands up, burning with a curiosity that she cannot comprehend. The little girl who was being pampered was perhaps of the same age as her – or a year or two older. Paarvani longed to be fussed over as well. She imagined what it would be like, to drink from tall silver glasses and be fed lovingly, by another hand. What would it be like to wear the finest

silks and not worry about being scolded if she were to soil them while playing? And then, just as easily as her mind had drifted, it came back. She stopped to wonder. Did this Rati Kumari have many friends? What games did she play?

Paarvani thought of her own house, the cows she helped her mother milk every morning, the temple their family served from dawn to dusk, her own training sessions in dance and music. She knew how much her mother doted on her. And her Ajji did too - how her grandmother spoilt her, despite a packed day, by making her favourite dishes. Paarvani startled. She had forgotten her place. She was a devadasi's daughter, born to worship the Goddess and please the head-priests who would come to her when the time was right.

Eight years later, Paarvani would question her identity again, standing at the same spot that faced the Kaveri. But today, guilty that she'd dreamed of another life, she hung her head in shame and whispered a small prayer to her Goddess, seeking forgiveness. Slowly, she made her way back to the wooden doors of her house and shut them behind her without a sound.

“Was she there today as well?” her mother's voice softly asked.

Paarvani gasped, then rushed to her in a tight embrace. “How did you know? I was just – just... watching her, Amma.”

Pankaja Amma smiled and ran her hand over her daughter's head. “I always knew. Paarvani, I wish I could fulfil your desires before they tug at your heart. But it is not our place to dream, to make wishes. We are destined for the temple...”

Young Paarvani watched as her mother was overcome by emotion. She

gripped the folds of her mother's saree. "I know, Amma. I am sorry to have hurt you. I will never look at Rati Kumari again."

Pankaja Amma nodded and smiled through her tears. She motioned for Paarvani to sit near her.

"Let me explain, Paarvani. I think it is time for you to know something about your mother." Paarvani sat down as if in a daze, not blinking.

"Your grandfather – my father - was a very wealthy man. At your age," she patted her daughter's cheek and continued, "...I was a free bird too. I had the finest clothes, the shiniest bangles that ran up and down my arms, gold ornaments... but, I didn't have a mother to look after me. My father was a busy trader in the court of the Wodeyar kings, and had arranged two servants to care for me. He was away on a journey when, one afternoon, news went around that the Maharaja had been made a prisoner in his own palace, betrayed by his chief *Subedar*, Haider Ali.

Fourteen years have passed. But I can still remember the chaos that drowned the village that day. One of the servants who looked after me took me to her house and bolted the door from outside. 'For your own good,' she said before hurrying away, 'wait till your father arrives...he will come, don't be afraid.'"

Pankaja Amma sighed. "He never did. For two days no one came. Not the servant-woman, not my father. The kind neighbours dropped in food from the window a couple of times, which I hungrily devoured. On the third day, there was a knock on the door. Terrified, afraid for my father's life, I opened it wide. The woman had a very kind face. I didn't recognise her, but she hugged me and caressed me all over. She then said she would take me to my father...that he was hiding at the palace, waiting for me. I didn't want to hear any further, and jumped into her carriage."



“Go on, Amma,” Paarvani pressed her mother's hands.

Pankaja Amma shook her head sadly. “It was a trap, Paru. Well before he took over Mysore, Haider Ali had the entire state of Karnataka covered by spies. Many of these were women – they worked as servants, dancers, vendors – one of them even worked right under my father's nose. Their task was to collect young girls, pretty or otherwise, for Haider Ali's entourage of domestic staff. Some of the girls were straightaway taken to the palace kitchens; others who were more good-looking and graceful, were to be trained in dance and music...”

Paarvani listened as her mother recounted the tales of many young girls, forcibly taken away from their homes, flogged and starved till they performed the tasks set out for them. Some of them were converted into Islam if they wanted food and shelter, or not to be beaten again. “I was taken to the palace hall to train as a dance girl,” Pankaja Amma continued.

“For a week, I waited. I looked around for my father in the palace; I got into their good books, saving myself from their threats and flogs. Then, one night, I ran away...”

Paarvani's eyes widened with surprise as her mother went on.

“I remember that night like it was yesterday. A strange courage crept into my blood. There was no one after me – no one had seen me escape, perhaps one less dancing-girl wouldn't matter to them. Yet I ran, faster and faster, very afraid. When I was exhausted, I rested in a temple. A group of Devadasis had come to perform the next evening and had halted there for the night. Your Ajji was one of them. After a long time, I felt safe. I did not know then, perhaps due to all that fear and confusion, that I had also come of age. Ajji cared for me like my own mother would. I

stayed on with them a little longer and soon, I was one of their community.”

Pankaja Amma ran her hand across Paarvani's cheek once again. “You must be wondering why I am telling you all this now... *magu*, it is I who brought you into this world. You are yet to grow up, to know what a devadasi's life is like. But you also have a choice.... Paarvani, I want you to know that, when that day arrives, and when you decide whether your heart is with the Goddess or not, you must remember to come to me. And if it isn't, if you really want to leave, I will give you my blessing, and see you to the door.”

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*Kama: desire, love, sensual pleasure. One of the four goals of human life according to Hinduism, the others being Dharma - moral righteousness, Artha - creation of wealth, and Moksha - liberation.*

*What does Desire do to the body? The erotic sculptures in the temples of Khajuraho, Konark, Brihadeeshwara, and many more have all openly suggested desire. At what point then, did it change to fear and shame? And why?*

*I have all these questions in my head as I browse through a copy of the Kama Sutra in Madhu's library. As she rightfully said (and as I'd wrongly believed), the Kama Sutra isn't about sexual positions alone. It is a primer on relationships between a man and a woman, laying down the traditional principle that a girl, whatever her social standing, must know how to seduce a boy and learn the erotic arts. "If a girl has studied erotic science," the book reads, "she will know how to behave in her married life, as well as in her youth, and will not fall into the snare of ignorance." I put the book down. No wonder courtesans were respected in early Indian society. I think about morality at the time: where would they have drawn the line? I pick up the book again and open a random page. It answers my question with another: "What is the benefit of practising a virtuous life if the future is uncertain?"*

(23)

**Paarvani****Kaveri riverside, Mysore. Karnataka. 1780.**

Siva sat at the bank of the river, his feet dangling in the cool, green waters. Tiny fish nibbled playfully at his feet, looking for clay and minute organisms hidden in the cracks of his heels. It soothed him and he let them be. Siva was seventeen, and today, everybody was an enemy, including his mother. Why else would she stop him from meeting his only childhood friends, Paarvani and Rati Kumari.

“Siva, you are a simpleton. You don't understand...Paarvani has grown up now. She is fifteen. She is not the same girl who played cowries with you,” his mother had pleaded. Siva had stayed silent, pulling tender threads from the banana stem with his thumb-nail. He would later divide them between the two girls – ribbons for their hair. They would be delighted. “You still aren't listening, you good-for-nothing fool,” said his mother and pulled away the stem from his hands, plonking herself down. She had good reason to be upset. The men and women of their village had been mocking Siva and Paarvani's friendship for a while now. And outside their hut, boys of his age had been jeering at this quarrel between the mother and son. They made clucking noises and teased him for his effeminate qualities which, his mother believed, came from spending so much time with the two girls while growing up. What else would he do, her maternal love for him reasoned. The village boys were bullies, and

they always played practical pranks on him. Siva had found his soulmate in Paarvani, the devadasi neighbour's daughter next door. Five years ago, Rati had joined them and the trio had been inseparable since. “*She* is the one who has spoilt everything,” his mother moaned. “*She* is the one showing my son impossible dreams. Why! She's already taken Paarvani away from her dear old mother, Pankaja Amma. The jinx. The *paradesi* courtesan's daughter, Rati Kumari. *Chhii-Thoo!*” she spat. “May she never find happiness! May she...”

Siva had heard enough. He was always the village idiot – harmless, innocent and very gullible. Paarvani was his best and only friend. He found joy in Rati Kumari's companionship, too, though they were never as close as Paarvani and him. But today, he didn't know why, he didn't want to hear a word against Rati. Outsider, courtesan, dancer...these were terms he never really grasped. She was his friend and that was all that mattered to him. He stormed out of the house, something he had never done before. The boys outside booed and jeered even louder but he was deaf to their laughter. His mother followed, wailing, apologising, asking him to come back. Siva just walked on. Turning around, Siva's mother picked up a fallen branch to beat the boys who mocked her son even as they scampered away. “Go back to your homes, what has he done to you? You... inconsiderate animals, go back to your mothers. Leave my son alone! GO!”

Siva's mother had always regretted that her son was not normal like the others of his age. He was slow in the head, she knew. What she didn't

know was that in a couple of months' time she would be grateful that her son was born this way. She would thank her gods that her son would not have to join the army or be forced to go into battle like all the other youngsters. For now though, she sat down on a rock and sobbed.

The river bank was where the three friends always met. It was here that Paarvani had sneaked up behind a tree many years ago to watch Rati Kumari being bathed like a princess. It was here that Rati Kumari, knowing that a certain girl hid and watched her every day, sprang up on her. A beautiful friendship had blossomed, shared by only a few of Rati's attendants. Paarvani had brought a sulking Siva along one day. "Let's include him as well," she'd said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "He has no friends, the poor boy." Rati loved to bully Siva most of the time but he didn't mind. Like a child would, he'd believed in her pure heart and continued to do so even today. Perhaps that is why he could not bear to listen to the bitter words his mother had used for her. He picked another pebble and threw it in the gentle, flowing waters, watching it sink with a plop. A rustle among the stones caused him to turn around. "Paarvani?" he said, and looked behind him. He had been waiting to talk to his Paarvani all day. But it was Rati who turned up.

"Paarvani? Why not Rati?" she asked playfully, and sat next to him.

Siva smiled through his surprise. Her voice sent goosebumps all over his body, and he jerked his head to shake them off. "No - no, not like that. Just...just that I was expecting Paarvani," he stammered, throwing another

pebble into the water. Rati held his hand and whispered, “She won't be coming today.”

Siva, who had never before been touched by a woman in this manner, was startled and overcome by shyness. He pulled back his hand. This made Rati laugh even more: her earrings and bangles tinkled as she rocked back and forth, shaking her head. He felt as if he were seeing her for the first time. She was, indeed, growing prettier each day. When she stopped laughing he quickly averted his gaze. But Rati was, after all, a courtesan's daughter. She was quick to catch his thoughts, and decided to have a little more fun. Coming closer, she rubbed her bare arm against his and sighed. Siva inched away, embarrassed. Rati giggled, coming closer again, and put her finger on his lips.

“Sshhh....,” she whispered into his ear again. “Siva, you are not an idiot. Know this.”

Withdrawing her hand, she let her fingers run over his shoulders, down to his chest, gently dragging her nail to his arm and towards his palm. Siva held his breath. His heart beat rapidly and louder and, despite the cool of the twilight, beads of sweat broke over his brows. Rati smiled gently, looking into his eyes. He looked away again. She clasped his palm now; it was cold and clammy. He shivered, sensing a new rush of blood running through his veins and limbs. Breathing fast and heavily, he pushed her away and blurted, “Stop! Stop! Rati, what is this?”

Rati only smiled again and brushed her palm fondly against his cheek.

“Sshh,” she whispered, “This, is proof that you are a man, Siva. A man. Not an idiot. Now you know... don't you?”

(24)

**Mysore. August, 2004.**

“I thought my responsibilities towards you would end with your marriage,” a weary voice said on the phone, “but you will not let me rest, will you?”

Ambilli smiled. “Achchan, is that how you greet your daughter after so many months?”

“Ah, so at least you recognise my voice. How are you, *Amu*?” said Unni, gently. “And what is it you have got yourself into this time? Leaving Manu on his own...”

“He's alright, Achchan. I'm glad he's alright. I will join him soon.”

“Listen, *Amu*,” Ambilli's father cut her short. “I don't want you to become a *Sati-Savitri*; none of us insist that you fast for your husband's prosperity or life – you know I never approved of your mother doing that either. But don't earn your father a bad name, child. Manu is a man after all. He will have his needs. Stop playing around with his life and yours; there's no point in regretting it later.”

Unni's phone call that afternoon left Ambilli feeling guilty again, but Madhu, not surprisingly, was in splits after hearing about the conversation. When Ambilli frowned, Madhu patted her shoulder, still laughing. “Sorry, Ambilli. Couldn't help myself...but just think about it. You still fall for their emotional blackmail?”

Ambilli chose not to comment. Madhu continued, sitting next to her, chuckling still: “Regret' indeed. 'Sati-Savitri'...I think your parents watch too many of those homely afternoon-soaps about mothers-in-law and daughters and their extended families. Almost the entire female population of India now believes Sati and Savitri did just that. *Fast* all their pious lives! What rubbish!”

It was Ambilli's turn to get amused now as she saw a slowly charging-up Madhu who showed



no sign of stopping. “Do they even know about the real Sati and Savitri, who only followed their hearts? Do *you* know? Tell me what you know about them.”

Ambilli rolled her eyes and sighed. Madhu was the sort who would tolerate anything but hypocrisy, and this time Ambilli just knew there was a lecture coming on.

“Okay, I'll try,” she said. “As far as I remember reading when I was a kid, Sati was the god Shiva's wife. She jumped into the sacrificial fire because her husband was insulted by her father...right?”

“Correct. She jumped into that fire not only because of love for her husband, but because her pride was hurt as well...,” said Madhu, and promptly began the story.

“Daksha was the chief of all gods. Sati was his sixteenth and youngest daughter. Daksha had always held a grudge against Shiva, who was dark, filthy and would roam around wearing nothing but an elephant-skin. Despite Daksha's continuous disapproval, Sati had set her heart on marrying this ash-smearing god. Soon it was time for Sati's *Swayamwar* – you know women could choose their own *var* or husband in the ancient times... But Shiva was deliberately not invited to Daksha's court. When Sati could not find him, she cast her garland up in the air, asking Shiva to accept it, and he did, appearing out of nowhere! Daksha *had* to agree to the marriage and let Shiva take Sati away to his home in the Himalayas. Of course, he wasn't happy with this defeat. Some days later, Daksha arranged for a great horse-sacrifice ceremony for all the gods and, once again, he left Shiva out. Sati was furious when she heard this and expressed her desire to attend the event. Shiva warned her not to. Nevertheless, she went alone....” Madhu paused.

“This, Ambilli,” she continued, beating the small of her fist on the table, “is the *second* instance of Sati being impertinent. And so proud: when Daksha called her husband an ash-smearing mendicant in front of all his guests, she could not tolerate it. She was now in a situation where she could neither face her husband, who had been insulted and who had, in fact, warned her not to go, nor could she demand justice from her father. So she released the *yogaagni*, or the inward consuming fire, and killed herself. Now, nowhere does this myth talk about the death of Shiva,

Sati's husband, and yet look how her name has turned symbolic over the years!”

A knock on the door, followed by the turning of a key, revealed Husain armed with three bright carrier-bags and a wide grin on seeing the two girls in the heat of discussion.

“No one at home, I thought,” he said, sheepishly. “Carry on talking. I, not here.” The girls laughed as he hurried to the kitchen and emptied the bags of grocery items and vegetables onto the shelves and the little refrigerator. Then he walked back to where Madhu was seated, placed a pack of her favourite Hobnobs on the table and the leftover money in her open palm.

“Thank you, Husain. And did you have your lunch?” Husain nodded, gestured that he was off again, and shut the door behind him.

“Umm, where were we?” asked Madhu, dropping the change into her handbag and helping herself to a glass of water.

“You were talking about Sati's story, and that it has nothing to do with the act of Sati itself...But Madhu, didn't we learn about the Rajput queens burning themselves... in our school books? I remember being haunted by that graphic illustration for days! I thought that was an act of Sati too. Wasn't it?” Ambilli asked.

“Agreed. The Rajput princesses and queens killed themselves in mass immolations... that was in order to save their honour – themselves - from the Islamic invaders. But history still confuses their 'Jauhar' act by calling it 'Sati.' I remember coming across one or two front page-news headlines some months ago, about young women in North India who were assigned to flames after the death of their husbands. I still don't know if such a young widow is drugged and made to sit on her husband's funeral pyre, or if she chooses this horrific death herself. But the whole world sits and watches. Why else do we only read about it the next day?

“The British had abolished this Sati practice *after* exaggerating the number of incidents in the country. Read more about it and you will discover that they had initially *legalised* it themselves

too. This, despite the glaring reality that it is not written – nowhere in the Hindu scriptures - that a woman should join her husband after his death. Who knows, perhaps all this was just a ploy to 'civilise' the natives,” said Madhu animatedly holding up her fingers in the air to open and close invisible quote-marks, “and make way for British rule. The result today is that ignorant, uneducated villagers continue to cover up such suicides, or even murders. And Sati – poor woman, all she wished was that her father show some respect to her husband, Shiva - continues to be glorified in the tele-serials and by parents like yours and mine even today...

“*Accha*, now tell me, what do you know about Savitri?” Madhu continued, shifting her position on the creaky wooden chair as she reached for the unopened packet of Hobnobs sitting on the table.

“That she brought back her husband Satyavan from the god of Death, Yama?” replied Ambilli, a little unsure.

“Did you know, Ambilli, that Savitri had chosen her husband of her own free will when her father had failed to find someone suitable for her?”

“Umm...No?”

“See! I'm not surprised you don't. Not many do...

“Savitri's father had asked her to find her own husband as he was unable to; Savitri chose Satyavan – a youth whose blind parents had lost their kingdom to enemies, and who lived in a forest. Savitri's parents were happy, but Narada – the singing seer – warned her that Satyavan would lose his life within a year of their marriage. Savitri didn't budge from her decision. The day of Satyavan's impending death did arrive, but Savitri used her patience and wit to bring Satyavan back from Yama, not at all by fasting.

Our parents like to feed us selective history, and selective mythology...like their parents did for them. We only get the filtered version...*'oh, what a pious woman that Savitri was! She snatched her husband from the after life. You must fast on Mondays, observe fasts again on every second Tuesday of the month and on Wata-Savitri days, and you will gain brownie points for your husband.'* Bah!” said Madhu, dusting the crumbs off her kurta and reaching for another Hobnob.

“Maybe fasting works wonders to de-toxify your digestive system, but sorry, it's not for me. And besides, who knows what lies in store for us in the future?” exclaimed Madhu, with her mouth full this time.

Ambilli blinked. She thought she had come across that question before.

“Actually, when I think of this now... 'India' is an idea made up of several mythologies – which would never be the same without the women in our ancient epics,” continued Madhu, getting ready to count on her fingers, still holding a half-eaten biscuit in her other hand.

“I'll explain. Look... In the Ramayan, Sita throws a tantrum that she be allowed to follow her husband, Rama, into fourteen-year exile. If it were not for the scheming maid servant Manthra and the queen Kaikeyi, the exile would never have taken place. In the Mahabharata, the fisherwoman Satyawati has a son, Vyasa, from the sage Parashara and later goes on to marry a King Shantanu. The Kauravas and the Pandavas - rivals in the Mahabharata war - are her grandchildren, while Vyasa is none other than the author of the Mahabharata. The queen, Kunti, in the Mahabharata again, hides the birth of her first son Karna, and is unable to reveal this truth to her five Pandava sons until Karna is killed by his own brother Arjuna on the battlefield...

“Why pick only the epics... you must have heard the name, Ahilyabai Holkar: a young widow who under the guidance of her father-in-law, turned out to be an able administrator and the queen of Malwa in Maharashtra in the mid-18th-century; so did Rani Lakshmibai, the queen of Jhansi around the same time. Karnataka, too, has had many women rulers. You have accompanied me to the library and assisting my research for the past few months now: you've read about the well-educated women writers and poets who were also dancers, and the clever courtesans...

Doesn't it make you wonder, Ambilli... where were the moral police then? When and *why* did our attitudes change towards our own women?”

Ambilli, still absorbing Madhu's stories that she only vaguely remembered from her own childhood, simply shook her head. “Go on...”

“I think it's the Victorians who first made us Indians ashamed of our own culture, of our brown

skin. Layers and layers of morality were thrust upon us; first through the missionaries, then through the English generals and their wives. Today, we're fast losing the use of our own regional languages, along with our ancient literature and culture, to English. We've got top cosmetic brands competing in the international Fairness cream markets, with Shah Rukh Khan and almost-*gori* Kajol – both actually wheatish-skinned superstars - vouching for their products...

“Krishna, Vishnu, Ram...all our gods are dark. The beautiful Draupadi, whom the Kaurava princes set out to disrobe in the open court – she was dusky as well! Everyone seems to have suddenly forgotten where we've come from...”

Ambilli shook her head and whistled. “You really have taken your research on pre-Victorian India to your heart, haven't you?”

Madhu loosened up, smiling. “Sorry...maybe I did get carried away. But I really cringe when I read about all the damage the Victorians have done to this country. And the worst part is, we – our urban generation - are doing nothing to undo any part of it. Take our mother tongue – or any native language for that matter. How many of us in the city are literate in any language apart from English? Why, I myself don't know to read, let alone write, in my mother tongue, Malayalam!”

Ambilli laughed. “Neither do I!”

“*Because* our parents were told we should be taught English! Do you remember, Ambilli, the story of the bald king that we read when we were younger? Why then can't we accept our bare Indianness for what it is, minus the many layers of inhibitions? Why... why are we still thinking of those green mangoes?”

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*The bald king and the green mangoes.*

*There was once a king who, much to his disappointment, lost all his hair. He threw open a contest to all his ministers. Whosoever got him some magic oil that would help him grow his hair back would be rewarded handsomely. Those who tried and failed, would be banished from the kingdom forever. Understandably, nobody came forward with any magic oil. The king was just beginning to lose all his hope, and his temper, when a wise old sage arrived at his palace. He gave the king a tiny vial containing magic oil.*

*“But beware,” said the old man to the king, “when you let this oil touch your head, you must not think of the green mango. For, if you do, the consequences will be far worse than the lack of hair on your head.” The king was immensely pleased. At last some magic oil. Each time he opened the vial, though, he would remember the sage's warning, and then the accidental thought of green mangoes would make him swallow his pride and screw the lid back on the vial again. Many months and attempts later, the king finally understood the old sage's lesson. He learnt to accept that he would indeed remain bald, and that his hair was never going to grow back again.*

*There is a reason why this old Indian story is repeatedly told to children at a very young age, by grandparents, teachers or the 'Tinkle' picture books. Because as grown-ups, we may forget.*

*We may forget that sometimes getting out of a difficult relationship might be*

*easier than staying in it. Perhaps we try too hard to erase that bit of our life which otherwise seems so perfect. We don't always realise that the people we meet in this course of this erasure, the decisions that we make – all these will play a part, and perhaps help, in breaking away. Fortunately for me, Madhu and her research and of course, Paarvani, are all proving to be a far more welcome distraction than forgetting Shashi. And yet, like the thought of green mangoes, he is still there.*

*He is always there.*

(25)

**Mysore. August, 2004.**

“Tell me, Ambilli. Is there anything in your childhood that you regret?”

Ambilli had been chopping tomatoes and coriander leaves for the savoury, puffed rice tea-time snack she was making for herself and Madhu. She was looking for onions in the vegetable basket when Madhu suddenly threw her this question. Ambilli smiled without turning around to face her friend, and asked: “Do you know where Rajeshwari Amma keeps the onions, or have we run out of them?”

Madhu had been busy at the university with lessons and library visits all week and the two girls had barely seen each other. When Madhu had time to spare, she visited Anand at his campus – Anand, back from his two-month break, and who threatened to be a permanent source of friction between Madhu and Ambilli.

Ambilli preferred to treat this disaccord with silence. A silence that did not come from a grudge but from the understanding that Madhu was mature enough to make her own personal decisions. She decided to be indifferent, not realising that she would do a very poor job of it. Madhu, meanwhile, found the lull quite irksome and disproportionate to her happy-go-lucky mind. At first she let this new side of Ambilli be; she thought her friend was preoccupied rather than upset. Three, four days into the week, she sensed that the rift in their relationship was growing far deeper. Something about Anand seemed to bother Ambilli so much that she didn't even want to know how the rest of Madhu's day went, or how she'd been getting on at the university. When Anand suggested, only half-teasingly, that perhaps Ambilli was jealous, Madhu dismissed it



straightaway. She reckoned instead that Ambilli was simply trying hard to be a friend and not an over-protective mother. That Ambilli was brought up to be wary of the opposite sex, and therefore had a few purist notions when a boy and girl stayed together. One evening, however, she promised Anand she would talk to Ambilli and get an answer.

Madhu's sudden appearance at the door even before it was twilight had surprised Ambilli, who nowadays found herself engrossed in reading the history books that Madhu often left behind, or in filling her own journal with Paarvani's stories. Seeing Madhu at home had, in fact, made Ambilli happy, but she didn't show it. Madhu was left standing there greeting the walls; Ambilli mumbled a cold 'hi', then went into the kitchen and started fixing some coffee and a dry *bhel* snack for both of them. Madhu followed her quietly, the bag still around her shoulder. She pulled a chair next to the table and sat on it.

“Your mother called,” Ambilli said at last, placing Madhu's coffee in front of her, and pushing the jar of sugar alongside. She knew Madhu liked her coffee strong and sweet. Madhu nodded, putting her bag away, taking her time to open the jar, scoop some of the sugar into her coffee and stir it. Ambilli continued to arrange and create at the kitchen worktop. In front of her now were two bowls with puffed rice, chopped tomatoes, coriander leaves and some *farsan* lightly sprinkled all over. She opened the shelf doors and shut them at random, as if looking for something. “I told her you were having late lessons at the university these days, and that I would ask you to call back later,” she added without turning around. Madhu stopped stirring. “Why did you have to tell her a lie? I know you don't like to. You could have told her I was with Anand.”

Ambilli did not respond. Madhu sighed. She would have to initiate this conversation herself.

“Tell me, Ambilli. Is there anything in your childhood that you regret?”

Ambilli carried on with her search for the missing ingredient. Finally Madhu pushed her chair back and got up. She walked to the front room where Husain would have left the grocery bags for the day. Returning to the kitchen, she plonked them down on the worktop. “Here are your onions. *Now* will you talk to me?”

Ambilli peeled an onion and began to slice and then chop it fine. “I don't understand your question, or where it comes from,” she said.

“The question is simple, Ambilli. If you could go back to your childhood and change one aspect of your growing up years, what would it be? *If* you wanted to, that is.”

Ambilli placed the now-ready-to-eat snack on the table and sat across from Madhu. She began to dig into the bowl with her spoon, mixing the ingredients together and appearing to be deep in thought. “Yes. I would,” she said at last, looking at Madhu. “I would like to see what it would be like to grow up under parents who would not be as over-protective as my own. I would have liked to see if it would make me any better prepared for the world then, or whether it would still leave me afraid to come out of my cocoon. I would have liked to see if, like you, I could go into and out of relationships and not feel ...”

Ambilli stopped short of completing her sentence. She had got carried away, without intending to, and had in the process directed all her anger at Madhu, her best friend. Madhu was quiet and still. Finally she spoke. “Is that all you think this is, Ambilli?”

“Listen, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to blurt out like that. But you make it look so easy. You and

Anand, going around together, sleeping together. What if things go wrong, Madhu? What if he walks away one day? What if he's just playing around with you?"

Madhu now started to laugh. "Ambilli, you and I, we are almost thirty now. Aren't we grown up enough to face life and what it brings our way? I'm glad you said what you did because I had my own suspicions for explanations of your cold behaviour towards me and towards Anand, who you haven't even met. What makes you so sure he's going to cheat on me....and even if he does, what makes you think I can't cope with it?"

It was Ambilli's turn to be quiet now. For someone who had grown up with a strict set of rules all her life, even after reaching adulthood, Madhu's logic was beginning to sound as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

"Listen, I know there's more to this. Is everything between Manu and you, *okay*? You...you know what I mean right? Did he....did someone hurt you, Ambilli?"

Ambilli didn't answer. Her days at Bangalore, her reasons to be away from her family and her bitterness towards her Achchamma had all become meaningless when Shashi had entered her life. Everything her family had almost prophesied about her living alone had then come true. She had been torn, betrayed by her first and only male friend and left to cope all by herself. She married Manu, hoping for a new beginning. But he was so full of unqualified affection that she found it increasingly suffocating to live with him alongside her guilt.

The two girls sat facing each other, not speaking, their snack bowls untouched, the savoury puffed rice fast absorbing all the juice from the finely chopped tomatoes and onions. Madhu

knew she was pushing Ambilli to the edge; she waited for her friend to break down, any moment now. What she didn't know was that soon she would be scratching at wounds from her own past too.

“Phew!” Madhu exclaimed suddenly, shaking her head. “I think I need a cigarette.”

Ambilli's eyes widened. “*You smoke as well?*”

The invisible clouds of tension above their heads burst at last and it made the two girls giggle.

Madhu scooped a spoonful of the *bhel* and put it in her mouth. “Mmm, nice. A bit soggy with all that melodrama, but delicious.”

Ambilli smiled, sipping her coffee. “Manu is the best friend I could ask for, really. I am a lucky girl.” she winked.

“Friend? *Friend?* Hullo? Aren't you married to the guy...of course, I know he wouldn't hurt you. He is the best friend that *any*-body could ask for. When I asked if everything is okay between the two of you I meant, your relationship...and all the... *jiggerypokkiri* in between. You have....haven't you?”

Madhu's questions made Ambilli burst into laughter. Madhu's eyes widened, questioning her again. “Well...?”

Ambilli shook her head, scratching some dried-up food on the table with her fingernail and brushing it away. “No.”

“No? But why not? You're both...it's almost been, what? Six...eight...nine months?” She leaned across the table and squeezed Ambilli's hand. It was cold. “Ambu....*sab theek hai na?* Manu is not....*not gay*, right?”

Ambilli nodded a yes, then giggled again. She was blushing, embarrassed, awkward, shy, all at once. She had never been able to share her intimate thoughts with anybody all her life. Madhu

was right in front of her; she was trying to help. She was making it easy for Ambilli to open up. And yet, Ambilli couldn't. She felt like someone had held her throat, tight, not letting any words escape from her mouth.

Madhu played with the food in her bowl absentmindedly. Not looking up, she said, "You know, Ambu, this brings me back to what I was trying to tell you just a few weeks ago. I was right. It is because we are all brought up with this language... *taboo*. We don't know what pleasure is. We don't even know what it should be. We are *scared*, of the male touch. That is what it is, isn't it?"

The girls were quiet for a while. The clock on the wall ticked away; it was nearly 7:50 pm. Outside, a lone dog barked when a cyclist passed by. In the distance, temple bells rung out the evening *arati*. The vegetable seller knocked on their front gate as he always did at this time, calling out: *Avarekkai, sorakkai, kumblekaai!! Tomato... avarrekaai...soppu bekaa, Ammaa?*" Hearing no response, he would move ahead, and repeat the same at the next gate, and so on ...one of the residents in the houses along the road would eventually buy his vegetables. In another ten minutes, the *Azaan* would sound out as well. Rajeshwari Amma would accompany Husain along with a few other Muslim boys of their area, to the small mosque near his night school. The school was run by volunteers from a local Rotary club association for young children who worked during the day; education here was free and a meal was provided at the end of their two-hour sessions. Husain was the youngest student. While he finished his prayers, and proceeded with the others for study at the school, Rajeshwari Amma helped in the community kitchen housed in the same building, preparing their dinner. Sitting by the table, Ambilli's thoughts had wandered to all of these places until they returned to Madhu again, and to what she had just said.

"Madhu," she asked. "Have you ever been abused, sexually?"

“Abused? Mmm, yes,” she said, not looking up. Dismissive, and with her mouth full, she added: “*Arre*, tell me... who has not been abused?”

Ambilli frowned. She waited for her friend to go on. Madhu continued, still slowly chomping her food and sipping coffee. “You remember secondary school? There was that shabby-looking man outside the school gate, well hidden from the public, but we could see him from the first floor window, and he could see us...he was *so* disgusting, remember? He would throw a pebble at our window pane, and when any of the girls turned to look, he would start masturbating – right there on the street. Wasn't that abuse? We were just school girls. Some teacher eventually complained and the security guards beat him and threw him out.”

Ambilli interrupted, “I remember, but I wasn't...”

Madhu went on, pushing heaped spoonfuls of the snack into her mouth now, ignoring Ambilli. “One of my office ex-colleagues, he would stop a girl – any girl - literally obstructing her path with his body in the office pantry or corridors, harassing her till she managed to wriggle away. I can still hear his drink-heavy voice in my head, see his ugly face in my mind...it drips with lust, the lecher. I think he was finally sacked, but do you think he would have stopped there?”

“No, Madhu, I'm talking about...,” but Ambilli was cut off again.

“I was seven. Part of the Annual Day stage performance at our school. Mom and Dad were late coming to see me. They were supposed to get some flowers for my hair – all part of the make-up for my role. Hell, I've even forgotten who or what I was playing – I think it was some Hawaiian dance ritual: a bunch of us girls were dressed in skirts made of strips of colourful

tissue paper. That's all we were: tender and fragile as tissue paper under tissue-paper skirts..."

Ambilli waited. Madhu scraped the last of the puffed rice, then extended her hand to reach Ambilli's untouched bowl for another helping.

"He was one of the teaching assistants. ...Pulled me aside while I was still waiting for my parents to show up. He said, 'come here, *beta*, let me adjust your skirt'...he slid his rough hand underneath and then..."

Madhu pushed the half-empty bowl in front of a shocked Ambilli again, and drained her coffee in one big gulp. She put the cup down with some force, frowning and angry. "Who has not been abused, Ambilli? Why make a big fuss of something we face everyday, sexual or not?"

*Regardless,*" she stressed, "...*regardless* of whether or not our parents were over-protective, or broad-minded."

The tears in Ambilli's eyes fell without warning. She'd intended to confide in her friend what had happened with Shashi five years ago but the words had not simply come. Now she realised that by not burying that incident, by not moving on, she was abusing herself. Again and again.

"I'm...I'm sorry, Madhu," she mumbled. "Sorry for being so... selfish all along. I could never have imagined that you..."

Madhu was calm now. She stretched her arms across the table and held Ambilli who began to cry, shaking, like a child.

"Ambu, Manu and you...are just made for each other. Don't deny yourselves your piece of heaven... And look, whatever it is, just let it go. I am sure it's not your fault. Don't blame yourself for somebody else's shame."

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*I grew up in a black and white world. A world comprising my Achchamma, and my parents who, for my apparent benefit, divided everything that came my way into good and bad, white and black – not a hint of grey. The stories in my childhood, the very few friends I had, the uncles and aunts. Nothing escaped my father's attention and nothing slipped past my Achchamma's ears. When I graduated and began work much against their wishes, my father tapped my phone calls. He began to ask a lot of questions: Why do you need to work? Why the long hours? Are you the only one who works late in your office? Who dropped you home? Where did you eat your dinner? With whom? He threatened to visit my office one day and speak to my employer for keeping me back so late. At first I thought he did not understand the publishing industry. I explained that late hours were common because everything depended on deadlines dictated by the publishers. And that what went into those papers depended on when journalists delivered their stories. But then the curfew at home tightened even more. It had turned into an obsession. I told myself: this is a phase, it will pass. But it didn't.*

*One Sunday morning, I caught my parents quarrelling. The previous night I'd overslept on the train and a bar girl – no, a prostitute - had helped me get off just in time. I didn't tell them how or where this happened as my parents wouldn't have believed me anyway. Instead, I just tiptoed in with my spare set of keys, went straight to my room and plonked myself down on the bed. It was past 2am. When I woke up it was almost eight and I thought someone had left the television on. But it was my father accusing my mother of spoiling me, of*



*making me believe I could get away with anything – maybe even sleeping around. My mother, furious, demanded to know what made him come to such a conclusion. She blamed Achchamma for filling his head with unwanted fears. “Your mother lives in another world! Trust Ambilli: for god's sake, this is our daughter we are talking about.”*

*“I don't. Well, I've said it now. I. Don't. Now ask her to quit her job and let her stay home. We'll get her married soon...”*

*In the bedroom I had the pillow over my ears. I was tired of being a little girl all the time. Of being told off for something I had not done. I was 25. I was grown up, but my father could not see that. My colleagues taunted me to get a life. To get a boyfriend. But that was exactly what I had avoided. I could see that it was all pointless. I decided to leave home. Eventually, I did.*

*What I could not see was that, barely eight months from my hasty exit, I would come back wounded. And so much a changed person that only my Achchamma would recognise me.*

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*Even today, I have not many memories of that night.*

*From where I lay on the thin mattress on the floor, I could see the full, bright moon high up in the midnight sky. There were a few dark clouds, I remember, and these sped past the moon in a hurry. Go, rain somewhere else, I recall myself thinking. The smell of freshly washed earth, warm, humid air, came in through the open windows like gentle lapping waves. I felt someone nudge and slip close to me under my blanket, startling me.*

*“Sshh, it's me, Shashi,” the body whispered.*

*“Shashi!! What...? What are you doing here?” I whispered back, sitting up in alarm.*

*Holding both my shoulders with his hands, he pushed me back down on the mattress again. “Husshhh....,” He looked around.*

*“Please, I need your help.”*

*“Yes, sure. But, what help...? Shashi,...is everything okay?” I sat up again.*

*We were in a family guesthouse, a bungalow on the rustic outskirts of Bangalore, for a celebration picnic sponsored by the employers to boost employee morale and team spirit. We'd been walking, eating, brainstorming all day. Tables, chairs, whiteboards – all had been rented to suit our requirements in this makeshift office, and so were the mattresses and blankets when we retired for the night. The boys – and some of the girls - had been drinking...the rooms were full and I had volunteered to sleep in the lounge, hoping to avoid any slurry conversations that went late into the night.*

*At first I had wondered if Shashi was sleep-walking – I knew he didn't drink. I couldn't hear the rest of the gang in the adjoining room and wondered if they were asleep, or too drunk to move. I knew one of them had already thrown up and had to be tucked in bed.*

*My instinctive concern was: if I shouted out, no one would hear me. Another voice in my head instantly asked: now, why did that thought occur to me?*

*I shifted in the dark, resting my back on the wall and placing the pillow upon my lap, all the while trying to get a close look at Shashi's face – his shiny eyes. He seemed sober. He inched closer.*

*“Take off your clothes, Ambilli.”*

*I had known Shashi for six months. He was the only male friend with whom I could hold a conversation for more than three minutes. While I battled with my own problems at home – the coming home at late hours after work followed by a row every morning between my parents and me; my father's sudden lack of trust; my Achchamma reproaching my parents for sending me out; my betrayed friendship with Achchamma – Shashi made me forget about all of them at work. He cheered me up, made me laugh. He flirted openly with Amruta, making Fiona very cross, and he taunted and teased her until she was ready to strangle him. I didn't know then that Fiona's hatred for Shashi went far beyond his clowning around. I had never bothered to find out. My world at the office consisted of these three friends, apart from the work of course, which almost never felt like a job.*

*During the breaks - and if I was not with the other girls - Shashi kept me company. He told me about his family: his elder brother Arun who, for as long as he could remember, was the star in his house. First, because he was simply*

*the better of the two – better at sports, at school, at finding and keeping girlfriends, at making his parents proud. Second, because at the age of 21, Arun went on to join the Indian Army. The more his parents missed Arun, the more Shashi felt his absent-presence in the house. Shashi was just another member of the family - someone who now used Arun's room and was not supposed to touch any of his belongings: not the fading posters that were tearing at the edges sagging with dust and their own weight, not the trophies caged in the glass shelf - along with the toys Arun had played with as a little boy.*

*All this Shashi told me, an only child, with a smile on his lips. He told me how he had learnt to ignore his parent's partial treatment towards him, and how it was worth being a 'matlabi'. Self-centred. "Remember, Ambilli," he had leaned forward to tell me one day, our noses almost touching, making me spring backward, "if you don't love yourself, no one will."*

*I had laughed it off, but Shashi was serious. He vowed he would change me, "...in six months, if not sooner!" he had said as he waved and walked away. I should have asked him, why? Why do I need to change? But I didn't. As someone who'd always lived inside the suffocating world of over-protective parents, perhaps at that time a change was what looked most promising, most colourful to me.*

*Not white, not black. Just different.*

(26)

**Bangalore. October, 1998.**

“Take off your clothes, Ambilli.”

“Go to bed, Shashi. Have you been drinking with the others?”

“Not a drop. I am doing this for you, Ambilli. I saw how you were bullied by your so-called friends. They were mocking you but all you did was laugh. I could see that you were intimidated by them...”

“What are you talking about? They're my friends. They were only teasing...”

“Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror?”

“Shashi...”

“Do you remember I once asked you if you love yourself? Ambilli, have you *ever*, looked at yourself in the mirror, naked?”

Ambilli felt cornered. She could not comprehend what had come over Shashi, and she did not know how to react to him. He was her friend: was he really being serious? Should she gently persuade him, or should she try and run away? Her mind raced. Outside her room the moon was completely hidden by dark clouds and, somewhere in the distance, the ground rumbled with thunder.

“Answer me, Ambilli.”

“Shashi... what is wrong with you? Go away, you need to sleep and so do I. I'll see you in the morning. Now, *go*,” said Ambilli, trying not to panic.

Shashi shook his head, smiling. “You need to do this, girl. Trust me. Just do as I say...take off your clothes, slowly. Do it for me - there is no one else here. I won't touch you. I promise.”

They sat there in the silence for what seemed to Ambilli a long, long time. But morning wouldn't come. Shashi would not leave without having his way. Ambilli wished someone,

anyone, would open the door, walk in, and lead Shashi away.

Shashi put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, I have locked the door. They are all fast asleep," he said, as if in answer to her thoughts.

"Tch, come on, let me help you..."

"Please...no," Ambilli said. She stiffened, the pillow pressing on her chest, her hands crossed tightly against it. Shashi undid his own clothes first, pulling his T-shirt from over his head, and the pyjama from under his legs, still seated. "See, I've done it now."

Ambilli closed her eyes. Shashi touched her arm, caressed her cheek, asking her to relax. "Look at me. What do you feel?"

"I don't feel anything, Shashi, go away. Go away." Ambilli whispered, her voice breaking past the knot in her throat.

Through the French windows, the pale moon illuminated at intervals the room, Shashi's bare shoulders, his chest, Ambilli's frightened face, her knuckles clutching the pillow. Shashi moved slowly, telling her not to cry. That he was not going to touch her, let alone rape her. He managed to pry the pillow from her crossed arms. He rubbed her shoulders, worked his way down to the buttons on her top and pulled down her pyjama bottoms, until she was in her underclothes, shivering with shame. Shashi whispered, "There is nothing bad-girly about this, don't worry. Look, look at yourself in the moonlight." He chuckled, feeling the goosebumps on her skin.

"There, take those off as well. Let me help you." As he spoke, Shashi clicked the hooks open on her bra, and ran his warm hand on her cold skin, humming. Ambilli was shaking violently now.

"You said..." she pleaded, her voice barely audible to herself between gasps, "you...said you... wouldn't ...touch me."

"Oh, yes. Right. I'm sorry... couldn't, couldn't resist. I was just..." He left the sentence incomplete. Sliding down himself, he gently made her lie down on the mattress, so her back was resting on it. He then pulled the blanket over her, over his naked body, and guided her clammy hand to his erect organ. Ambilli pulled her hand away with a little shriek, disgusted with the

touch. “No!”

Shashi laughed, and did not pursue her again. “This is education for you, Ambilli...,” he said, lying down next to her, his hand moving steadily under the blanket. “You are a changed person now.” He sighed aloud and moaned, and shuddered with bliss before falling quiet. Fast asleep.

Ambilli, the blanket up to her neck, held her breath until she realised that the nightmare might be over after all. Not wanting to wake Shashi, she grabbed all her clothes and ran to the bathroom, where she sat down and cried till it was morning.

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*Comfort zone. The sound of the phrase itself is so reassuring one would wish to stay enveloped in it forever.*

*Each of us carry our comfort zones with us, our own comfort blanket. For my parents, who had migrated to an urban suburb in Mumbai from rural Kerala, it took a while finding their comfort zone: the Ayyappan temple down the road, the Malayalee association, the fellow Malayalees who, probably, were going through the same apprehensions as them. It turned out that being accepted in Mumbai was not a priority, but maintaining their status as a traditional 'Keralite in Mumbai' was. So they weaved a fabric of their gods, their rituals, their prayers, their food, their tiruvathira-kali dances during festivals, their social dos and don'ts, and wrapped it around themselves and me. While they snuggled cosily under this warm blanket, covered from head to toe, they failed to see that my feet were sticking out. I was going to outgrow the blanket. Sooner or later I would get hurt. And then I would have to find a space for myself; my own comfort zone.*



(27)

**Bangalore. October 1998.**

Ambilli walked in late to the office the next day, her eyes swollen and cast downwards. She sat on her chair and switched on her computer, oblivious to the email jokes that Shashi was cracking with the others in the background. She rubbed her temples hard, as if it would push the night's ordeal deep inside her head. *He was my friend, my best friend...how could he?* She was aware of Fiona's voice arguing, fighting with Shashi as usual, and then footsteps coming closer. A pat on her shoulder. It was Amruta.

“Woke up late? Your eyes are all puffed up.”

Ambilli tried to smile despite the memory. She turned away, unable to face her friend. She began to mumble something about a headache, when someone thumped her back hard.

“Hey! What say we all grab a mid-morning coffee, huh?”

Shashi was already pulling at Ambilli's chair, turning it around to face him. He showed not the slightest hint of regret, shame or recollection of the previous night.

“Come on, come on, let's all go. *Chalo, chalo...*”

Shashi let Amruta take Ambilli's hand and walk ahead, while Siddharth, Fiona, a few other colleagues including Shashi – still reeling over the jokes – followed them slowly.

Over the next few days Shashi never brought up the episode but he never left Ambilli alone for a moment, lest she got a chance to confide in either of her two best friends.

A month later, he visited her room in the company guest house again, and then again the next fortnight, and again and again - until Ambilli had grown immune to his demands. She no longer resisted, she no longer cried. Like a robot she obeyed whatever Shashi said. Sometimes he touched her. He felt her skin; he told her she was beautiful. He told her she should flaunt her body, get a new wardrobe, change her style, *'become a woman.'* But once he was done

masturbating under the blanket, all the suggestions would die down, his hunger sated, his thirst quenched. Ambilli would put her clothes back on, lie down and stare at the ceiling, not seeing, not thinking, unable to sleep all night.

It was during the day that the questions came to haunt her. *So this is what urban women do?*

*This is what relationships are about? Is this what my parents meant, when they said a girl and a boy can never be friends?* What Shashi was doing to her was not normal, she knew. *But then it's not rape either. Or is it? What do I tell anyone? Who do I tell?* She wondered if Fiona and Amruta too had secret nights of their own but could never bring herself to ask them. She attempted to lie, telling Shashi, sometimes twice a month, that she had her period and so he should stay away. Shashi knew better; after all, he knew more about a woman's body than most well-informed women themselves. "Nice try, baby, but you're such a pathetic liar," he laughed. "Come here, let me give you a hug." And he would start all over again.

A few weeks later, Ambilli accompanied Fiona, Amruta, and a couple of other female colleagues to the shopping mall where they stopped at a clothes' store. To their surprise, Ambilli picked up a couple of snug-fitting outfits and made her way to the fitting room. Dropping her own clothes to the floor, she looked for a long time at the three naked Ambillis staring back at her. Her gaze flitting from one mirror to the other adjacent ones, she stared at the shape of their calves, the curve of their hips, the hollow of their waists, the soft flesh of their breasts, the faint lines that circled their necks. She looked ahead at her face, and ran a trembling finger around the dark circles under her eyes. She then began to try on the outfits, one by one, and liked what she saw.

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*Shashi did change me. Out went the baggy salwar kameez suits with their beautiful patterns and chiffon duppattas. I wore tight jeans and smart 'western' tops to work. The comfy Kolhapuri chappals and slip-on mojdis were forgotten. I bought myself some sleek-looking sandals and boots that gnawed on my little toe and the area just over my heel. I stopped cooking simple dals and vegetable side-dishes for my lunchbox. Instead we – Shashi and I - explored some of the finest restaurants around, their laminated menus glorifying cheese and pasta dishes in bland, floury white sauces. Lunch hours extended into coffee breaks; I worked late in the office, always trying to make up for the lost time. We were not lovers, but we moved together. I seemed to have convinced myself, somehow, that I was happy. That I had a friend. What was right, and what was wrong – who was to decide? I'd stopped thinking. Yet in my head it was always about me. I didn't realise that I was seeing even less of my parents and my other best friends, until I learnt that Fiona had handed in her notice. She was leaving the country with her boyfriend of six months.*

*I will never forget her parting words, when I asked her how she could be so trusting of someone she had just met. “At least I love him. I know what I am doing. Do you? Ambilli?”*

*I didn't, and it was the truth. What do you call someone who uses you but doesn't fall into category of either 'friend' or 'lover'? Who was Shashi to me? Nobody. Three months after Fiona left, I found the will to face up to myself and quit the company that also employed Shashi. I took up a new job in Mumbai and moved back to my parents' home. They were surprised to see me, relieved even,*

*but I couldn't face them. It wasn't me, I wanted to tell them. It wasn't me, but somewhere, somehow, I've let you down. I could not go back to the Indian clothes or the dusty slip-ons lying unused in the shoe-shelf. I lost my appetite for food. My tastes had been fouled, my body wouldn't forget...*

(28)

**Mumbai. January 2001.**

In the three years that quickly passed, Ambilli threw herself into her work, taking up more assignments, staying late in the office. She'd managed to avoid all her old colleagues; she didn't make a single new friend. At first the young men and women in her current workplace would try and get her to come out with them, share a spare evening together or sign up for a Sunday hobby class like Photography or Spanish lessons, but Ambilli made her excuses. To her great relief they soon began to leave her out of their plans, all except Seema.

Perhaps a year or two younger than Ambilli, Seema often urged Ambilli to get a life and tried various ways to gain her attention. Coming from a broken home herself, Seema empathised with Ambilli, an only child, but was increasingly curious about why she kept to herself despite everybody's well-meaning efforts to befriend her. Under some pretext or other, she tried to get Ambilli to open up, or at least talk to her more often, but Ambilli only withdrew deeper into her shell. It was on one such afternoon that Ambilli's phone rang.

"I was in town for a conference; thought I would drop in and see how my baby's doing," Shashi whispered in a husky tone over the intercom. Ambilli froze, cowering in her cubicle. "I - I'm busy right now." But Shashi insisted: he was already at the reception desk. She dropped the phone into the receiver, clasped her hands to her mouth and tried to take a deep breath. She looked around at her colleagues' faces lit by the pale hue of the laptop screens. "Kya hua?" *What's up?* Seema asked, catching her panic-stricken gaze. But Ambilli simply shook her head. She noticed the old head-peon, Ganpatrao, having his tea, and slowly walked up to him. Hesitating, she asked him if he would take a message to Shashi who was waiting outside. "Tell him anything, tell him I'm not available. Please?"

The Maharashtrian errand-boys, or peons, in Mumbai's offices are a blessing if you're in their

good books. With a memory like that of an elephant, they can be loyal and protective of you when you least expect it, and unforgiving and ruthless if you've irritated them somehow. One look at the frightened girl and Ganpatrao understood. "Tumhi zaa, tai. Mi baghto," he nodded, draining the last of his tea in one noisy swoop. *You go ahead, sister. I'll take care of this.* Ten minutes later Ganpatrao reported back to a relieved Ambilli that Shashi had left. Ambilli never learnt what had happened between the two but, for a long time, Shashi did not contact her again. Meanwhile, back in her cubicle, Ambilli desperately began looking for Fiona's email addresses again. She found three, all hand-written in Ambilli's old address book by Fiona before she'd left. "Where are you? Need to get in touch urgently...need to talk," Ambilli wrote. *Why did you always hate Shashi? Do you know he came in to meet me today? Help me get away from him! Tell me how!* Ambilli would ask her these questions when Fiona replied. This was not the first time Ambilli had tried to contact Fiona. She was certain the email addresses themselves were correct because her emails never bounced back but Fiona never responded. Ambilli persisted, nevertheless, hoping Fiona would write back someday. So engrossed was she in front of her monitor that she never noticed Seema walk towards her chair, or peer over her shoulder.

"*Fi-o-na*. Fiona? Is this *the* Fiona Perriera of Bangalore? The drummer-girl?"

A chill ran down Ambilli's back. She turned to look at Seema. "Ye- yes, she stammered. Do you know her?" Ambilli asked, weakly. Seema's eyes didn't budge from the screen. "Well, I've heard the name Fiona from my husband. He worked with her for a while..."

"What's his name?" Ambilli interrupted, her heart beating faster.

"Vijay," Seema replied.

Vijay. *Vijay*. Ambilli ran through faces of her old colleagues in her head, trying to recall a Vijay. She probably would recognise him from a photograph, she thought, half-relieved, hoping he wasn't anyone significant. "Wait, I have a picture of him on my phone. Here..." Seema instantly offered, and was back in a moment, mobile in hand. This time Ambilli did recollect: he *was* at the picnic that night.

"Er...no, Seema. Thank you. I think he might have been on another team. I don't remember this

Vijay,” she lied, returning the phone.

Seema put the mobile away, disappointed that she couldn't be of any assistance. She had never seen Ambilli so worked up, so helpless, and she determined now to find out what the matter was. To begin with, she would talk to her husband.

Throughout the ordeal Ambilli had never once suspected why all had been quiet that night at the picnic, in the neighbouring room which was occupied by the boys. Three years later, Shashi's unexpected visit to the office, and the coincidental mention of Vijay, was making her increasingly uncomfortable. It was only with great effort that she had come this far, far from Shashi and everything that had happened that night....and many nights more. She found herself picking at her old wounds again. Should she tell Seema the truth, that she did recognise that face? Should she meet Vijay and ask him if he knew something more about Shashi, or Fiona? Would she make a fool of herself? What if Vijay had no clue? The questions made her dizzy. She took the next day off, complaining of a headache, wandering along the stone parapets of Marine Drive, sitting all by herself and watching the sun go down. She began to miss her meals again, lying to her parents that she had already eaten at the office. With them also she avoided conversation, her head buried into a book or in front of the computer at home, afraid that a single question, “*what happened, amu?*” would weaken her resolve or cause her to burst into tears. Often she would relive the days when she hadn't met Shashi: *What was I like? Was I happier? Why did he pick me? Why couldn't I see?* A week later, when Ambilli was at work, a brief email landed in her inbox. She read it many times, puzzled. She hit the refresh button on her laptop, as if more words would appear by magic, but they didn't: “Dear Ambilli, I'm terribly sorry, for everything. I haven't been a good friend. I don't think I can ever see you again. Please don't try to get in touch... I only wish you well, always. Fiona.”

(29)

**Mumbai. January, 2001.**

Although he still worked for the same company, Vijay had been transferred to Mumbai the previous year, where he had married his writer/reporter wife, Seema. Seema and Vijay took the same train to the city and then went their separate ways, meeting again in the evening for their commute back home. Sometimes they stopped off at the Indian Coffee House, which was just at the ground floor of Seema's office building. In the course of their many conversations over coffee – ranging from domestic matters of house and relations, to updates about each other's workplaces and colleagues - Seema had mentioned Ambilli a number of times. Apart from the first instance when he heard her name (“Where did you say she was from again?”), Vijay never made any comments about her. Seema had forgotten about it, until today when something about Ambilli's response to seeing her husband's photograph on the mobile didn't feel right. This evening, Seema decided, she would use an old journalism trick on her own husband. She smiled at the idea even as she walked down the wide staircase of the heritage-building. In their twelve months of marriage, she'd always been the spontaneous one anyway. Either Vijay really did not know Ambilli or he did. What did she have to lose?

She would soon find out. Vijay had struck a huge marketing commission for himself just that afternoon and he seemed to be thrilled. He settled down quickly, chatted with the waiter to get some *masala dosas* along with the usual two 'South Indian filter coffees' and beamed at his wife. Seema listened to Vijay patiently and then sprang the question the moment he put the cup to his lips: “Hey, by the way, Ambilli said she knows you very well! Why didn't you tell me you two were already well acquainted?”

Vijay gulped down the hot coffee and coughed, burning his tongue. “Aahh...huh...What!?” he blurted.



Seema laughed. “Oops, Sorry! Here, place some of this sugar on your tongue,” she said and handed him a spoonful from the bowl on the table. “It’ll heal the burn in an instant,” she added, now feeling a little guilty that she was responsible for his discomfort. Vijay pushed the spoon of sugar aside. “She remembers me? What did she say she knows about me?” he asked.

Seema felt a knot tighten in her stomach. “So you *did* know her. You - you never mentioned... You lied to me...didn't you?”

Vijay shifted uneasily. “What is this, Seema? What are you thinking, asking me something out of the blue like that?” he said.

Seema continued stirring her coffee, “Well...I asked you first. You lied, didn't you?” she repeated without looking up at him. For a minute or two, the couple didn't speak. Finally, Vijay leaned forward and held her hand. “Look. Okay, okay. Yes. I lied. But...I don't know how exactly to put this. It's not how you think it is, Seema...it's complicated. All I need to know is, why now?”

“Why not now? Tell me everything. I need to know,” Seema replied, taking her hand away.

Vijay exhaled, sitting back. Then he picked up his laptop bag and wallet and leaned forward again. “Alright. I will explain. I think I owe it to you. I'll tell you everything but let's leave here now – I'll talk on the way home.”

Seema didn't see her colleague until a week later. The dark circles under Ambilli's eyes had grown deeper and she looked pale. Seema couldn't help feeling sorry for her; it sounded as if, from what Vijay had said, Ambilli was a completely different girl just a couple of years ago. How much longer would Ambilli go on like this, Seema wondered. No, she'd have to learn the truth. She'd confront Ambilli herself: only then would she be able to come out of this self-imposed misery. That evening Seema approached Ambilli as she was packing up for the day, her mind distant and still puzzled over Fiona's email.

“Ambilli, I need to talk to you...”

“What about, Seema?” Ambilli asked, managing a weak smile.

“Not here. I'll walk you to the station and we'll talk. Okay?”

“Uh...Sure.”

Seema knew it was peak hour. She thought perhaps this would be the best time to talk to Ambilli: the chaos of commuters all walking together on the streets of Mumbai, rushing to catch their local trains is always strangely reassuring and might just leave Ambilli distracted enough. Perhaps she could catch up and deal with her emotions once she was safe with her family back home.

“Ambilli, I know,” Seema started.

“Know what?”

“I know you lied about Vijay's photograph. That you recognised him straightaway.”

Ambilli stiffened. Seema held her hand and walked close with her. “Please don't get me wrong, Ambilli. I'm trying to help. In the past few months we've been working together I've never seen you smile. You never talk to anybody. I've seen you missing your lunchtimes altogether, hiding behind your computer screen. Ambilli, I believe nothing in the world is worth destroying yourself over...which is why... I spoke to Vijay.”

Ambilli had fixed her gaze on the ground, allowing Seema to lead the way as she spoke. “It took me a while to get him to open up too...you know, at first he too had maintained that he didn't know you.”

“And?” whispered Ambilli.

Seema found it difficult to look at Ambilli and continue. She stopped and placed her hand around Ambilli's shoulder again.

“Listen, whatever I'm going to say now is just so that you move on...do you understand? Some creeps decided to have the time of their life without even thinking about the consequences, and you just cannot let one incident ruin your life. You. Have. To. Move. On.”

“Seema, I don't understand anything. Please tell me, whatever it is. What did Vijay say?”

Seema took a deep breath, continuing: “That night, at your office picnic some years back, a guy

called Shashi had placed a bet with his office colleagues. Vijay... was one of them. Instead of discouraging him, instead of turning the ridiculous idea down, they egged him on. They challenged him further, saying he wouldn't be able to do it.”

“...wouldn't be able to...what, Seema?” Ambilli pulled Seema away from a group of youngsters rushing past them. They stopped in front of a roadside stall. “Tell me, what bet?”

Seema continued, lowering her voice, squeezing Ambilli's hand to reassure her. “Shashi placed a bet with the boys and a couple of girls that... he would get you to strip naked, without you even complaining about it to anyone. Vijay told me... that Shashi was in the room that night with you, and that ever since you'd changed. He told me that you were always very unlike the other girls, that you were easily trusting...almost gullible...Vijay told me that for all these years he felt guilty about letting Shashi get away...ohh, Ambilli, are you alright?”

Ambilli looked away. The tears wouldn't stop. Seema held her and gave her a hug, rubbing her shoulders. “I was very, very angry when Vijay told me all this...why, if I could just get my hands on that bastard, Shashi....

Look, I know nothing I say right now is going to make you feel any better, but Ambilli, please, please get over this incident and try and move on now. Vijay was very sorry too...he said he hasn't been able to forget about you, or forgive himself for being part of this...are you listening to me, Ambilli? Look at me.”

Ambilli covered her face with her hands. So it was a bet. A *bet*. Shashi had fooled her, and everyone else. She wanted to scream out and tell Seema that it was not just that one night. That Shashi didn't stop at stripping off her clothes. That he *used* her... to masturbate. Not that one night alone. But for many other nights that followed. She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. “You said...a couple of ...girls. Who?” Ambilli asked, her voice barely audible. Seema shook her head. “He didn't remember most of them, but he did mention the one girl you were writing to last week. Fiona.”

(30)

**Mumbai. 2001-2003.**

Ambilli didn't utter another word the rest of that evening. She didn't even realise that Seema had escorted her all the way to the station, made sure she was seated on her usual local train and then hurried back onto the platform before the train started to move. Seema had wanted to help Ambilli know the truth so she could move on and stop punishing herself. But now she wasn't sure if she'd done the right thing. She thought perhaps Ambilli was more sensitive than she had assumed. *She'll pull through this*, Seema told herself. *It was the right thing to do. She'll be fine.*

Ambilli was far from fine. In the first-class compartment where she was seated, the ladies had all begun to chatter; from their huge handbags they pulled out hot samosas, *theplas*, sandwiches and *dhoklas* for the one-hour journey home. A couple of them also had tea in shiny stainless steel flasks. *Take, take, try this*: they pushed the food into each other's open hands. They giggled and gossiped, shared stories and recipes like they did on every other evening. But Ambilli neither heard nor felt their presence today. Then two of the women sitting next to her began to yell, "*Arre baba, take na, why so quiet again?*" Ambilli pushed their hands away and rushed to the open doorway of the train which was speeding along. With her hand on the bar, she felt the cool air on her face, her hair flying and stinging her cheeks. She wanted to give in to the sharp breeze, she wanted it to slice her into pieces and overpower her. She wanted to disappear. The poles by the side of the tracks cut the sound of the whooshing air as the train sped past. It seemed to say to her: A bet. A bet. A bet. Another train approached from the opposite direction, causing a tunnel of air to rush upwards. Ambilli closed her eyes as her tears blew away. Her hand on the bar tightened once before she let go, swaying dangerously at the edge of the footboard. She heard someone scream and pull her back just in time as the both the trains screeched to a halt with a lengthy, metallic grating sound. There was blood on her *salwar* and

some on the floor. Ambilli couldn't understand. She felt no pain. The trains had stopped now. Suddenly, there was shouting and screaming all over again as commuters jumped off and collected around the tracks, just below where she was standing.

“*Mar gaya! Mar gaya!* He's dead! He's gone!” they shouted. Ambilli began to shiver all over. She was almost ready to end her own life – but someone else had died. The blood on her clothes belonged to another man. She turned around. The doorway was full of the women whispering and shaking their heads. “God help his family,” someone said. “He was from the opposite train I think, just a youngster,” another echoed. “What a waste of life,” someone tch-tched. An elderly Catholic woman standing next to Ambilli began to pray and then saw her shaking. “You poor thing, go and sit inside. And what were you doing, *beta*, leaning over like that. You could have fallen! See what happened to that fellow now...tch...*arre*, you're pale now...someone help her. The poor girl's too shocked.” Numb with the past hour's events, Ambilli felt like the train walls were going to collapse in on her. She let herself be led inside the compartment again as someone opened a packet of tissues and another offered water, trying to rub the still wet blood off her salwar.

Something in Ambilli altered forever that evening. She thanked Seema quietly the next day and resigned for the second time. For a few weeks she stayed at home and in her room, pretending to read, sending out job applications. Two months later she was working again. This time she had more of researching to do as a features writer for a quarterly magazine. It was engrossing and interesting, and there were fewer deadlines. Ambilli liked it. Three months, eight months, a year, then two years passed. She travelled to work and back home by train and bus, her face buried behind a book. On some days she would also carry home a bundle of loose pages from a forthcoming issue of the magazine, waiting to be proof-checked by her. She kept herself busy. Deep inside, though, Ambilli's disgust, guilt and shame for what Shashi did to her, Fiona's betrayal, and an anger that strangely had no face, simmered but refused to disappear. At times she lashed out at her parents and their need to conform to the Kerala *Samajam* with their many

traditional festivities in Mumbai. She maintained a distance from prying cousins or old family friends who tried to reach out to her. When Achchamma sent her proposals - rich, eligible bachelors already settling or settled abroad - Ambilli laughed at the idea and called her a hypocrite, demanding that she be left alone. *How am I expected to spend my entire life with a man, when you've never taught me how to spend an hour with one?* she asked. Ambilli noticed that she was increasingly feeling suffocated by the gestures of her unduly conservative family.

One day, while she waited at the bus stop, a young man approached and introduced himself as Manu. He seemed to talk for a long time, but Ambilli was hardly paying attention. She thought his face vaguely familiar; perhaps he was part of the Kerala community activities in the temple, or a son of her father's acquaintance? She wondered why, despite her anxiety, she let him chat with her; why she felt he should just go on and on; why she was so comfortable listening to his voice. Yes. For the first time since she could remember, she felt safe with a complete stranger.

(31)

**Paarvani****Malabar. 1783.**

In the dark of a moonless night, the silhouette of a tall man armed with what looked like a fat rifle and a few boards, moved shakily, alone and unsure on the slushy ground overgrown with bushes and trees. *Thwack!* A loose branch struck his face and he swore aloud. Paarvani stirred. She heard familiar voices in the distance – a song. Barely conscious now and in between moments of waking and blacking out, she relived a memory:

*“Move on his lips  
the tip of your tongue”*

Bubbles of laughter travelled across the sky as the garden swing rose higher and higher. Young women from the palace harem - dancers, courtesans, their royal maids and the attending eunuchs - giggled together like little children out at play. It was dusk. A time that on other days would have kept the courtesans busy with elaborate rituals of perfuming their bodies with fragrant unguents, styling their long black tresses with fresh flowers, wearing ornaments, or tracing delicate designs on their palms and forehead in anticipation of the night. The dancers would have to colour their feet red just before a performance that would go on for three hours at least.

But there would be no visitors this evening, and no guests to please.

The Muslim dictator of their state, Tipu Sultan, was on a rampage in the South and not expected for another two days at least. The women of the pleasure profession had no choice but to keep themselves entertained till then. And they were in celebratory mood.

*“...do not scare him  
by biting hard.”*

Another burst of giggles. The voice belonged to a smiling, dark-skinned eunuch who flashed his eyelashes while pretending to string flowers on an imaginary garland. A dancer joined in, even as she got her palms painted by a royal maid who could hardly keep still from chuckling to herself:

*“Place on his cheeks  
a gentle kiss;  
do not scratch him  
with your sharp nails.”*

More laughter. The women teased and pulled at each other's garments, reciting lines written by Thanjavur court's most popular devadasi, Muddupalani. They finally came together at the tree where the swing oscillated the highest, its two occupants huddled together in a warm embrace. “*Sshhh...*” said one of them as she dragged her painted toes out to the red earth, bringing the swing slowly to a halt. It was Paarvani. Turning to her best friend seated next to her, Rati Kumari, she whispered in the same mocking tone, concluding:



*“Make love  
gradually;  
do not scare him  
by being aggressive.”*

Rati, a courtesan's daughter herself, unabashed, outspoken, and yet a loving girl at heart, was not unfamiliar with the art of making a man fall for her charms. But this time it was she who was smitten. She was in love with Paarvani's childhood playmate - the ever-trusting simpleton, Siva. She hid her now flushed face in her hands and ran towards the palace, shivering with desire. The others stayed behind, laughing till tears escaped their kohl-rimmed eyes. Paarvani, left alone on the swing, still had a big smile that neatly held her breaking heart. She kicked the earth with her toes and reached for the sky again.

Paarvani coughed. The tall man stopped. He lit a candle and brought it close. Paarvani gathered that she'd been found. The man saw her limp body, face down in the wet earth, her clothes drenched and stuck to her skin like they were one. He turned her around, felt for her pulse. She whimpered. He swore again. Throwing his belongings aside, he crouched down and pulled at the branches that were tangled around her feet and waist. He pushed her hair back and felt her forehead, wiping away the wet mud that was all over her face. He brought the candle nearer; perhaps the warmth of the flame would stir her. Paarvani opened her eyes slowly, straining to focus. She had never seen a white man so close, his eyes so

blue. Her head hurt. The effort drained her and she slumped back in his arms. Vaguely, she heard him say something and talk to her, but she was too exhausted. Soon, she felt cool water over her face and licked her dry lips. The man spoke to her gently, pushing tiny bits of food into her mouth so she could swallow, if not chew.

A wild chirping of birds woke her a few hours later. Her head reeled from fatigue and hunger but she looked around, sitting up. Where were the others? Was it all a dream? She would not be surprised even if it was. Paarvani had lost count of the days she had been on the run. She had crossed a river, lost herself in a huge forest, and now she was here. She remembered there had been a revolt in the palace. The Sultan had let loose his army on the Hindus in the land, forcing them to convert to Islam or face torture and a painful death. Unable to locate her mother and *Ajji* in her village, she had knocked on Siva's doors. And Siva? Siva. Why had *he* been so angry with her? Her head hurt again. Hungry, she shivered and lay her head down on the ground. Through a gap in the leaves she spotted something move. She sat up, using the leaves for cover. It was a big shoe. A pair of big shoes, big feet, legs. A man. A white man. He lay asleep. She gasped. It wasn't a dream after all.

Crawling on her hands and knees, she looked for a weapon. A stone. Anything to defend herself. She spotted a fat tube lying next to the man: the rifle! Without a sound, she pulled it toward herself. The man moved. She stood up pointing the tube at his head. The man was awake now. Lying on his side, he shielded the glare of the rising sun from his eyes. "Whoa! Good morning to you too! And you're welcome..."

Paarvani clutched the tube tighter, not able to understand a word of what the man said.

“You... a dancer?” he asked, gesticulating and pointing to her girdle.

“Dancer? Why are you here...who hurt you?”

Paarvani looked down at her waist; a bag containing her ornaments and some gold coins hung from her girdle. *Rati!* She suddenly remembered everything.

Rati...her best friend. Rati was dead.

Dropping the tube to the ground, Paarvani sat down and cried bitterly now, her face in her hands. The man sat up; he thought he should comfort her but stopped. Paarvani screamed and picked up the tube again. The man held his hands up in the air.

“Hey, I'm not one of them. I can help you.”

Tears wouldn't stop streaming down her face; Paarvani sobbed but didn't take her eyes away from him.

“This is not...a...gun. No...rifle. Look...”

He opened a bag and brushes tumbled out. He yanked on the bag and Paarvani could see what looked like the top of an easel. “I'm an artist, look. Paint? Painter? *Chitra?* That's me. And that's my painting you're holding.” He pointed at Paarvani's hands.

Hesitating, she put the tube down. The man opened the lid and pulled out several rolls of thick paper, some of them with sketches of a palace, and a few portraits.

“I got lost in the forest too. I was told there is a village not far from here.”

Paarvani was quieter now. “*Na...Nanri sahib,*” she said, her voice choked.

“I take that for 'thank you'! Well, it was nothing. I'm glad you are fine now...”

She looked at the sketches again, trying to place where she was. At last she pointed to a portrait: a man who wore his hair in a tight bun on the

side of his head.

“That's the senior *Nammphoothiri*...one of the priests of Malabar...”

Paarvani frowned. She was far away from home. She looked above at the trees, the lush green pepper vines outgrowing them, and the dense jungle around.

“*Malabar-a?*” she asked, her heart beginning to race again.

“Yes. Malabar.”

(32)

**Paarvani****Malabar. 1783.**

*Malabar.* For years, the name had echoed through the tall palace walls and corridors of Haider Ali's Mysore: among the royal family members, the rulers, the sepoys, the dancers, the women in the harem and their many, many children. For years, the 'country of the fierce Nairs' was mentioned in the conversations between Paarvani's *Ajji* and her mother, Pankaja Amma. Most often, it accompanied a sad sigh or shudder:

*Another temple plundered, another thousand men converted to Islam, another village emptied of its women and children... where will all this end?*

At least the illiterate Haider Ali had conquered Malabar only to push the boundaries of his rule in the south of India, they said. But since his death a year ago, Haider Ali's son, Tipu Sultan - educated under orthodox *maulvis* and trained by the ruthless military - continued in his father's tradition only to impose Islam over the Malayalee Hindu, and Christian populace, be they of Indian or Portuguese origin. Tipu had recently turned his attention towards his own home country, Mysore, giving orders that not a single Hindu family be spared. And who else would know all this better than Paarvani, who, betrayed by a madman in Tipu's army, had caused the downfall of her own devadasi community, and the death of her only best friend. In hiding for almost three weeks, now accompanied by an English artist who introduced himself as Thomas, the seventeen-year-old awaited

the next turn of fate.

“Malabarees,” Thomas assured her, whispering. “They will help.”

The sound of approaching drums and gunshots had put dread in her heart – and hope in that of her companion. But Paarvani shook her head.

Reaching into the bundle tied to her girdle, she pulled out some of her own gold jewellery and thrust it into his big, square hands. Joining her own together, she begged him to take them and to not give her away.

Thomas was in a dilemma. Malabarees or Mysoreans, he knew he would not be harmed on account of his white skin. On the contrary, if he stayed hidden, Paarvani could be saved. But this meant he could remain lost forever in the jungle. He thought hard, then grinned and nodded. Claspings the gold with both his hands, he stuffed it into his bag.

The sounds marched closer.

Suddenly, Thomas turned and, with his thumb, rubbed the bright vermillion *pottu* off Paarvani's forehead, pulling off the *tali* that was around her neck. Too stunned to react, the girl stood still. He quickly dropped the *tali* into his tube of rolls, and motioned her to hide. “Sit still, then, follow me out of the forest,” he instructed her very slowly, motioning with his arms to make sure that she had understood. Paarvani nodded. Without her *pottu*, Paarvani was now not a Hindu; without the *tali*, she was not the daughter of a devadasi. Fighting the tears that stung her eyes, she watched as Thomas – with his clumsy bag of brushes and roll of half-finished paintings, both containing her jewellery - rushed towards the mob, wildly shouting for help.

(33)

**Mysore, 2004.**

Ambilli's hand hurt. Her fingers ached to stop, but the pen just wouldn't drop down. Wide-eyed and surprised at the story flowing onto the pages of her journal, she sat back and looked around to check if anybody else had caught her excitement. Then she relaxed and smiled to herself.

*Now, what next? Is Paarvani going to be rescued after all?*

Madhu visited Anand often these days, sometimes returning only to pick up a change of clothes or to leave behind some books, which Ambilli looked forward to reading. Together, over mugs of filter coffee and the snacks that Rajeshwari Amma cooked for them, they discussed a certain history or detail that Madhu would use in her research later. The early black and white photographs, palace intrigues, the life of the courtesans and dancers of the era, stories of warring Indian rulers who seemed to have invited the *firangees* – all opened up a new world for Ambilli and fascinated her. Madhu noticed that Ambilli seemed to have accepted Anand – or the fact that Madhu was 'living-in' with him – and that pleased her: it was a sign that her friend was moving on. Perhaps Ambilli was just indifferent, but Madhu didn't mind that either. She had also noticed that Ambilli was busy shaping Paarvani's life, and, unknowingly, making sense of her own.

(34)

**Paarvani****Malabar. 1783.**

Just as Thomas had predicted, the mob consisted of a small number of Malabarees, but they were also *Mapillas*: Muslim fighters on the side of the Mysorean army of Tipu Sultan. Thomas instantly switched to fluent French; the army, thinking him to be one of the allies, agreed to help him out of the forest. Paarvani followed close behind, grateful, and out of sight. It was Thomas who insisted, when they reached the ruins of a temple, that he could go no further and rest for the night. The Malabarees, somewhat amused by the order but also eager to please the white man, were well aware of the threat of animals and snakes in the dark. They complied with his wishes without a protest. Paarvani sighed in relief. Crouching behind a thicket of bushes at a safe distance from them, she rested on the face of a rock and fell asleep the moment she closed her eyes.

The next morning, despite her disoriented self, she realised that Thomas, and the Mapilla mob had already left the ruins. She thought she was all alone, but she wasn't.

*Enda avide!?? AARA?!!*

Terrified, Paarvani willed herself to disappear, but she remained there, shaking. Half sobbing, half-gasping for breath, she rattled on in her



mother-tongue about what she had been through and how she had reached this alien country. She stopped when she felt the tap-tap-tap of a wooden stick near her foot. The male voice cleared his throat and asked her gently a second time. Paarvani looked up. Standing tall and about two yards away from her was a lean man of about fifty. Despite the walking stick that made him look older than his age, the man had the air of someone who was highly learned and worthy of respect. She was reminded of the scholars and musicians she had trained under, and instantly lowered her eyes.

“*Kutty, nee aara?*” he asked again.

Paarvani felt a hot tear run down her cheek; she did not understand the language.

The man stepped back. He studied her costume, now tattered in places, her dishevelled appearance and the tiny bag that hung from her girdle. He was just on his way home after a *Bhrashthu* – the exile of a woman from their community – and had to have his purifying bath. Only then could he have his breakfast. The girl neither spoke, nor gave any clues as to who she was or why she was hiding. If the others found out, there would be another *Smarthavicharam* right here, he muttered under his breath, growing impatient.

But Paarvani caught strain of his mumbling and looked up, smiling at last. She recognised the language: Sanskrit. Years of dancing and giving expression to Sanskrit couplets and songs would now probably save her life. He cleared his throat again and prepared as if to leave, grumbling about Tipu's approaching army and the approaching clouds, heavy with rain.

“*Tishhta! Maagachchah...*” Paarvani spoke at last, begging him to wait,

to come back.

“*Aham Paarvani, nartaki...raajaganika*” she said with some hesitation, giving away her name and that she was a royal court-dancer.

“*Nartaki?*” he asked, alarmed. Dancers were not common in the Malayali land these days; she would have travelled down from Thanjavur or Mysore. Setting his doubts at rest, Paarvani continued. She confessed that she was on the run from the Mysore army and, joining her hands again, pleaded with him not to hand her over.

The old man was silent. The girl was an outsider, a *paraya*; for now, her caste and lineage were unknown. He could not promise her any help, considering that he was one of the senior-most brahmins of his rather orthodox community. If found out, he was at risk of being excommunicated himself. Unless...unless, he stroked the stubble on his chin. Unless he sent her to a Nayar *tharavadu*, where she would be safe.

*Hmm*, he spoke to himself again.... *tattra surakshitaseet*.

*Uthishtatu*, he commanded. Paarvani's feet hurt from all the thorns and sharp stones they had endured but she obeyed and stood up. The old brahmin tapped his stick in the direction of the hut and began to walk towards it, showing no inclination to help the stumbling girl. Paarvani followed him quietly.

The hut was vacant. He instructed her to wait inside until he returned and then promptly set off in the direction of the rice fields.

The silence in the room was drowned by Paarvani's heartbeat. Alone once more, she feared what would come next and clutched her bag of gold, what was left of it, regretting not having offered some to the old man. But he looked like someone who had everything: what would he do with her

jewels? She was hungry. If only she could find some food...legs drawn close to her body, Paarvani rested against the mud wall and did not fight the sleep that soon overcame her.

It was dark when she was rudely awakened by two men, armed with bows and arrows, and a flaming torch. They gestured her not to make a sound. Seizing her by her elbow, they led her into the wet and rainy night. Even as the flares sizzled, the three squished their way to a nearby clearing where a palanquin was waiting. Pushing the girl inside, they lifted the palanquin – one from the front and the other behind, and began to sprint. Paarvani held on tight to the roof of the makeshift vehicle as she was thrown from side to side and forward and backward. From now on, everything would happen so fast that Paarvani would have no time to think, or to be afraid.

*Ambilli's journal entry...*

*What is Bondage?*

*Let me tell you an old Indian story. It is from the Upanishads, perhaps, but I had read it in the Amar Chitra Katha picture book when I was a child.*

*There was this merchant who would travel far and wide on his camel, resting only for the nights. After one such tiring journey across the desert, he spotted a lone shelter ahead and decided to knock on the doors. The house owner appeared to be kind and wise, albeit, living alone. He welcomed the company of the merchant, and asked him to freshen up so they could eat some dinner together. The merchant was relieved, but soon returned, worried.*

*"I have forgotten my ropes for the camel," he said. "There could be a storm late at night...I could lose him if he remained standing outside, untethered."*

*The house owner didn't have a rope to lend. But he said, "Never mind, just tie him as you normally would."*

*The merchant replied, "Sir, you don't understand. I don't have a rope."*

*"Yes, I know. Trust me," replied the man calmly.*

*"Just tie him as you normally would, with a pretend-rope."*

*The merchant was perplexed, but he proceeded towards the camel as he was told. Swinging an invisible rope, he waved his arms a couple of times around the camel's neck and brought them together as if tying the ends, all the while talking to the animal. He then squatted down, pretending to hold the rope down with one foot, while his hands struck an imaginary iron baton into the ground. Straightening up, he patted the camel heartily, and squatted again pretending to wind the rope around this baton. Finally, he clapped his hands in front of the camel and motioned him to sit as was his usual practice. To his surprise, the camel obeyed and promptly sat down!*

*The merchant was delighted. He rushed indoors where a humble dinner of warm rotlis, some*

*yogurt and pickle was waiting. The next morning, after saying his goodbyes to the kind stranger, the merchant prepared to leave for his journey. This time the camel wouldn't get up.*

*Ten minutes after trying in vain, the merchant knocked the doors again.*

*"My camel will not budge again," he complained.*

*The man laughed. "Brother, you had tied him last night, how will he move unless you unbind his neck from the iron baton? Repeat the exercise from last night, this time in reverse, and may god be with you on your journey!"*

*Like the camel, we are all in some way, tethered to our various realities by our invisible ropes.*

*Of beliefs, of old habits, of fears, of expectations, of our pasts... We are the merchant too, carrying these ropes with us everywhere.*

*The bondage, you see, is in our own minds.*

(35)

**Bangalore-Mumbai Express. 2004.**

It was ten minutes since the *Udyan Express* had left Solapur Junction, just a few hours away from their destination: Mumbai. Crouched on the upper berth, her book in one hand, Ambilli held on to a side-handle as she leaned forward in an already shaky compartment. Madhu was not in her seat.

Ambilli put her book aside, her heart racing against the rhythm of the train. She was beginning to panic. They had been travelling overnight for over 12 hours and Madhu had wanted to stretch her limbs and take a short walk. *Did she miss the train?* She hurried down the four-rung ladder and ran through the narrow aisle, half-wearing, half-dragging her flip-flops along the way. There were two main exits, one each to the left and right of the air-conditioned compartment that Ambilli and Madhu were travelling in. Tight, push-pull doors within the coaches ensured the cool air stayed inside for the travellers, while hawkers, railway urchins and other ticketless passengers stayed out. Ambilli checked the left-side doors first, and then the toilets. No sign of Madhu. She raced back to her seat and towards the opposite exit, looking at the windows as if her friend might appear suddenly amid the scenic landscape of rural Maharashtra, but the stiff canvas curtains and the smoke-tinted screens made it difficult to peer through anyway.

It was Madhu's idea to take the week off from her research in Mysore and visit her mother in Mumbai. This would give a chance for Ambilli to visit her parents too, and

get some shopping done for Manu who had already given her a list of items he was missing in London.

“I’m going to convince Amma to meet Anand,” Madhu had winked.

*And now what will I say to her mother?* Ambilli thought, getting annoyed by her disappearance. Just then she heard familiar voices from one of the seats nearby. It was Madhu, in the midst of a debate with a middle-aged man. She had seen the man before, or heard him. Perhaps on the radio. She wasn't sure.

“But, Madhavji, with all due respect...”

“*Dekho, beta*, this is India,” the man said. “You search for unity here and you will find diversity. You seek diversity here and you will find unity. First, it was the British who divided us. Hindu, *alag*, Muslim, *alag*. Now, it is the Western media. Our own media, at times. Look at what they have become: umpires to shouting matches conducted live between politicians on national television! Words have power, remember. Words can manipulate. First, we had differences. There was always the potential, the hope, that these could be sorted by talking, arguing, laughing, together. Now, we are intolerant.” He raised his hands to gesture quote marks. “*Intolerant*. No hope. End of discussion. My best friend is Muslim, since our school days in the village we were both born and raised.... I am 72 now. Even today, when he comes to my home, he does not enter indoors. When I visit him, I don't eat food at his place. But this is our mutual respect for each other's religion.... Another culture will never understand this. Why only us? Our wives are close as well...they share recipes, gossip; they chitchat just like members in any normal family. So do all our children. You ask why these stories of friendship are not talked about more. *Arre*, why should they be? Why should *we* always justify to the

West about what happens in India? We are not the white man's burden anymore...”

Madhu listened, appearing to agree. A young couple seated opposite looked up from their mobile phones and at each other, nodding. A man selling tea and coffee approached the compartment, his cries and stainless steel containers announcing his arrival. One of the passengers who was also listening intently to the discussion, took out a hundred-rupee-note from his shirt pocket and handed it to the hawker, gesturing coffee for all those around.

The train chugged on as the man continued, his tone calmer: “*Beta*, our culture is a complex one, with so many intersecting factors – history, mythology, our gods, religions, our languages – everything acting on it and affecting it in every way even in this modern age. How long are you going to explain this to the non-Indian readers? I don't see them doing it for us. How far will you go...?”

“Are you saying, Madhavji, that as a translator, you don't have to do that in the Hindi and Gujarati books? Do you find it easier...than translating something to English?”

The man paused to sip his coffee, raising his eyebrows. “It does not really come up. Look, let's think about it from a writer's perspective. Does a writer – Indian, or for that matter, one belonging to any country – think about his or her nationality while sitting down to write a novel? No. A writer brings expression to impressions, experiences. Now, coming to the question of why I find it easier to translate to Hindi, Gujarati, or Sanskrit and not English, let me give you an example. If you were to describe the *champa* flower for a Hindi reader, or say, the *raatrani* for that matter, for example, you would call it *champa*, or *raatrani*. Correct? But, if I were to use the image of these beautiful flowers in English, the nuances of what it makes me feel, the mythological stories they bring to my mind, the endless comparisons to pining lovers and



gods...where do I begin? Sometimes I have to take the writer's permission and simply just *drop* the context. If I were to do it for another Indian language, it is most likely that the reader knows the context already...”

“Hmm..mm, I think I get your point, but...”

Madhu turned aside to let the hawker selling tea and coffee pass, and just then noticed Ambilli.

“Ambilli!! Come! I was just going to come and get you...you must meet this ...”

“I didn't want to interrupt,” Ambilli replied, slightly embarrassed, and smiled towards the elderly stranger, greeting him with the customary nod of her head in respect.

“I was worried when I didn't see you, that's all, so I ..”

“*Dekha*, Madhavji, didn't I tell you? Now this shy girl is writing a big novel.” She then introduced them to each other: “Ambilli, this is Professor Madhav Tripathy...He used to be a Hindi teacher, and was a guest lecturer at my college in Mysore as well for a while. Madhavji says he is retired from his teaching job now, but look at the dream work he is enjoying now. *Indian language evangelist*, the radio called him the other day! He's currently translating Sanskrit works into Hindi, as well as the other way around, and occasionally, also to English...that is, according to him, when he is having a bad day.” She laughed, continuing: “He also collects unique pieces of ceramic and glass for interior designi...”

“*Bas, bas*, that's quite a long introduction, Madhu *beta*. Thank you. And...,” he turned to her friend. “Ambilli, is it? A name for the moon. I hear from Madhu that you are assisting her...and writing. *Achcha hai*, very good. In my opinion...the best way to learn history, in fact, is to re-live it for the others...”

“I can only try, Sir. I am not an expert in history as Madhu is...I hope I do justice to it.”

The professor nodded in acknowledgment, looked outside the window absentmindedly, then addressed both Ambilli and Madhu.

“These are interesting times to live in. I remember my growing up days, when everything was either 'before the partition', or 'after the partition', or, 'girls cannot do this or that', and of course, the mad rush for English education...the approval-seeking of the white Westerner...somewhere, somehow, in all this rush to '*be like them*' we have forgotten who we really are. My son learnt English nursery rhymes that had absolutely nothing to do with his country, for example, and now, regretfully, my grandchildren continue to recite the same. There is a lot of our unique *Indianness*, in various forms of history, culture... that lies unsaid, forgotten, but the fact remains that it is still out there. Hidden within the rich, native Indian languages.”

He sighed, straightening up. “But... nowadays, I hear about many talented artists who are slowly *repackaging* this Indianness. It could be food, it could be textiles, it could be Indian history – be it the ancient *puranas* or more recent versions – into more modern, interesting forms of clever, what-you-call-them, *takeaways*. Take graphic comics, and fantasy novels, for example, that are based on the old stories. The *Amar Chitra Kathas* are timid in comparison, but weren't they invaluable...look at the *entire* 70s and 80s generation who have been nourished in body and soul by just reading them. As for these new writers: I think one should consider them successful if they can make at least *one* reader – grown up reading and writing only the English language - curious to learn more about his, or her own mother tongue...to understand that everything need not be fully black or white. English will always thrive; it is our own languages that we should now worry about.”

“*Kya* Sir, are you saying that we did a mistake by sending our children to English-

medium schools? It would have made millions of our lives easier, economically...but without English who will give them a job?"

The voice belonged to a fellow-passenger who had been sharing the professor's berth all along. Madhavji shook his head. "*Hanji Agarwal saab*, but new jobs can also be created. English has become a global language for every business, I agree. That is why I say that it will continue to thrive. In my opinion, equal importance should be attached to our local languages. That is all I'm saying. I have seen children at English medium schools being punished if they are heard speaking Hindi or other native languages during their classes. That...should be avoided, to begin with. There is nothing shameful about speaking in your mother tongue; it is the only connection to your roots. *Angeez to gaye*...the British have left; it is almost 70 years that they did. We need not continue to bind ourselves to their invisible ropes."

He looked out of his window, and got up from his seat laughing. "*Chalo*, I didn't realise we had left Uruli station over thirty minutes back. I've almost reached my destination and should prepare to get off now, or I could have continued talking. My wife will be relieved today to be spared of my boring *bhashan!*"

"It is always a pleasure to listen to you, Sir." Madhu beamed, helping the professor with his suitcases and water bottle.

"Wait, I'd like to leave you both with this...it is not much, just something that was leftover from my last meeting with the clients. I hope you could put it to good use somewhere." Madhavji unravelled a small square cloth-bundle from his shoulder-bag and spread it out on his seat between the three of them. It contained stained glass of all kinds: broken glass beads, tiny mosaic squares, chipped and coloured glass...each

unique.

“Did you ever imagine that collecting these could ever be a profession by itself?”

Madhu said to Ambilli.

Madhavji nodded with pride. “Yes. I have a few select clients who like what I bring them. They use these in their expensive furniture or chandeliers...it's well, a useful side-income to have, eh?”

The girls thanked him and took his contact details just before the next station arrived.

After waving their goodbyes, they slowly proceeded back to their seats. They would be home in six hours.

Pune: another three-minute halt. Madhu gestured to Ambilli as they watched Madhavji getting off. “He did mention he had to meet someone at Pune...and would be staying with his best friend. By the way, did I tell you? Even his travel is paid for..”

But Ambilli had frozen. Just as Madhavji landed his feet on the platform along with his metal trunk-suitcase, she saw a couple race from behind him and climb onto the train. Probably new to the experience of climbing aboard a moving train, the girl giggled loudly and openly hugged her partner. He, seemingly younger than her, patted her back in response and bragged about the adventure, planting a kiss on her cheek. They entered the air-conditioned compartment and sat down on the now vacant seats where Madhu and Ambilli had just been talking to Madhavji. Someone gently reminded the youth that this was the reserved section, to which he retorted, “So? Let the TC come na, we'll handle this ourselves. Thank you.”

The girl giggled again, covering her face with the dupatta clutched in her hand and fanning herself. Despite the refreshing cool train, the rush of adrenalin had made her

perspire.

“What happened, Ambilli? Do you know them?” asked Madhu.

Ambilli placed a cold finger on her lips. She was pale, as if the presence of the couple had sucked out all the strength from her. Madhu looked at them, then held Ambilli's hand and took her across to another empty seat that was further away and out of their sight. “Who? Who is it? Don't scare me, girl, tell me.”

Ambilli was on the verge of tears. “Shashi.”

Madhu grasped the situation instantly. She placed a firm hand on Ambilli's shoulder.

“You've moved on, Ambilli. Why are you upset now? You don't have to feel guilty about anything...”

Ambilli looked away but the tears fell. She shook her head, “You don't know, Madhu, ...he...” Madhu squeezed her shoulder. “I know. I know everything. I read ....it all in your journal. I didn't mean to but, the other day when you'd cried... Ambilli, I just *had* to find out what was bothering you. It's not your fault. Stop blaming yourself.

Confront him. Why, that creep...”

Madhu said it as if it were the easiest thing in the world. The girl with Shashi continued to giggle and make small protests. “Shh, don't...there are people on this train...what will they say...stop, Shashi, or I'll get off...”

Ambilli wiped her tears and shook her head. “He's doing it again. I can tell that she knows nothing...he's playing with her.” Madhu nodded. “You know what? This might surprise you but I can tell too. He's so obviously a womaniser.”

It would take a little over two hours to reach their destination in Mumbai. The sun was setting behind the faraway hills, throwing fiery shades of orange and red across the evening sky. But no one noticed. The girl continued to purr and coo in Shashi's dominating company. The train chugged on. Ambilli battled with her own mixed feelings of self-pity, anger and shame. An increasingly restless Madhu wished she could do something, *anything*, to get back at Shashi and separate the hopeless girl from him.

Lonavala. The train would stop here shortly for a minute or two. It was just past 5 pm. Coolies, *chikki*- and jelly-toffee-sellers, fisherfolk returning to Mumbai after a day's work in the small hill-station, railway urchins... a few *kurta*-clad political party members as well, one of whom held a bunch of rolled up flags – all of them had begun to sprint onto the platform alongside the slowing train. Eventually one of them would manage to place a foot on the steps of the carriage and be hauled in by somebody at the doorway.

“Wait here,” Madhu instructed Ambilli. She unpacked her bulky camera from inside her backpack and walked briskly towards the crowded exit. As she passed Shashi, she threw a sidelong glance at him: one not entirely accidental or casual, but a flirtatious, inviting one that hit its mark instantly. Shashi perked up, irritating the girl who was now practically sitting on his lap. Sure enough, a while later, Shashi made a clumsy excuse and pried himself away from her, following the direction Madhu went. When he reached the exit however, he couldn't find her anywhere. The train had gradually come to a halt by then and instead, Shashi got caught among the Maharashtrian women fishsellers who

first charged through the narrow doorway.

*“Arre, disat nahi? Bazula hatt, saalya,” Can't you see? Step aside, you idiot!*

Shashi was showered with more curses, as well as leftover fish-water that splashed out from the huge baskets over their heads – just when the coolies began to push commuters along with their luggage inside the compartment. It was only when the train started with a jerk again that everybody began to settle in nooks and corners of the narrow doorway. One of the porters scolded Shashi. *“Idhar naya hai kya? Are you new here? You should know better than blocking the entrance at this peak hour. They would have killed you with their gaalis alone,”* he said, pointing to the fisherwomen before hopping out of the moving train onto the platform.

The railway urchins sitting near the door laughed at his expense, more comments followed, and Shashi, his clothes stinking wet and toes stepped on, felt foolish to the core. Still seated inside, his girl was embarrassed. She was surrounded by stern-looking political party workers who had been 'tipped-off' about a runaway couple. “Where is the boy?” they demanded. The ticket-checker standing next to them basked in their authoritative clout. Not only had he refused Shashi and his girlfriend a seat, he made them pay a hefty fine for getting on the train without a reservation. The men were still not satisfied. A mob began to gather. Stop the train, they growled. “Let them learn a lesson or two about our *sanskaar*, our moral values. The uncultured youth today...bah! Throw them out I say!” One of them pulled the chain above. The train groaned noisily, and screeched to a stop beside a remote-looking, rustic and clearly isolated railway platform. The girl was sobbing by now. Shashi's face was white with fear and anger; it looked like he had been slapped too. The entire compartment eyed the duo as they were publicly shamed and made to get off. Within a minute, the train started up again with a

jerk. From the windows, amused onlookers smirked with contempt and hushed chatter as they watched the girl now bawling, while Shashi tried to pacify her in vain even as the train picked up speed and left them far behind.

For now, three berths away from where they were led off, Madhu clutched her tummy and laughed. Ambilli was puzzled. “Alright... I know that you smoothly exited one doorway and got in through the other one, but what *did* you tell the ticket checker? How did you get the fisherwomen to create all that commotion?” And the guys with the flags...? she whispered.

“*Apna* moral police,” Madhu chuckled, “...came in at the right time. And as for the ticket collector...,” She waved a hundred-rupee note in the air, before folding it neatly and putting it in her purse, laughing all the while. “Oh, Ambilli...you know there is *nothing* that money cannot buy in India. And a little revenge can come very cheap.”



(36)

**Paarvani**

**Malabar. 1783.**

The first thought that came to Paarvani when she opened her blurry eyes was that she was back home at last. The face that peered closely at hers was her mother's. She smiled. *Amma*, she said, although she couldn't hear her own voice. The face looked surprised. Even happy. But it spoke to her in a strange language, towelling her burning forehead, her cheeks and neck. Two other faces presently appeared on either side, their brows knit with concern.

Paarvani tried to prop herself up, completely disoriented until two girls rushed to help. She saw that they were naked up to their waist, around which they had elegantly draped a gold-bordered white cloth. An older girl – who Paarvani had initially mistaken for her mother - covered herself in a rich, cream-white cloth that left only her shoulders and neck exposed. She also wore a necklace of gold, pearl and coral with matching earrings and bangles. All the girls tied their lustrous black hair in a thick bun on the side of their heads. Paarvani's face fell. She was not at home.

The girls sat around her, patting her shoulder and comforting her. The older one among them brought forth a steaming wooden bowl of rice gruel. She used a spoon made from hand-stitched mango leaves to scoop up some of the liquid and gently let her drink from it. Paarvani closed her

eyes and took one long sip, letting the warm, soft grains of rice, crushed pepper and coconut coat her tongue and caress her throat. She now remembered being brought in by the Nayar warriors, limp with exhaustion and fever. She recalled being fed warm *kanjee* in pepper-water, and some herbal concoctions that smelt very bitter despite her dead tastebuds. But she felt hungry today and held her neck out for the food again; the girl was only too happy to oblige. One more sip from the leaf, and another. And another. Paarvani opened her eyes finally, misty with gratitude. “*Nanri....nanri....*,” she bowed, her hands joined together. The girl held Paarvani's hands and nodded, accepting the gesture.

“Shakuntala...,” she introduced herself placing Paarvani's hands on her own chest. She then pointed to the other two girls who smiled and embraced Paarvani, one by one. “...*Bhargavikutty*. *Damayanti*.” Paarvani was tired but she returned their warm embrace. She placed her hand on her own chest and replied, “Paarvani.”

In the days that followed, Paarvani made a rapid recovery. She learnt that Shakuntala *chechi* was a daughter of a wealthy chieftain from North Malabar who had lost her mother and sisters to Tipu's army. Her father was in hiding, scheming with the tribal armies of Malabar so he could win back his land and his people. Many addressed her as Shakuntala *thamburatti* or princess, though she preferred to be called 'elder sister'. *Damayanti* was Shakuntala's maid who had become an orphan as well. The girls had escaped to the south of the country by boat, along with many other families, royals and commoners alike. And this is where they met the youngest among them: *Bhargavikutty*. Minutes before Tipu's army

reached Bhargavi's doorstep, her mother had ensured that her daughter left on the last boat that the refugees were able to take. As the vessel sailed away in the dark of the night, Bhargavi had watched her village go up in flames. A couple of days later, she received information that perhaps her parents were still alive, so long as they had swallowed the meat that was forcibly stuffed down their throats, and were not Hindus anymore.

The eight-pillared house – *ettukettu* - that sheltered Paarvani belonged to a wealthy Nayar *tharavadu* from Kizhianur: a town that was destroyed and plundered by Tipu's army and soon evacuated by its inhabitants. Along with Paarvani, princess Shakuntala *chechi*, Damayanti and Bhargavikutty were at least five or six other women who shared their own stories of how they narrowly escaped death or Islam. The eight pillars of the house formed the centre of the rectangular structure with its roof open to the sky. Several rooms were built around this central courtyard - rooms for storage of grains, storage of weapons, a pooja room for the gods, bedrooms, kitchens, sitting rooms – all of which were now converted into shelters for the escaped Nayar women. Most of the women had a fair knowledge of herbal medicines themselves. In times of an emergency, they sent word to the *vaidyar* residing in the next town. Sometimes they received news and messages from their own family members: that one of them was lost, or that they were all alive, or that they had no alternative but to succumb to another religion. Once or twice a week, a few passing Namboodiris or Nayars brought them supplies of food and clothes, and kept them up to date with the latest news or rumour. They spoke of hostilities between the English troops sent from Bombay and the Dutch forces in Malabar and of Tipu's inhuman treatment towards the new prisoners at the Telicherry fort:

he had by now captured almost every territory that the English were protecting. No matter what the stories were, the women in the *ettukettu* had to stay back and nurse those new refugees who arrived. Paarvani helped too, and, listening to the tales of the brutality of Tipu and his ruthless army, thought to herself, *how wrong Jamaal was. How wrong he was to be singing about Tipu's exploits and bravery just over a month ago...*

Over the course of the two years that Paarvani would stay in this *ettukettu*, she would also learn the language and many customs of the Malabarese, identify what made them different from her own upbringing and, most helpful of all, meet and make many more women friends. Despite their ongoing war with Tipu's men, despite the hardships and separations from their loved ones that the women endured, they had a unique sense of humour which Paarvani learnt to admire and draw inspiration from.

“What happens to the men?” Paarvani asked Shakuntala *chechi* one day. Another woman had taken refuge in the house early that morning and they had just returned from her room for the evening prayers. Although the girls spoke in their own different languages, they could communicate and understand each other very well. They had also begun to pick up words and phrases from Malayalam, Kannada and Sanskrit and mix them into a single sentence which led to hilarious results.

“The men are either dead or at war; it is the women we have to save.... In our *naade*, it is the women who run families after all.”

Paarvani was told about the matriarchal system of the Nayars, where the men come and go, the women stay and rule the house. She learnt that a Nayar woman is as independent and cultured and well-read as perhaps a courtesan in the royal palace in Mysore. She is eligible for as many husbands as she desires, as long they belong to the same or a higher caste. The children stay with the mother, their needs taken care of by her own brothers or relations.

“I don't understand. So, there's no formal marriage?”

“There is and there isn't.... I'll explain. Before a Nayar girl gets her first period, the girl's parents choose a suitable, often elderly brahmin or someone senior in their own lineage, for the *tali-kettal* ceremony. The *tali*..., this,” and she held up her own leaf-shaped gold pendant to show Paarvani, “...signifies, 'I am from a respectable Nayar family.' But this association ends there. When the girl is physically mature, she chooses a companion to live the rest of her life with... and with blessings from both families of course. There is no formal marriage, just an exchange of cloth. If the couple are not happy with each other, the cloth is returned and they part ways. She can have more than one husband if she wishes to...four to five or even twelve who will provide for her.”

Paarvani was surprised. “Don't they quarrel? What happens at night...if two of them come at once?”

Shakuntala *chechi* laughed. “It is far less complicated than you think: They don't. The Nayar man who is going to sleep with her leaves his sword by the door to indicate the woman is engaged for the night...there is no question of jealousy or scandal, because sex is one of the necessities of life, just like eating food or taking a bath. There really is no ceremony

involved... Look, Nayar men are warriors, and almost always at war; the Namboodiris are more concerned with not mixing their pure lineage or brahminical social status. This system works out as convenient for us Nayar women: our duty is to ensure the proper running of the house or *tharavadu*...and also to keep our bodily desires in check. Of course, a Namboodiri brahmin has his own privileges over our Nayar community, and if he were to keep a lady engaged, everybody would know.”

Paarvani now understood. She recalled that a few days earlier, one of the women refugees spoke of a 'sambandam' proposal that had come for her. Damayanti explained that it was a way of formalising a union between a man and a woman.

“A *Sambandam*?” Paarvani asked.

“Yes. A Namboodiri brahmin cannot be refused if he asks for a *sambandam*, a union with a Nayar girl; in fact it is considered a great honour for the *tharavadu*. He will visit the girl for as long as they are both compatible and happy with each other. Maybe as lifelong companions. But the more the number of Namboodiris that approach a Nayar girl, the more respect she gains from the society. The same rule applies for other Nayar men of higher castes.”

“But what if a girl is not ready? What if she wants just one man?”

“Then she simply refuses all the others. If she is in a *sambandam* already, or living with a Nayar man and is happy with him, she will not be approached by any other man unless he wants his throat slit.”

“Then,” Paarvani reacted with some surprise, “...you Nayar women share an almost equal status with the men!”

Shakuntala *chechi* winked, “My dear Paarukutty, there is no doubt whatsoever. We clearly are the stronger sex.”

(37)

**Jamaal****Seringapatam. December, 1782.**

My name is Jamaal. Jamaal Fauz Mohammad: *Killedar*. Seringapatam fort-keeper. Commandant. Call me whatever you want, I am here now. Not by accident though. I always knew I would be commandant to Haider Ali, sooner rather than later. Why else would I volunteer to fight alongside him in all his bloody campaigns for Rs 30, and survive each time? I could have fought many more, but I was getting impatient. I had to win his attention. And so *I* planted the hunt that night. I sent the drummers into the forest long before I sent word to Haider Ali (interrupting his lovely evening *nautchgaana*) that the tiger would be out on the plains... right under his nose. Hah! I knew he would not be able to resist that. After all, the great Haider Ali loved big, ferocious cats. The wilder they were, the bigger his challenge. He was entitled to the first stroke that would get the tiger into his trap, and then into the fort along with the other animals. But this striped fellow was closer than the *Naiksaab* had ever imagined. You see, I had stunned the tiger already: he was in no position to kill. All I had to do was to pretend to risk my life and beat Haider to his first stroke.

By the grace of Allah, it all went off very well. Haider was impressed. His men, may they live long, told him about all the wars that I had volunteered in, and recommended that I be taken in the army. "I was just doing my duty, *Naiksaab*," I replied modestly, my head bowed. Nobody had a clue about my real intentions, not one of them.



So here I am, Jamaal Fauz Mohammad, *killedar* of the Seringapatam fort.  
Commandant.

For a year and a half, I trained and worked under Haider Ali: riding, fighting, hunting, relaxing. That's almost nineteen months together without a single break. Yet I never got a chance to tell the great ruler how much he inspired me, why I'd always looked up to him since my childhood. That I grew up thinking... no, *knowing*, that I wanted to be bigger than Haider Ali. And now, when I have got this far, *this* close to fulfilling my dream... rumour is that Haider is dead. Died of a cardiac arrest, the old man. *Allah* has a strange rulebook for Opportunities. In my hands are a good two days to fulfil my destiny: two days before Tipu reaches Seringapatam and takes charge of the fort. But I cannot reveal my plans to anyone. Not yet. Gaining the shrewd Tipu's trust is going to be difficult. I will have to wait. *Insha Allah*, my time will also come.

(38)

**Paarvani****Kizhianur ettukettu, Malabar. 1784.**

“So who is this *Jamaal*, Paarukutty? Is he your lover?” Shakuntala *chechi* teased even as she saw the colour drain from Paarvani's face.

One of the Nair girls in the house had received a proposal for a *sambandam* from a prosperous Namboodiri family and after many days, the Kizhianur *ettukettu*-turned-refuge centre for women was quietly excited about the event. The Namboodiri himself was in a hurry to leave the town and move to Travancore; he would take the girl with him if she gave her consent. The girl, unsurprisingly, looked forward to the journey and the new life.

“Husshhh, where did you hear the name?” Paarvani moved next to Shakuntala *chechi* who was making a garland of *tulasi* leaves and little white flowers. The *thamburatti* smiled. “So he *is* your lover, huh? You kept repeating his name while you were delirious with the fever when we found you.”

“I did?” Paarvani's face fell. She sighed. “I don't know anymore, *chechi*. I thought *Jamaal* was special...not as special as *Siva*, who will always have a place in my heart. But *Jamaal* has secrets. I am worried he is not what I think he is.”

Shakuntala *chechi* put aside the garland and touched Paarvani's shoulder.

“Really, why? Tell me more.”

“I first noticed *Jamaal* three... four years ago when he came barging into

the entertainment tent. He was a nobody then. It was a night of great celebration: Haider Ali and his son Tipu had gained their victory against the British and the Captain, David Bairdsahib, was thrown into the dark dungeon. Rati had found her soulmate in Siva and I... I had lost mine forever to her. We were dancing, enacting a comedy about jealous lovers when this Jamaal interrupted our performance. He said a tiger had wandered out of the forest, and was too close to our camp. Haider Ali, the prince Tipu...they all picked up their weapons and charged after the tiger and we were left standing alone. Two days later, when I was summoned to the durbar for another song, I saw Jamaal again. He looked radiant. He had just been appointed *Killedar* by then, and he showered a lot of gold on Rati and me. Rati always hated the sight of him; she called him a two-headed snake. I pretended to ignore him. For Rati's sake I honestly tried, but deep inside I wanted to know him. I wanted to talk to him, I was pining for Siva and Siva ...well I have told you about him, haven't I? Siva was so much like a child but in Rati's company he seemed to have matured overnight. And he was so happy. I didn't have the heart to snatch him away from Rati, not for one minute. Not ever. And so I began to get drawn to Jamaal. Unlike Siva, Jamaal walked tall and he was..."

"So you fell for his looks?" Shakuntala *chechi* interrupted in a mocking tone.

Paarvani looked down at her hands and said nothing.

(39)

**Jamaal****Seringapatam Fort. December, 1782.**

Beautiful. Vulnerable. Fragile. Very fragile. I cannot take my mind of the young girl who danced last night and sang the most heartfelt, melodious song I have ever heard. Her body smooth as shiny marble, her colour that of the setting sun... I cannot wait to know her more. She has reached out to me and somehow I want her to *want* me more. Her eyes, her sad, curious eyes have warmed my stone-cold heart and yet she resists me. I have sent a messenger to the zenana for the third time tonight. Will she come?

Love? Bah! That word is not for soldiers, not for Jamaal Fauz Mohammad. I have worked hard for my position as Commandant (scheming, calculating, managing relations...if this is not hard work, what is?). I have had to remind Tipu constantly that his recently deceased father – may he rest in peace – did not make the wrong decision in employing me. What I need is a trick, something very significant, to a) remain the *killedar* of the fort and commandant long enough and, b) take Tipu's place on the throne. Am I jealous of his position? Why not? I have everything that Tipu has and more: the brains as well as the brawn. Yet by not having a ruler for a father – oh, alright, I'm an orphan: does that make me unworthy of the crown? Even Tipu knows that Sheikh Ayaz – the Chirakkal, Nambiar boy convert – was more favoured by Haider than his own blood. Why else would Tipu attempt to kill and chase Ayaz out of

Mysore as soon as Haider Ali died? The last I heard, Ayaz had begged the English to send him to Bombay. The fool, Sheikh Ayaz. Got me to kill a brahmin for nothing. He could have come to me directly, bah!

Well, I'm not the one to wait for another chance. I have begun to keep track of everyone in the palace like a fox. The diwans, the courtesans, the visiting French, the dancers and musicians, the guards, even the poor old imprisoned Maharani of Mysore, Rani Lakshmamani. She is old, yes. But she certainly is not helpless. A number of letters are being taken to and from her quarters. Who does she write to? Who delivers the letters and their replies back to her – she is not using any pigeons. This I have to find out, before anybody else does. Least of all, Tipu. This is my golden chance. And I know one little golden bird who might be of help. Ah, here she is. *Allah!* Paarvani. Beautiful, beautiful Paarvani.

(40)

**Srirangapatna. 2004.**

“The place seems too quiet for a temple, don't you think?” Ambilli said at last.

“Hmm,” said Madhu almost absentmindedly. As she was busy making notes, Ambilli wandered off on her own on the vast, Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple grounds. Some of the structures were broken or crumbling, yet the grass was freshly mowed. There wasn't the usual hustle and bustle of hawkers selling flowers and coconuts for the deity. There weren't any children scampering about for the cheap plastic toys that sat alongside the pooja accessories at the stalls. In fact, there were no stalls. Ambilli then noticed with a sudden creepy feeling that there also wasn't a single devotee in sight. A drunken man lay senseless under the shade of a huge peepul tree; its heart-shaped leaves shivered along with the strings and the faded, torn kites that lay entangled among some of the branches.

Ambilli turned around to look for Madhu. She was still near the creaky, revolving gate that had let them in one by one. Madhu had stepped out again and was now talking to a bespectacled old man, taking notes. Occasionally she would stop and squint, or scratch the bridge of her nose with her pen: a sure sign that she was disturbed by something. Maybe she wasn't getting the information she wanted? Ambilli waited for Madhu to catch her eye and, when she eventually did, she signalled to Madhu that she was going for a *pradakshina* around the temple. Madhu waved her hand in response: go, go on..., she gestured, still talking to the old man.

Ambilli walked ahead. She took in the maroon and white-striped paint on the stone compound walls, and the messages, presumably, of love and longing or pure mischief etched on them by hundreds of vandalising hands in Kannada, Tamil, some rare ones in English. She'd probably

covered about fifty metres of the grassy stretch when she finally noticed the sanctum building. Ah, this is where the deities must be kept, she thought, and quickened her pace as she didn't want a preoccupied Madhu to leave without her. She thought it strange that, despite the early hours, there were no sounds of prayers being chanted, no smell of incense or camphor surrounding the main place of worship, not even a lit *diya* or oil-lamp. She reached another gate. It was locked. Ambilli craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the sacred deity but suddenly something told her she must leave. Ambilli stepped back, looking at the outer walls again. The statue of Garuda, Vishnu's eagle-chariot, was missing a wing and half its crown. There were signs of other statues standing alongside Garuda but these were minus heads or a torso. She fought her racing heartbeat and a single fear that slowly began to grip her throat: *No, no, this is a place of holy worship...it cannot be haunted...can it? No!*

It is said that one must never leave a *pradakshina* or circumambulation around a temple incomplete. Having encountered a solid gate and none of the sacredness of a normal temple atmosphere, Ambilli had wanted to turn around and run back to Madhu. But the age old saying had put her in a fix. It was only now that the deathly silence that hung over the place was also beginning to unnerve her. Ambilli was frightened but decided nevertheless to complete the circle. The sound of dry leaves dragging themselves on the earth further startled her, sending a shiver down her spine and prompting her to hurry. As she neared the peepul tree she noticed that the drunken man was now sitting up and looking at her with bloodshot eyes. He grinned at her and mumbled something before collapsing into his stupor again. The dust and vomit smell that hit Ambilli in the face almost made her scream and she raced back to the revolving gate where Madhu waited, sitting on one of the stone steps.

“Let's go, let's go, please...,” she pleaded and Madhu instantly stood up. They walked back to the waiting taxi and Madhu instructed the driver to take them back to Mysore. While Ambilli couldn't stop talking about her experience for the first five minutes, Madhu seemed to be lost in

thought.

Ambilli changed her question. “Madhu, what did you learn about that temple? Why did we visit this place when they aren't worshipping the gods there anymore?”

Madhu sighed and shook her head. “You're right. There wasn't any need for us to go there. I'd heard Rajeshwari Amma vaguely mention this temple and I had wanted to see it for myself.”

“So, what's so special here? It looks like it was looted, plundered just like most of the other monuments we've seen around Srirangapatna, except Tipu's Daria Mahal, of course.”

“Tipu. That's what is special about this temple.”

“You mean he destroyed a temple that perhaps was very significant in history?”

“Yes, Ambilli. And no. That gate to the sanctum, which was locked and from where you had to turn back, was witness to the slaughter of 700 members of the Iyengar community from the Mandya village...”

Ambilli clasped her hand to her mouth. “I – couldn't stand there...no wonder – but *seven hundred*, killed...?”

“Yes. By Tipu, when he'd discovered that the Maharani was spying behind his back...it's shocking yes, but it *is* still part of history. What is shameful about this history is not the fact that Tipu had slaughtered seven hundred people ruthlessly, but that his deed is deliberately withheld from us. This happened in 1783: on *narakachathurti* - the fourth day of Diwali. You will not find this story in any of our history books, or on any of these shiny tourism-plaques that have been so helpfully put up by the Indian government. And yet a child belonging to the *Bharadwaja* clan will tell you why Diwali is not celebrated – but mourned – on this day, even after two hundred years. For them,” she gestured towards the local Mysorean taxi-driver, “...for us, as common Indians who have a right to know our past, history is denied. If *this*, Ambilli, isn't a true betrayal, what is?”



(41)

**Paarvani****Malabar, Kizhianur *ettukettu*. 1784.**

“I did not fall for Jamaal, Shakuntala *chechi*. I was afraid of him. My mind said this man is powerful, I could be the queen if I agree to his demands, but my heart would just not agree. Jamaal was powerful indeed. From a common, volunteer foot soldier, he had risen to the post of the *killedar* and commandant directly under Tipu Sultan. He had the entire army under his right thumb. He was ruthless in dealing with an enemy, or even with his own staff if they did not obey. He claimed to be an orphan, but I'd heard people whisper that he had burnt his parents alive and put his own lame brother to death. Only a devil would do that, Shakuntala *chechi*.

When he sent word for me, twice, and a third time, I got frightened for my life. I was not afraid for Rati – she often openly challenged him and called him a coward, but Rati had Siva to protect her. Who could I run to if I were in trouble? And so I put on a brave face, and went to Jamaal that night. He was pleased. So pleased that I began to wonder if what I had heard from the others was true at all. Jamaal pampered me, showered me with money, gold jewellery, the finest silks, and he talked to me. He listened. He was curious about the life of us entertainers. He wanted to know everything: where we got the songs from, how far the performers travel from, how much we got paid, and if we were happy. He wanted to know how different things were when the Wodeyar king was around, but of course I was too young to remember that. I told him about my mother, that she was held captive by

Haider Ali once, and then sent to the *Natakashala*, and how she had escaped from there and was saved by an old devadasi. He was sympathetic. He took me in his arms and gently made love to me. My fears had all but melted away. I was relieved, but I couldn't wait to get back to the safety of my room; somewhere deep inside, for the first time I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing.”

Paarvani swallowed. Shakuntala *chechi* pressed her to go on.

“For months, this went on. When he wasn't away on a battle campaign, he sent for me. He wanted me to sing just for him, to dance for him and I did. I would do everything he said just so I could get away from him quickly. I couldn't understand why I was obeying him so. Perhaps,” Paarvani bowed her head, “perhaps I was still afraid of him.”

“Did you not tell Rati about Jamaal?” Shakuntala *chechi* asked.

Paarvani nodded. “Rati got to know. But it was too late by then.”

“What do you mean, too late?”

“I wish I had told her earlier. If there was a reason why Rati had a dislike for Jamaal, it was because she knew the ways of the royal household. She knew what went inside the heads of the shrewd rulers, Tipu and all his followers. She mostly kept her opinions to herself but she certainly could recognise a bad vibe from far away. And Jamaal was one of the two-headed snakes she'd always warned me against.” Paarvani looked down at her feet

now, circling her big toe on the dry, cowdung-washed surface of the floor.

“I should have trusted her,” she said sadly.

“What happened, Paarvani?”

Paarvani was quiet for some time. Shakuntala *chechi* let her be. At last she inhaled deeply, her breath breaking up as if she had been sobbing for a long time.

“About four or five months after I met Jamaal, there was word from my village that a few houses had perished in a fire. Nobody knew how the fire had started - it had eaten everything: the houses, the people within and even some cattle. Where the houses were untouched, some goats and cows had simply disappeared. I feared the worst for my *Amma* and old *Ajji*, and I was told not to hope for any miracles: it was their house which had caught fire first.”

Shakuntala *chechi* placed her hand on Paarvani's while she continued.

“There was no point in me returning to my village again: there was nothing there, no one. But I still did. Siva was there too. His mother's face was burnt beyond recognition but she had survived. He had learnt that there were many horsemen who had passed through the village that night. Despite my grief I could see that Siva was so unlike the shy, unsure boy I had befriended so many years ago just to save him from the village bullies. Rati's love had really turned him into a man just like she had said she would. Siva handed me a torn piece of cloth that was found among the debris. The orange and black stripes of the tiger were unmistakeable. I

couldn't understand. Siva was angry. He shivered as he spoke. 'It was Tipu's army. They had come here looking for something, someone. And I think they found her first. *Your* mother, Paarvani. They had come looking for your mother. Why, not even my mother had known that Pankaja Amma had once been held captive by Haider Ali, and then run away. The whole village is talking about it now. How, Paarvani? How did they know?' Then he pointed his finger at me and said, 'It's you, isn't it? You have *killed* your own mother, Paarvani. What have you done?'

“I just sat down and cried. I still couldn't understand why Tipu's people would want to kill my poor *Amma* and *Ajji*. It just didn't make any sense. I went back to Seringapatam.”

“What happened then...?”

“I had my first quarrel with Rati. She too blamed me for their deaths. She asked me why I went to Jamaal's room every other night...”

“*Aan, madi, madi...sandhyadeepam samayam aayile?*”

The story was interrupted by the arrival of *Veliya Ammayi*. The girls instantly stood up with their heads bowed as a mark of respect. The elderly matron was not related to any of them but she took care of the smooth running of the house, now a shelter for many. She politely but firmly reproached them about not having lit the prayer lamps in the evening:

“That's enough storytelling for today. *Shakuntalakutti*, you are a princess. At least you should not forget your duties as the *Thampuran's* daughter. It brings bad luck on the family you know...”

Both Paarvani and Shakuntala *chechi* nodded meekly and said they would attend to it rightaway. They left for the house pond where the other girls were already freshening up, washing their faces, hands and feet before proceeding to the pooja-room for the *sandhyadeepam* or evening prayers. *Veliya Ammayi* lay fresh wicks in the huge brass lamp and smiled, satisfied. Shakuntala *chechi*, being the most privileged of the lot, poured sesame oil into it and lit the lamp. She held it in her hands and led the others who all chanted together: *deepam, deepam, deepam*. Taking the lamp to the four directions of North, South, East and West of the house, she placed it in the front porch area where they all sat down around it to say their prayers. By now, Paarvani too had picked up this everyday ritual and it always had a calming effect on her.

Soon after the prayers the girls lit the lamps and lanterns in and around the house, and then helped the women in the kitchen with laying out the dinner – a simple *kanjee* and a shallow-fried yam side-dish. Shakuntala *chechi* and Paarvani did not speak to each other until it was bedtime.

“I can't sleep, Paarvani,” whispered Shakuntala *chechi* at last, sitting up in her bed. “Why did Rati blame you? Did Jamaal...surely that's not true. How were you to blame? And what did you tell her, Paarvani?”

Paarvani was not able to sleep either. She and the other girls lay on a long mat made from coconut tree-leaves and placed on the bare floor. Now rising from the mat, she too crossed her legs and sat up. At first she was silent, hesitant perhaps, and lost in her memory of the day. “I – I told her it was

none of her business,” she said finally, and started to cry. But soon she stopped and continued her story. Shakutalachechi held her by her shoulders, and motioned that they should sit up on the bed and talk.

“Rati calmly asked if I had in anyway told Jamaal about my family – about my *Amma* and *Ajji*. I kept quiet. I was horrified that Jamaal should do such a thing – if he had, that is. I told Rati I didn't believe her. That Jamaal might well be brutal toward his enemies but he was good to me. I bragged that I even thought he loved me, though I myself wasn't really convinced. Rati began to laugh. Taking my hand, she boldly walked to Jamaal's chambers and asked to see him. I was shaking, telling Rati to stop this madness...

“Jamaal dispersed his men and asked us to enter. The men looked at us in a queer way as they went out. Rati barged in, with me still holding on to her hand. 'This girl', Rati said pointing at me. 'Leave her alone, Jamaal. You are nothing but a shrewd coward. Paarvani is naïve and knows nothing about the politics in the palace. I know you are responsible for her mother's death.' At this Jamaal began to laugh. He laughed for a long time. Then he turned into someone I had never seen before. His eyes were bloodshot and before I knew it, he had grasped Rati's arm and pulled her towards him. 'And what about you, you are not naive are you, the queen of desire, Rati Kumari?'

“Rati wriggled and kicked him to get away, but he was too strong. I tried to pull her away from his grasp but he pushed me away. 'You stay out of this, Paarvani. This girl has been asking for it for a long time now. It is time I gave her a taste of my pride as well. Guards!', he shouted, 'don't let anyone come inside for the next fifteen minutes. I need some privacy, understand.'

The guards nodded and stood outside, blocking the doors with their spears. I screamed as Jamaal began to strip Rati off her clothes. First her sleeves and then the entire dress. He pinned her to the wall and threatened her menacingly, 'Calling me a coward, are you? What are you but a mere courtesan? *Now* what do you think of me?' Rati had tears in her eyes but she had not given up. She looked at him straight in the eye and spat in his face. 'I am not afraid of you like Paarvani, Jamaal. Whatever you do, you cannot crush me.' Saying that, she struck his crotch with her bare knee and pushed him away. Jamaal growled in pain and tried to hold her again but she pulled away in time. Clutching what clothes were fallen on the floor, Rati caught hold of my hand and we ran outside through the gap under the spears. The sound of loud laughter came out of the room again. The guards prepared to chase us but Jamaal instructed them not to bother. 'Let the birds fly away,' he guffawed loud enough for us to hear. 'They won't be out of my hands for too long, you will see.'"

(41)

**Paarvani****Malabar. 1784.**

Mornings at the Kizhianur refuge house started quite early, when the sky was pink with anticipation of the sun. Tiny birds perched noisily on branches of trees and shrubs, shaking the glistening dew that fell onto the thirsty earth below. One by one, the girls took turns sweeping the courtyard of dry leaves and fallen branches. Another girl smeared the ground with fresh cowdung which, when dry, kept away tiny insects and lent an auspicious aura around the house. Behind the *naalukettu*, *Veliya Ammayi* supervised and helped a young girl set alight the small pile of rubbish collected. It crackled and burned, the smoke rising and merging with similar plumes of dark smoke coming from other huts and houses in the village. Shakuntala *chechi* and Paarvani, now inseparable companions, were given the task of cleaning the centre of the *ettukettu*, the sacred sanctum where all the deities were placed and worshipped. There they removed all the withered flower-offerings from the previous day and replaced them with fresh new blooms. They emptied the copper pots and filled them with fresh water from the well. Paarvani dropped *tulasi* leaves into the pots, watching the leaves float for a while and then swirl and lie at a tilt – half submerged, rippling gently - in the now holy water.

The piercing, heart-wrenching cry of a woman wailing aloud startled Paarvani and everybody else in the huge house out of their calm. *Veliya Ammayi* rushed to the front porch where a Namboodiri had arrived. Next to



him, an older woman, a Nair lady, had fallen in faint and sorrow while her daughter ran to her side.

*Enda ivide? Veliya Ammayi* asked, her gaze shifting from the elderly Nair woman to the Namboodiri. The woman cried. “I cared for her as my own child...oh, poor unfortunate girl, what have I done?”

The man cleared his throat, unaffected by the rest of the women now gathering around him albeit with their heads bowed and standing at a distance. In a cold and flat tone, he announced: “A *smarthavicharam* – which has been in progress over the last few months – has just been concluded. The lady on trial was the eldest daughter belonging to the Kizhianur Namboodiri *illam*. She has already been isolated, subjected to physical torture for days and stripped off her status as an *antarjanam*, based on the evidence forcibly extracted from her maidservant....” At this point, he glanced sideways at the elderly Nair woman who continued to sob and beat her chest, and he continued: “...some days ago, she finally relented and named the accused who supposedly had an illicit relationship with her. Her allegations have been proved, both the man and woman will be excommunicated today on the grounds of adultery.”

“Didn't he agree then for the *Succheendram Kaimukkal?*” *Veliya Ammayi* asked the Namboodiri when he had finished. The case had been known to her and among the senior members in the area, but no one spoke about it until the *smarthavicharam* was complete.

“No. He refused, which clearly means he was guilty,” replied the Namboodiri flatly.

Shakuntala *chechi* gasped. Paarvani asked what it meant and Shakuntala *chechi* whispered to her explaining: “If a man is accused of having illicit

relations with a Namboodiri woman he has a chance to prove his innocence by dipping his hand into boiling hot oil at the Sucheendram temple. If not guilty, his hand would be clean of any scars even after three days; if guilty, not only would he lose his hand, he would also be thrown out of the Namboodiri community and live the rest of his life in exile.”

*Veliya Ammayi* hushed them, giving them an angry stare. She spoke to the Namboodiri again. “Is it really safe for the excommunication now? I was told Tipu's men can strike anytime and are in hiding...”

“We have waited long enough,” the Namboodiri rudely interrupted. “If we constantly bow down to those *neechnaars* we will lose what is left of us as well. Our values, our culture. It has been decided. The *smarthavicharam* is over.” And with that he swished his *melmundu* that was around his shoulders, looked at Paarvani and Shakuntala one last time before turning around and walking away.

News of the *smarthavicharam* proceedings had brought many spectators at the site of the temple. None, however, were allowed to be seen by the accused or the Namboodiris who were acting as the judges. From her hiding place, Paarvani counted at least a dozen men, semi-naked but for their *kodi mundu* – an unwashed, new sheet of cloth, the length of which was tucked in around their waists while the other end fell to the floor, covering their legs and feet. The sacred thread across their torsos, their hair neatly oiled and tied up at the front of their head, reminded Paarvani of the sketch by the artist Thomas who had helped her out of the jungle. Her heart beating wildly, she bit on her knuckles and watched as the men furiously debated. Their tone was accusatory and their manner, anything but forgiving. About eight feet away from the Namboodiris, there stood a hut with a

thatched roof. Paarvani could see that it housed a woman, also semi-naked with a similar waist-cloth and another lightly thrown over her breast. Her earlobes dangled with thick silver rings that shook vigorously with the slightest movement. She seemed calm – even though she was a servant - with her hands close to her chest and shoulders stooping in submission. Meekly, she responded to all the Namboodiris' queries, her voice barely audible to Paarvani. At intervals, the woman leaned backwards and seemed to converse with someone standing behind a straw curtain. It was from here that the wails, now a controlled sobbing, were coming. Paarvani watched part-fascinated, part-afraid, looking to her right to ensure Shakuntala *chechi* was still sitting next to her. As if they could understand the ill-happenings below them, eagles screeched and circled over the temple skies that overlooked the Wayanad hills and the river Chillum that flowed down and out towards the coast.

A while later, the frequency and volume of the dialogues began to pick up, along with an increased sobbing and rising tension among the women, until one of the Brahmins standing far behind threw a towel from his shoulder onto the ground, silencing all.

It seemed like the verdict had been given. The straw curtain was lifted aside. Craning her neck to look inside the hut, Paarvani caught a glimpse of the fair Namboodiri woman who was now being led out. She was barely older than Paarvani herself. Despite her face - bare of any ornaments and swollen from all the crying - she walked with grace, strikingly beautiful. What a charmer she would have been at the palace courts, thought Paarvani, and immediately checked herself. For two years she had been away from the palace. Her mother, Pankaja Amma, was dead. Her friend, Rati, was

dead. For two years Paarvani had not worn her *selangai*, although in secret she had danced without them for Shakuntala *chechi* and the other girls. She felt her companion squeeze her hand. “This is it,” Shakuntala *chechi* whispered. “She is exiled now.”

Paarvani let her curious gaze follow the downcast woman as she slowly made her way to the end of a narrow pathway leading away from the hut. A wooden door with a huge iron bolt was opened to a wave of leering *Mappillas* and *Chettiyars* – Tamil Nadu traders - on the other side. The woman stopped, hoping perhaps for another chance, another fate. Back at the hut, the servant-woman held her face in her hands and sobbed uncontrollably. Paarvani gasped. She hadn't fully grasped the incident, but she could understand the humiliation of a brahmin woman who had up to now enjoyed high-caste privileges and was now an outcast. The woman turned around to look at her servant for one last time before stepping out and being swallowed by the crowd. Paarvani sat still, trying to take in all that she had just seen. A thousand questions flew around in her head. Absentmindedly, Shakuntala *chechi* and Paarvani moved from their hiding places and out of the thick foliage to get a better view. What they saw made them grasp each other's palms more tightly than ever. This is what had attracted eagles to the skies earlier. For behind the unfortunate Namboodiri wife-turned outcast, behind the leering *Mappilas* and *Chettiyars*, stood an entire army of Tipu's men on horseback, ready to strike.

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**Paarvani****Malabar. 1784.**

The mass of people screamed and pushed as one solid body, waiting to explode. In their midst was the unfortunate woman who had just been excommunicated. Everything that followed happened very fast. Gunshots from a distance silenced the crowd but made the horses neigh uncontrollably and cause a stampede. A spear pierced deep into the right shoulder of the woman and she slumped to the ground without a sound. Paarvani, who was still hiding behind a rock on the tiny hill, clasped her hand to her mouth. Perhaps death was a destiny preferable to living as an outcast, she thought. Just then Shakuntala *chechi* screamed and pointed to their left from where the gunshots were fired. British troops appeared at the scene as if they had materialised out of thin air. The girls were now trapped from both directions.

The British had been watching Tipu's moves closely, but their guns were no match for the Mysorean rockets that found their mark on every temple and house in the area. Tipu's army had advanced without any warning, sparing not even women or the old brahmins, their swords and spears butchering and striking any body that came in its path. Amid the mounting chaos, most inhabitants already dead and many lying wounded, *Veliya Ammayi's* Nayar helpers managed to grab a stunned Shakuntala's hand and take her downhill. Paarvani followed, stumbling but staying close behind her friend. The

escorts didn't stop until they reached a waiting boat near the foot of the mountain from where the Chillum river flowed. Paarvani found many of the other girls from the *ettukettu* standing there too. The boat was small and could probably carry two or three passengers. It was already occupied by a single boatman. Shakuntala *chechi*, who had also just taken in the arrangements for their escape now understood. They would have to be discreet and not attract the attention of the British or the Mysorean troops, who had already killed her father just a few months earlier. She turned to Paarvani and squeezed her hand. "If anything happens to me, Paarvani," Shakuntala *chechi* said, whispering hurriedly, "...go to Narayana Namboodiri. He is a kind man, the one who brought you to the refuge house...go to him. I have spoken to him about you..."

"I don't want to let you go alone...Shakuntala *chechi*. Let me come with you..." protested Paarvani.

*Veliya Ammayi*, the firm matron who was also sympathetic to the girls' stories at the *ettukettu*, intervened. Her eyes were moist and her voice choked. "Paarvani, child, Shakuntala is the only surviving princess of her family...she has to reach the south of Kerala, Kochi, where she will be safe. Let her go...let her go." Saying this, she gently pried their hands apart and helped Shakuntala climb into the boat. The two friends could not tear their eyes from each other. Paarvani fought her tears even as memories of her friendship with Rati many years back came rushing back to her. Shakuntala *chechi* had been like an elder sister to her, her best and only friend in Malabar. Now she was moving away too. As the boatman pushed away from the river bank and thrust his oars into the water, the princess found her voice again. "Don't be frightened, Paarvani. Remember what I have told you. If god wills it, we will meet again."

Paarvani and many of the other girls were crying silently, but *Veliya Ammayi* urged them to move to further safety now. The Nayar helpers led them around a bend at the foothills where they could wait in the shelter of a cave. The lush greenery outside and up towards the mountaintop worked as camouflage; they could buy some time here until the battle above their heads simmered down. From where they waited, Paarvani watched the people – innocent villagers, Muslim soldiers and white troops alike – getting injured and falling lifeless into the river waters from above like ripe fruit dropping off a huge tree. The injured swam back to the safety of the opposite shore; others just sank like stones. Soon it began to rain gunshots from the mountaintop as well. Balls of fire began to crash into the river, causing water to shoot up.

“Shakuntala *chechi!*” Paarvani gasped even as the girls heard a woman shout from afar. They all tried to rush back to the open, only to be pushed back by the strong Nayar warriors. “It’s not safe right now,” one of them said. “Stay where you are.” But Paarvani was very difficult to console. In tears now, she let out a yell and pushed a warrior aside. Despite *Veliya Ammayi*’s pleas to hold back, Paarvani along with two other girls managed to come to the place where they had bid their friend goodbye only moments earlier. Shakuntala *chechi*’s boat should have covered at least a quarter of the river that stretched straight across for miles and miles. In its place instead, floated burning embers of wood that had been torn apart by a stray rocket. Shakuntala knew how to swim. But there was no sign of anyone struggling in the water or swimming towards the shore. As if in reply, a *melmundu* with a gold border bobbed up, floating in the red waters. Its fair owner had been killed and drowned already. Paarvani let out a wail. She lunged to jump into the waters but the girls held her. One of them got shot

in the back, when a Nayar soldier used his spear to catch the English shooter off guard and quickly pulled the girls to the safety of the cave again.

Paarvani had stopped crying now. She sat on the ground, still as a statue, and stayed there till there was silence all over.



**From Ambilli's journal...**

*Is it normal to mourn the passing of someone who is very much alive? Maybe not. I have, though.*

*I have mourned her only because I love her so much.*

*Each day, my fond memories of her fill me with anticipation of the dreadful news that I might have to hear...and so I imagine her gone already. My dear Achchamma, gone with her stories, her secrets, her values and her rules. I imagine that there will be a lot of regret on my behalf. I imagine myself crying for days and wishing I had spent more time with her; wishing I could at least have tried to understand her better; that perhaps I should at some point have put myself in her place to grasp her wisdom, believe her beliefs until it would all be clear to me: The reasons for her restrictions against my mingling with the opposite sex as a teenager; her fears for me – her only grand-daughter.*

*I am now on this private minibus that is taking me to her village - my native village - and I find myself unprepared despite all those years of pretend-mourning. Amma's cryptic message on my mobile reads, "Achchamma is unwell, has refused hospitalisation. Go and meet her. ASAP!" I think about my mother and her strained relationship with her mother-in-law. So, has she forgiven the old woman and her daughters? I am confused. For as long as I can remember, Amma has held onto her bitter experiences of her first trip to Kerala, brainwashing me into maintaining a distance between my paternal grandmother and me. Now she urges me to go and visit her. After all these years of cold, brief conversations over the telephone, how do I face my Achchamma? What will I say to her...?*

(44)

**Mysore-Kerala. 2004.**

Eventually, Ambilli's thoughts drifted into silence and she put her journal back in her bag. She observed the changing scenery outside as the bus reached the borders of Mysore. There were lesser red dust roads and more foliage around. Groaning sounds from her bus, and from the few other motors on the climbing road as they shifted gears, were drowned out by the steady, rising pitch of crickets and other tiny wild animals hidden away from the urban travellers' untrained eyes. They were now crossing the Sultan Bathery forest: it had a single tar road that was open to vehicles and people during the day. Post-sunset, the forest officials kept it closed so as not to frighten or alert the animals in anyway. It was Madhu's suggestion that Ambilli should choose this transport and means to reach her *Achchamma*. Ambilli now smiled at the clever idea:

*Paarvani would have taken this route to escape to Malabar.*

It was a little past noon when Ambilli reached the outskirts of her native village. She worried about her onward journey and how she would reach home, but she needn't have. Auto-Rajan, or Rajan, the faithful family rickshaw-driver was waiting at the bus-stop, his arms crossed as always. He'd greyed considerably. He waved as he spotted her at the window and proceeded to get her luggage from behind the bus.

"There isn't any luggage," Ambilli said, struggling for the right Malayalam words. "Just this" - she pointed to her handbag and bottle of water.

"*Ayyeey*, is that all?" Auto-Rajan smiled, disapproving. "The way everybody has been awaiting you at home I thought there would be loads of suitcases. Aren't you going to stay long, *Ambillikutty?*"

They had seated themselves in the auto now and Rajan pulled the lever bringing it to a full-throated life. Ambilli smiled faintly in response. *Awaiting me? Does Achchamma know I am*

*coming?*

She considered enquiring with Rajan about Achchamma's health but decided against it. In small towns and villages like this one, she thought, births, illnesses and deaths are so much a part of daily life that perhaps the people living here are indeed much emotionally stronger than any of us from the big cities. The thought lifted her spirits and the warm afternoon breeze made Ambilli look forward to meeting her Achchamma. *I will tell her about the story I am writing. If she is well I will tell her...*

They travelled along smooth tar roads that Ambilli recalled were once dust-ridden and bumpy from the many stones and potholes on it. She'd always enjoyed those rides when she was younger, whereas the elders winced and moaned about their backs. On either side of the road now stood detached, bright red brick homes, each bursting with a rich collection of house plants; the scene was mostly unchanged but for a new lick of paint or an extended driveway here and there. Families had grown and so had the houses. There were plenty of shops, their fronts painted over with images of the latest mobile phones, or of foreign brands of baby diapers. *Diapers in an orthodox village where great-grandmothers still help deliver babies? They are certainly moving on,* Ambilli observed.

About thirty minutes later the lush green shrubbery and tall coconut trees gave way to a more gentle and soothing landscape of chequered paddy fields rolling for miles into the horizon. Under the bright afternoon sun, a few labourers were bent over in the ankle-deep flooded fields, busy with de-weeding and tying fresh paddy grass into the neat bundles that they would later pick. Auto-Rajan squeezed the rubber horn twice in greeting even as the rickety noise of the vehicle made them look up and straighten their backs. They waved in recognition, one or two of them yelling out and asking Rajan to meet them at the tea-shop later to catch up on the day's gossip. *"O! Veramallo!"* He laughed and said he would. They soon crossed a paddy field with the familiar, tiny rock in the centre of it. Ambilli's heart beat faster. Anytime now, she would be home.

“Here we are,” said Rajan, hopping out of his rickshaw, deftly folding his *mundu* around his waist. A stony path led up to a gate which creaked painfully when he pushed it open, startling a sleeping stray dog. “*Po da.*” Rajan kicked the animal as it yelped in protest. “*Veru, molle,*” he addressed Ambilli, asking her to enter now that the dog was out of their way. Ambilli held on to her handbag and camera, walking at first, then sprinting to the open doors of her dear Achchamma's house, excited yet not knowing what to expect.

It was the biggest surprise she could have ever asked for. Beaming toothlessly and with tears in her eyes was her fragile grandmother, supported by none other than Manu holding her hand. Behind them, Ambilli's parents looked on, smiling. Throwing her arms wide, Ambilli screamed with joy and rushed in to embrace them all. She learnt later that Manu had planned to bring the family together: it was he who'd asked her mother to send the urgent message. He himself had arrived from London two days earlier to ensure Ambilli's Achchamma was also privy to the surprise, while her parents had travelled over from Mumbai by train the previous evening. Hours flew by as the family caught up with each other. Ambilli's relief was threefold...her Achchamma was not going to die yet, her mother had chosen to bury her differences with her mother-in-law and lastly, but most importantly, Manu was with her. The separation of the past few months seemed to melt away and suddenly it felt like it was only yesterday that the couple were together in their flat in London. Ambilli had never given it a thought before, but now that he seemed to have decided that her exile had to end, she was glad it had ended, and in this way.

(45)

**Kerala. 2004.**

“Tell me, Ambilli. Why did you choose to write this story?”

The question came from Achchamma, taking Ambilli by surprise. She had been sitting by her bedside, thinking her to be asleep. She'd held Achchamma's fragile hand in her own and gently, mindlessly, was tracing the path of the veins over skin that was still soft but wrinkly and so very thin. It was the day after Ambilli had arrived in Kerala. Indu, Ambilli's mother, had wanted to purchase some gold-border *Kasavu* sarees and Manu had offered to drive her into town while Unni caught up with his old friends around the village. Ambilli chose to stay home with her Achchamma. She smiled. “I thought you were asleep; did I wake you up? The others have all gone out.”

“No, not at all. I was just resting my old eyes... I was just thinking about Kunjumalu *edathi's* daughter, Shwetha.” She continued in the same strain. “She usually comes over around mid-morning – this time – and reads me stuff from the magazine or the *Matrubhoomi*. There was something about a woman writer in those pages one day, and Shwetha said to me that these days anybody can become a writer. All one needs is some gossip and be ruthless about spilling out family problems....”

Achchamma paused for breath and tried sitting up in bed. Ambilli helped her up. “Manu was telling me you were writing something, maybe a book...you are not going to turn into *that* kind of writer, are you?” Achchamma continued and stroked Ambilli's face.

Ambilli began to laugh. “No, no, Achchamme. Yes, I am writing something, but just a private journal. Like a notebook that grandfather left behind when he was away in Burma, recording his thoughts into it. I still don't know if I will publish it yet, but I can assure you there are no family problems in it,” she smiled.

“Then tell me your story...I will tell you if you should turn it into a book.”

Ambilli hesitated for a moment. She considered how open she should be, knowing and respecting Achchamma's conservative views about women. Nevertheless she could not refuse her grandmother's request and decided to continue.

“My story is about a girl living over three hundred years ago, Achchamma. Her name is Paarvani, and she is a devadasi's daughter. She is also a dancer in the royal palace, educated in the arts and music. Her best friend, Rati, is a courtesan, and Paarvani, like many women of her period, is free to choose any man she likes. But she makes a mistake. The man she has chosen betrays her by using her to extract some state secrets. The friend is killed and she has to escape from Tipu's army. When Paarvani reaches Malabar, she finds herself in a womens' refugee camp set up by a Namboodiri brahmin. As someone coming from an open culture that encouraged erotic poetry, drama and dance, she finds it baffling that the Namboodiri community, with their traditions of *sambandam* and *smarthavicharam*, has contrasting rules for its men and women...”

“And yet, Paarvani wants to belong to this community?” Achchamma interrupted, smiling.

“Well, it's something I haven't been able to decide yet!” said Ambilli, surprised again, and glad that they were conversing like old friends at last. “It's something even I fail to understand; perhaps that's why I am unable to continue the story.”

“What do you not understand?”

“This difference in attitudes...Remember that old saying you always quoted to me when I was younger, Achchamma, about the character of a woman...that regardless of whether the leaf falls on the thorn or vice versa, it is the leaf that gets torn. Since when did it have to be this way? From what I read, women two hundred or three hundred years ago had no such moral constraints. Society was kind to them, respected them even, their roles were respected and they were well-placed and secure in whatever profession they chose...”

Achchamma nodded. “What you say is true. Sadly, my dear *Ambillikutty*, it is the way the world is today. Things were different when we practised the *marumakathayam*, or what you call the matriarchal system. The reason why women were more educated than men and could choose their partners – if that is what you are trying to say – was because they had to run the families

while their Nair husbands fought as warriors. The Namboodiris were men of learning, the highest caste. When a Namboodiri man arranged for a *sambandam* or union with a Nair woman, it was once considered a prestigious matter. The woman was free to stay in the relationship for as long as she wished – for life or even for a few years. The upbringing of the child would then be handed over to the woman's brother. Even I was brought up by my Ammavan...my mother's brother. My own grandmother, as far as I know, delivered seven children from three *sambandams*. She was a looker, that woman, and men fondly teased her even when she was old and grey,” smiled Achchamma mischievously.

“Then,” she continued, shaking her head, “the English Sahibs came and began to teach us that what we were doing was highly immoral. They brought in more and more missionaries who pushed Sanskrit texts and vedas aside and promoted English education in exchange for a secure income. Tell me, who would not be tempted? But when you remove a language from a child's tongue, Ambilli, you take away the entire culture from them. Our young Malayali men, far from being proud of their women as upholders of the Kerala culture, began to grow ashamed of them. Women began to be looked upon as mere possessions and not as individuals capable of running a family. Daughters were made to stay indoors. I remember, when I was a child, being beaten by my Ammavan for plucking a rose from our neighbour's garden...”

“Is that why you were strict - angry with me when I was younger? When I'd actually got lost and strayed into a field ...and then you'd got a *manthravadi*?”

“Ah, that, you still remember that do you?” Achchamma stroked Ambilli's hair and was silent for a moment.

“Forgive this Achchamma, my child. I was only doing what I knew then was right. You know, I was blinded by my love for you, and a fear that, like my great-great grandmother with whom you share your birth-star, you might get drawn to a life of what is now considered 'cheap' entertainment. In her time, of course, she was a much sought-after danseuse by everyone, even the king's palace. *Kaalam maari*, times changed, her daughters never got to wear the *chilanga* around their ankles. Eventually things do change back; I might not be alive to see it, though.

Until then, there will always be one generation that takes the hit....perhaps, my dear girl, that was you.” She lifted her hand away and turned to the door. “Shwetha is not here yet...? This is what I was telling her just last week...”

Ambilli had her head down and couldn't help hot tears from flooding her eyes. She was going through mixed emotions of joy and regret for what she had been through because of the don'ts that her Achchamma had imposed on her. *Had I known any of this then...had I not been so sensitive and naive...* But what had happened was all in the past now. She quickly wiped her eyes and checked herself. More than anything Ambilli knew she was deeply relieved that her Achchamma and she were together again.

Not noticing her grand-daughter's flushed face, and like any old parent who has found a listening ear at last, Achchamma continued to talk. “...The young generation I hear about from Shwetha is different again. She tells me about life in the cities, not any less bold than it is here in the village, mind you. About young, unmarried boys and girls living together under a roof, and doing everything that any married couple would engage in... about the increasing number of women choosing career and education over a life partner and children. If this is not like the olden times, what is? *Yela mullile veenalum, mulle yelemle veenalum, kede ye-ke tanne....*,” laughed Achchamma, trying to recline and rest again.

“That thinking was so wrong, Ambilli. If I try telling that to Shwetha now and compare the state of the leaf with a woman, she will laugh in my face, and tell me that only a naive woman will get cut by a thorn today. And she is only twelve...”



(46)

**Paarvani****Malabar, Kizhianur *ettukettu*. 1785.**

The nightmares were frequent now. Every night, almost.

They left Paarvani screaming, shaking and drenched in her own sweat and tears. In the two months since the death of Shakuntala *chechi*, *Veliya Ammayi* had tried everything from herbal concoctions prescribed by the most respected *vaidyars* in the village, powerful incantations uttered by black magicians, and prayers to appease her gods, but nothing, no one could help Paarvani overcome her sorrow.

The number of women in the refugee-*ettukettu* had dwindled too. Some of them had left with distant relatives who managed to contact them and make the journey to Kizhianur; many others had either disappeared since the morning of the *smarthavicharam* or perished in the fight that had followed. Despite the fact that Tipu had lost the battle to the British troops, his army spared none in ruthlessly converting the locals to Islam. Those that refused were stripped naked and dragged by elephants until they were mutilated and unidentifiable. Fear drove people in thousands to flee to Telicherry and Thiruvithamkoor in the South where the ruling king Dharma Raja Rama Varma offered asylum to all regardless of their caste. Meanwhile, at the *ettukettu*, *Veliya Ammayi* looked after Paarvani like the daughter she never had. Together they spent their evenings at the *devi kaavu*, the place of worship for the family deity or goddess, where

blessings were sought, along with news and information updates from the resident priests and visiting Hindus. Here, in the pale gold light of the many hundred lamps lit alongside the temple walls and the intermittent sound of the bells and drums, Paarvani relived memories of her friend Rati, and the palace where she used to dance. It was on one such night that she looked up to find the Namboodiri standing at a distance in front of her. “Where is your *Veliya Ammayi*?” asked Narayana Namboodiri, “I’ve come to see her before I leave...”

Paarvani was just about to reply when *Veliya Ammayi*, having finished her circumambulation around the temple, approached them and greeted the brahmin landlord. “Have I heard right, Namboodiri, that you are leaving Kizhianur for the South? And what about all the land you own here...will you just abandon and go?”

The Namboodiri appeared defeated but he collected his thoughts and replied slowly. “You know and I know that there is no other alternative, sister. You have seen many years more than me; do you think Tipu will stop after suffering at the hands of the British this once? Of what use is all this land if I am not alive...even the temples are being plundered and destroyed. You must have heard of the Parappanad and Kolathiri kings. Tipu's contempt for the Hindus is so fierce that even after the latter had surrendered, he killed them using elephants, and hung their limp bodies from the trees for all to see. Many of the Nayar chiefs' bodies too were found on trees; Tipu is not doing this for Islam, he's on a mad rampage and I...don't have the will to face anymore of this bloodshed. Thousands of Namboodiri families have already migrated. God willing, the Dharma Raja Rama Varma may live a hundred more years for all the help he is offering. Before Tipu reaches the outskirts of Kochi, I must leave too. I

couldn't go without letting you know..."

*Veliya Ammayi* nodded and sat down next to Paarvani. "You are right, Namboodiri, and wherever you go I wish you a safe life. As for me, I have no one to call my own. I've lived all my life here and I'll wait for death patiently, however it wishes to come to me. All I am worried about is this girl..." said *Veliya Ammayi* taking Paarvani's hand in her own. "She is alone and the roads to Mysore are closed to her forever. I don't know who else to trust with this responsibility...can I please request you to take her along with you?"

"That is another reason why I had to see you, sister," replied the Namboodiri. "Shakuntala did tell me all about Paarvani. I promised I would take care of her and, with the princess gone now, I have to honour my word. However, given the circumstances, she does not belong to any of the Nayar or Namboodiri communities. Any acquaintance with her would therefore be against the rules of our community. But," he paused, "...if she is prepared for a *sambandam* I could take her along as my wedded wife..."

(47)

**Paarvani****Malabar. 1785.**

Paarvani closed her eyes and surrendered to the cool waters rushing down her body from the top of her head. She heard laughter, child-like and far-away, like a memory from many years ago. *Rati Kumari*. The water was fragrant with herbs, and washed away the turmeric and sandal paste that had been applied earlier on her skin. *A skinny girl, refusing to step out of a palanquin, coaxed by the dozen maids and eunuchs come to pamper her.* She was dried and dressed in a silk, gold-bordered ivory *mundu* that the Namboodiri had sent for her as part of the pre-*sambandam* procedure. *She rests on a mat, bathed, dried and hungry. The attendants spread out her long hair on an overturned basket behind her head, the incense and coal underneath mingling with her long black tresses.* The usually stoic *Veliya Ammayi* cried tears of relief and joy as she adorned Paarvani's neck, waist and feet with gold ornaments. Then she touched her forehead with a dot of sandalwood paste and blessed her. *They get ready to leave, but not before a eunuch circles his fist over the girl's face three times. The contents of that fist are thrown far away into the flowing river which suddenly ripples...*

“May you always be protected from the evil eye,” said *Veliya Ammayi* at last, suddenly bringing Paarvani back from her ten-year-old self when she'd hid behind the mango tree watching a courtesan's daughter being pampered and bathed. Paarvani had wished for Rati's fate then. And she had been granted that wish now.

Paarvani was reminded of her devadasi mother, Pankaja Amma, who had always uttered the same words as she touched Paarvani's cheek with kohl from her eyes. Her mother had laughed when Paarvani had said, '*Amma, I want the moon.*'

Like Rati, her mother had given her life in vain. So had her dear Ajji. And now Shakuntala *chechi* too...

*"Amma, I want the moon."*

How far she had travelled already. How far.

"You don't have to be afraid," the kind Namboodiri told Paarvani as he shut the two wooden doors to their room. He sat next to her on the bed. Paarvani had been instructed to leave the waiting glass of warm milk in front of him when he came to the room, and obediently she did so. "*Do not touch him in any way until he tells you to do so,*" *Velliya Ammayi* had warned. "*Namboodiris maintain their distance and will not accept anything from your hands either.*" The Namboodiri drank half of it and returned the glass to the side table. He patted the empty space next to him and asked her to be seated again. But Paarvani stood where she was, and turned her face away.

"Forgive me if I am confused," she choked. "You first saved my life, picking me up from the forest and leaving me here.... I gained a friend and lost her. Unknown to me, you promised her that you would look after me and here you are. I...," said Paarvani, clearing the lump from her throat. "I am a mere court dancer. You are a learned man. With due respect, I am not sure why you should go this far as to have a physical union with me...I may not... be worthy of you."

The Namboodiri smiled. “Isn't that what you told me when I first saw you? That you are a court dancer...then, why do you hesitate, Paarvani? I already know who you are. Come now and sit next to me. We have the entire night ahead of us...let us talk.”

“But what is there to talk about when the time gone by is never going to come back?”

Paarvani sat by the side of the bed, her back to the Namboodiri. In the light of the oil-lamp, her face glowed with mixed feelings of repentance for the past, gratitude for the present and a fear of what was yet to come. The Namboodiri was calm, comfortable in the silence that surrounded them in the room. He slowly reclined on the bed and lay still, placing one hand behind his head to support it and the other on his chest. Having come across a number of people who suffered at Tipu's hands in one way or another, the brahmin knew Paarvani would take some time to open up. But if he had to take her along to Thiruvithamkoor she needed to trust him. They had only this one night before they would be travelling again into an unknown future.

“Paarvani,” said the Namboodiri at last, “if you were given a chance to change one moment in your past, what would you choose? Think well and tell me.”

“Is this really a good time for a game?” asked Paarvani gently, turning around to face him now.

She saw that he indeed was serious and it confused her all the more. The Namboodiri lay his palm on hers, touching her for the first time. “It isn't, my dear. I am trying to help you confront your past.” He withdrew his

hand and sighed. “We have a lot of work ahead, Paarvani. I am leaving all my possessions, my land behind here in Kizhianur, to start a new life in the south of our country. We might have to face a lot of hurdles along our way, but if god wills it, we will reach the court of king Rama Varma alive, and even be able to help a few others in their journey along the way. You were right when you said that time gone by will never come back. But then it is important to let go of that time as well, only then can you move ahead. I need your help too, Paarvani, and that's why I will request you to think again... If you were given a chance to change one moment in your past, what would you choose?”

After what seemed to be a very long period of silence, Paarvani spoke. “Seven hundred Iyengar brahmins in Mandya...I can still hear their cries. I let it happen. I let them die. If I had only not trusted Jamaal...”

The Namboodiri sat up now and touched Paarvani's shoulder. They sat facing each other now. “Go on,” said the Namboodiri. “Tell me all.”

“I was born to a woman who had escaped the palace of Haider Ali; she joined a devadasi travelling troupe and became one of them soon. When I was ten, I saw Rati Kumari, the courtesan's daughter who lived at the palace, and instantly got attracted to what made her different from me. We soon grew up to be inseparable friends – Rati, Siva and me. She taught me everything she'd learnt – as a dancer, a courtesan, a woman. Rati was irresistible and yet I didn't see it coming: my childhood playmate, Siva, and Rati fell in love. I felt jealous, isolated and at times happy for them too. But I found myself all alone all of a sudden, and that is when I came

across Jamaal.

“It was around this time – four years ago - that Tipu smelled a conspiracy. Letters were being exchanged between the British governor of Madras, General Harris, and the imprisoned Wodeyar queen, Rani Lakshmammani. Of course,” Paarvani paused, “some of us had known it all along. For the queen had begun her correspondence long before, when Haider Ali had taken over the Wodeyar kingdom. However... Tipu was furious. He had to make up for all the lost treasure in battles that were unsuccessful and that's why he began to destroy and loot the Hindu temples. Had he been alive, Tipu's father would never have allowed that. Tipu wanted the names of the traitors at any cost. Jamaal, who idolised Haider Ali and, like him, had quickly risen to the post of killedar of the Seringapatam fort, would go to any lengths to favour an angry Tipu. I know this now but back then I was as blind as any foolish, immature girl in a state of infatuation. Jamaal had calculated everything. He had a hunch that the traitors were from Mandya. He'd discovered that I came from the same village *and* I was a devadasi's daughter. Surely I would know about the exchange of letters. The void that Rati and Siva had created in my heart was soon filled by Jamaal's constant attention to me. Not once did I suspect that slowly, Jamaal had been drawing me into his trap. I had confided in him almost everything about myself, my best friend Rati, the village Mandya where I grew up, my mother, the tyrant that Haider Ali was during his prime and how Tipu was much worse... Yes, that was it. I must have mentioned the Pradhan Govindarajayya, who Haider had killed over thirty years ago, and the revenge that the Pradhan's sons Tirumala and Narayana Rao had been plotting ever since...”



Paarvani turned her face away again. The Namboodiri pressed her to go on.

“Rati just *knew* Jamaal was up to something; she tried to warn me...so many times...and paid with her life. She died in my arms. Even in the face of death, she had come prepared; she'd packed some of her gold ornaments in a bundle. She thrust it in my hands as she died and asked me to run and not stop. Jamaal had used me to get information; he got my mother and Ajji killed in a fire when they refused to tell the whereabouts of the Rao brothers. No one in Mandya would cooperate. Jamaal and his men herded up as many as seven hundred Mandyam brahmins, Iyengars, into the Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple walls – women, children as well as the elders. Four months later, on a night when everyone should be celebrating the festival of lights, Tipu arrived at the scene and mercilessly massacred each one of them. I was frightened...like a coward, I ran...I had been running for over three days. A foreigner, Thomas – an artist – found me in the forest. He led me to the ruined temple where I hid, and where you sent your Nayar warriors to rescue me...”

Paarvani fell silent. The lamp had begun to flicker and was running low on oil. The Namboodiri got up, adjusted the wick until it glowed brightly again, and sat down next to Paarvani. From the side table close to the bed, he pulled a roll of canvas and urged her to have a look. Paarvani opened it to find her own reflection staring back at her. It was a painting.

“You were not a coward, Paarvani,” said the Namboodiri, continuing, “I look at it this way. For ages...wars have been fought between good and

evil. Even on the eighteen-day battlefield in the Mahabharata, Arjun had to fight against his own close uncles and family. In the Ramayan, Raavana's brother Vibheeshana chose to fight against him. Kumbhakarna, also Raavana's brother, stood by him till his death although he well knew he was wrong. There are numerous such examples in history...and who are we but common men in comparison? Willingly or unwillingly, in this war between Tipu, the French and the English, we are bound to take sides. Some of us are victims but many among us are soldiers in our own way. Survivors. My dharma tells me to do what I can... to help as many people as I can during these tough times. As for you, Paarvani, your entire life lies ahead of you. And the choices are up to you to make. You could either spend the rest of your days feeling guilty over those unfortunate seven hundred Mandyam Iyengars, or you could try and make up for their sacrifice by saving many more..." Saying this, the Namboodiri stood up and went back to recline on his side of the bed.

"Besides," he added, "I think I should let you know. Thomas fooled the Mapilla army into thinking he was their ally. He reached Kizhianur the very night he led you to the temple ruins, and he stayed with me. He told me about you – the state he'd found you in, that in your delirium you spoke of the hundreds of Iyengar brahmins slaughtered by Tipu. You obviously needed help... *he* led me to you, Paarvani. I didn't reach there – with the Nayar warriors - by chance."

(48)

**Kerala, 2004.**

“*Chechi*...come with me! Let me show you something. Come on, *chechi*, quick!”

Ambilli and Achchamma laughed. “Go, go, Ambilli,” said Achchamma, “else this girl will drag you *and* me along with her.”

Shwetha jumped up, excited. She'd just arrived from school to read the daily newspaper to Achchamma as was her routine and, upon finding Ambilli, Manu and the whole family there, she couldn't contain her delight. Ambilli took her hand at last, infected by her enthusiasm.

“Where do you want to take me?” she smiled, as they half-walked, half-sprinted across the courtyard. Kunjumalu *edathi*, Shwetha's grandmother, had her muslin towel across her face as she pounded some paddy to de-husk it. She threw a stern look at Shwetha and warned her to be careful with Ambilli. “Don't scare the poor girl...she is not used to this place, did you hear?!”

Shwetha only laughed and nodded. Turning to Ambilli again, she whispered, “Sshh, patience, *chechi*. You're going to love this secret treasure...”

It was noon. Ambilli was given no time to put on her slippers and the ground below her was scorching hot. But Shwetha was used to running barefoot and hardly noticed Ambilli's discomfort. They crossed a tiny field and entered the premises of an old *naalukettu* that was once Achchamma's home. The ancestral property was locked now as Ambilli's father had helped build the present house with all the conveniences of a modern home. Shwetha, however, had free access to the house as she would accompany her mother and help her in cleaning the rooms once every month. The main doors opened to reveal a vast entrance, a square central courtyard open to the sky, and large, airy rooms on either side of it. Shwetha ran the length of the house until she reached the stairs, by the side of which was a half-sized metal door. “Come, *chechi*, this here is the storeroom. We will have to really bend down to enter inside, but let me warn

you...it'll be very dark. Are you okay with that?" Even her anklets jingled with the sense of child-like adventure.

Ambilli, a few paces behind Shwetha, was still over-awed by the house and its interiors. The kitchen had real earthen fireplaces that used wood fuel instead of gas or electricity; there was also a well attached to one of the wide windows that must have once been an integral part of the *naalukettu*. Tall wooden staircases connected to the upper rooms of the structure which was supported by thick wooden beams throughout. Ambilli tried to imagine her grandmother growing up here: how she would have loved to run around the many smooth pillars surrounding the courtyard. "Are you sure we can enter here?" asked Ambilli. Shwetha laughed. "Oh *chechi*, once we're inside you'll not want to come out!"

She knelt on the floor and Ambilli did the same. Shwetha then turned the huge metal key in the lock and the door creaked open. It was indeed pitch black inside and their eyes took some time adjusting to the sudden darkness. The girls crouched to get inside, just as Achchamma and Kunjeraluedathi had, many many years earlier. Ambilli noticed that even the walls were painted black or perhaps the darkest green – she wasn't sure. A thin shaft of light broke through this opaque background from a tiny, triangle-shaped opening on the opposite wall, illuminating thick cobwebs on the ceiling and a lizard frozen in its wait for prey.

"What is this place, Shwetha?"

"Told you, *chechi*. This was once the storeroom. Here is where they used to store foodgrains, the huge utensils and all such kitchen stuff. Since the house is locked now, all that is left is a few old possessions of your ancestors. I was little when our grandmothers first brought me here on an errand; since then I've always loved to visit this room. Don't worry... we are not in any kind of trouble..." Ambilli shuffled her feet uneasily, feeling powdery dust underneath.

Shwetha opened a trunk even as she spoke, and from it, pulled out a small box that sounded like it was full of some trinkets or old coins. Now curious herself, Ambilli switched on the torch on her mobile phone as they pulled out one more metal box, a few clothes, old photographs wrapped in crinkly paper and a silken cloth-bundle of what seemed to be scrolls. Together, the

girls carried everything they collected out to the central courtyard where they spread it out to see.

The silk bundle containing the scrolls was clearly the most worn-out of all the 'treasures', pock-marked with termite holes and coffee-colour stains. It was the last thing that Ambilli opened before she gasped, jumping up and running back to her Achchamma, the bundle clutched to her chest. A startled Shwetha followed her close behind, panting. "I don't know! She just...ran off!" she protested when they passed her grandmother again. Kunjumalu *edathi* had stopped pounding the rice and frowned at her grand-daughter, concerned that something in the empty house had frightened the city-bred Ambilli.

"Who is this, Achchamma?" Ambilli asked, panting, handing everything over to her grandmother, Saudamini, who was just preparing to rest.

The scrolls were ancient paintings on thick canvas-like materials. One of them was a portrait of a woman with the most arresting dark eyes, hair that flowed in curls around her shoulders.

Despite the worn-out paint and sketch lines that had faded around the borders, the face had sharp features. Ambilli vaguely remembered having seen it sometime in her childhood.

Achchamma only smiled in response. "This is my great-great-great-grandmother. There were no cameras then so I guess some artist had her portrait painted. She was a beautiful woman, and a popular dancer too. In fact, Ambilli, *this* is who I was telling you about just this morning. You share your birth-star with this ancestor – it is something that always worried me, when you were a child."

"Why, Achchamme... was she wrong in...?"

"No, child. No. She wasn't wrong or of bad character. As far as I can recall, my grandmother told tales of how brave and well-educated this woman was. She wasn't originally from our family you see..." sighed Achchamma. "No one knew where she came from... or whose family she belonged to..."

(49)

**Kerala, 2004.**

“Madhu! I have news for you, Madhu! You cannot guess what it is...” an excited Ambilli told Madhu over the phone.

“I have news too! Tell me yours first.” said Madhu, laughing.

“You do? No, you go on first, the suspense would kill me...”

“Then listen. Anand and I have finally decided to...we're getting married next week.”

The girls laughed and squealed with delight. “As early as next week? What made you change your mind about living-in and all that?” Ambilli teased.

“Well, it was my mom. She is all alone here. Makhi – you remember my brother, don't you?

Yes, Makhi too had been insistent that she come to visit his family in the US, but she wouldn't go leaving me all by myself here. Eventually, I saw that it wouldn't make much of a difference to Anand and me anyway...we would just be exchanging garlands in a temple. If my marriage to Anand meant so much to her, if it helped relieve her somehow, so be it na.”

“Hmm...,” nodded Ambilli. “It means more than just relief to her, Madhu. She obviously wasn't happy that your first marriage hadn't worked. You and Anand have been together for over four years now and he is a good man. He'll not let her down, I'm just so sure. Hey, and what about your project?”

“That work will continue...in fact I'm almost done. Okay, okay...now enough about me. Tell me what were you so excited about?” Madhu interrupted.

“Well, you know the story I was writing, based on your research work...”

“Yes...”

“There are some paintings that I came across right here...in Achchamma's old *naalukettu*, Madhu. I cannot help notice a few...coincidences in my family history too. I thought, perhaps, I

could use some of them in building the fictional Paarvani's life and character...”

Ambilli then recounted all that Shwetha and she had discovered in her Achchamma's ancestral home, and what little her grandmother had told her about the danseuse in her family many centuries ago. Madhu listened to everything and couldn't stop grinning when Ambilli had finished talking.

“I still can't believe it! What do you think, Madhu? Hello? Are you there...?” Ambilli asked again, wondering if they'd lost each other over some mobile-signal failure all too frequent in the interior parts of Kerala.

“I'm right here, Ambilli,” smiled Madhu. “Maybe you haven't realised it yet... It looks like your story is writing itself now. Knowingly or unknowingly, you've made your choice. You're on your way, and that makes me so proud of you.”

**From Ambilli's journal...**

*London. 2008.*

*A mal-intentioned touch. A kind hand on a sad shoulder. A friendship that strengthened. A friendship that betrayed. Sexual abuse. Perhaps the human mind and body are not designed to forget these, ever. What matters then, is how we deal with them. What matters then, is the choice we make.*

*Four years ago, I was a different person. I set out on a journey to Mumbai, not knowing if it would really take me anywhere. There, I met Madhu. I accompanied her to Mysore. I felt humbled and small in front of the stories of India I had not heard about. I created Paarvani. She led me by the hand on another journey, and into a time of her own making: the 18th-century Malabar. Madhu, myself, and Paarvani – together, we pitted the 21st-century against the past. We questioned why we look up to our fiery, beautiful goddesses – all of them armed with gleaming weapons and self-respect, crushing vile demons under their feet – while we ourselves fall as hopeless victims to molesters and misplaced guilt. We discovered our own ancient arts: our poems – clever, sensuous words as if in tribute, describing, even celebrating the sexuality of our women. Today, those songs are rarely mentioned. Perhaps they would be compared to some of the vulgar 'item numbers' of Bollywood, because unlike in the earlier era, dignity and respect for the female have been stripped away. Only the sex*



*remains.*

*Our ancient sculptures, frozen on the temple walls and structures across our country for centuries, used dance to proudly display the union between a man and a woman without which a new life cannot be created – not even in the animal world. But today perceptive tourist guides are hushed by the burdens of a morality that is at times irrational. They learn to deliberately ignore the flawless craftsmanship of the ancient sculptor, the pride and the passion in his tools of trade, the pure love of shape and symmetry. Instead, they whisk their tourist-clients to the next attraction, bypassing the smiling stone onlookers, dismissing their various poses with a general “lack of shame in those days.”*

*Through Paarvani, we learn that our ancient women – priestesses, devadasis, courtesans – were well-educated in the aspects of academy as well as the arts; that the majority of them were also allowed to choose their sexual and life partners, and that this was entirely 'normal'. Madhu and I ask why desire then has left this land of the Kama Sutra where pleasure was sacred and love was once an art, leaving only taboo behind. And the moral restrictions associated with it.*

*It is on this land that our parents were brought up, and before them their own parents and grandparents. I think of the past 800 years – of the Islamic invasions, the arrival of the Europeans, the exit of the British*

*colonialists – and I begin to understand the simple reason that the taboos were passed from one generation to the next. And I think, maybe this can stop now. Maybe it is time to revisit the country that attracted all these foreigners in the first place.*

*I think of where I am now. I think of Manu, and of the new life growing in me. Of the phone call from the publisher that will decide the fate of Paarvani's story. I know that Shashi will not be forgotten, but I also know that somehow, he does not matter now. Because somewhere along the three journeys – of Madhu's, Paarvani's and mine – I decided to gather my scars and move on. I made a choice.*

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## Glossary

**Key:** [M]Malayalam, [Mrt]Marathi, [T]Tamil, [K]Kannada, [S]Sanskrit, [H]Hindi.

<i>Aara?</i> [M]	Who is it?
<i>Achyutam, Keshavam, Rama</i>	A Prayer, Names of Krishna
<i>Naraayanam...</i> [M][S]	
<i>Aham Paarvani</i> [S]	I am Paarvani
<i>Amu</i> [M]	Dear, used for daughters
<i>Arangeteram</i> [T]	A debut performance on stage by a Bharatanatyam student who has completed at least seven years of formal training; likened to a graduation ceremony that marks the end of training and beginning of more advanced nuances of the art.
<i>Ashwati, Bharani,</i>	Names of asterisms, stars according to Malayalam calendar
<i>Karthika, Rohini...</i> [M]	
<i>Baghto</i> [Mrt]	I will look into it
<i>Belige hogidaare</i> [K]	She left early in the morning.
<i>Bhagavathy</i> [M]	Goddess
<i>Chilange</i> [M]	Anklets with bells worn by a dancer during a performance; See Tamil, <i>Selangai</i>
<i>Chukku vellom</i> [M]	Water boiled and infused with dehydrated ginger powder
<i>Coffee beka?</i> [K]	Will you have some coffee?
<i>Doubte-illa</i> [K]	Undoubtedly; (in this context, 'illa' - not existent)
<i>Edathi</i> [M]	Elder sister ; also, <i>Chechi</i>
<i>Elekkya</i> [M]	Cardomom
<i>Enda avide?</i> [M]	What goes there?
<i>Ettukettu</i> [M]	House with eight-pillars/halls and two inner courtyards; ancient Kerala architecture where many generations of the family grow in the same house; See, <i>Naalukettu</i>
<i>Gandharvan</i> [M]	Mythical figure, celestial being, eternal lover
<i>Hogebittu bartini</i> [K]	See you soon (literally translated as 'I will go and come back', uttered by someone who is leaving the company of another)
<i>Illa</i> [K]	No

<i>Illava?</i> [K]	Don't you have ...?
<i>Kanjee</i> [M]	Warm rice gruel
<i>Kashumala</i> [M]	Necklace strung with coins (gold/ usually ancient currency); <i>kashu</i> - cash.
<i>Koshaa paduvai</i> [T]	Nine-yard silk saree
<i>Krishna! Guruvayoorappa!!</i> [M]	Names of gods - Krishna, and Guruvayoorappan (Lord of Guruvayoor, place in Kerala)
<i>Kutty, nee aara?</i> [M]	Child, who are you?
<i>Maagachchah!</i> [S]	Please come back/ turn back!
<i>Maami</i> [T]	Aunty
<i>Madhu-medam illa</i> [K]	Madhu-madam is not here.
<i>Madi, madi</i> [M]	Enough, enough
<i>Magu</i> [K]	Dear, used for daughters
<i>Manthravadi</i> [M]	black magician, exorcist
<i>Marumakkathayam</i> [M]	Matriarchal
<i>Matrubhoomi</i> [M]	Popular Malayalam newspaper in Kerala
<i>Mel mundu</i> [M]	Loose cloth worn over the upper body
<i>Mi</i> [Mrt]	I
<i>Morukootan</i> [M]	Buttermilk/Yogurt seasoned with fresh coconut and spices
<i>Naade</i> [M]	Native hometown
<i>Naalukettu</i> [M]	House with four-pillar/halls and one inner courtyard; ancient Kerala architecture.
<i>Nakshatram</i> [M]	Asterism
<i>Nanri</i> [K]	Thank you
<i>Nartaki</i> [S]	Dancer
<i>Navvari</i> [M]	Nine-yard (saree)
<i>Neevu?</i> [K]	And you?
<i>Nidde Aaita?</i> [K]	Have you had a good sleep?
<i>Nimm hesre yaenu, medam?</i> [K]	What is your name, Madam?
<i>Odiyan</i> [M]	Mythical figure associated with black magic
<i>Orru paavum pennu</i> [M]	A poor (naive, in this context) girl
<i>Paraya</i> [M]	Outsider; also means a lower caste

<i>Parivaara</i> [K]	Family
<i>Pathayam</i> [M]	Store room for dry grains
<i>Pazhanchollu</i> [M]	Old proverb
<i>Po da</i> [M]	Go away
<i>Pottu</i> [K]	Vermillion dot on forehead of Hindu women, in this context, of devadasis
<i>Raajaganika</i> [S]	Royal court dancer
<i>Ragi mudde</i> [K]	Steamed millet (ragi) flour dumplings
<i>Roadu, rajavu</i> [K]	Road, Raja; Kannadigas tend to add the vowel sounds 'a' or 'u' as a suffix for English or other language words
<i>Sambandam</i> [M]	Relationship; in the context of this novel, it means a physical union between a man and a woman
<i>Sandhyadeepam samayam</i>	Isn't it time to light the evening lamps/for prayers?
<i>aayile?</i> [M]	
<i>Selangai</i> [T]	Anklets with bells worn by a dancer during a performance
<i>Suprabhatam</i> [S]	Good morning (greeting)
<i>Swalpa</i> [K]	A little
<i>Tai</i> [Mrt]	Elder sister
<i>Tali</i> [K]	A small gold pendant signifying marriage
<i>Tattra surakshitaseet</i> [S]	She will be safe there
<i>Tea kuditira?</i> [K]	Will you drink some tea?
<i>Tharawadu</i> [M]	Large extended family
<i>Tiruvathira-kali</i> [M]	A Keralite dance especially performed during Onam (Harvest festival) celebrations
<i>Tishhta!</i> [S]	Wait!
<i>Tumhi</i> [Mrt]	You
<i>Uthishtatu</i> [S]	Get up/ Stand up
<i>Vaidyar</i> [M]	Doctor/physician
<i>Velichapaad</i> [M]	Oracle
<i>Vikritikutti</i> [M]	Naughty child

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