

AYATHURAI
SANTHAN

The
Whirlwind

A NOVEL

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A Novel

Ayathurai Santhan

V.U.S.PATHIPPAGAM

63 - S, PARK DUGAR,
RAMAPURAM

CHENNAI - 600 089

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This is a piece of fiction.

*A whirlpool of events
far beyond anyone's control,
making **them all** victims.*

The Whirlwind - A Novel

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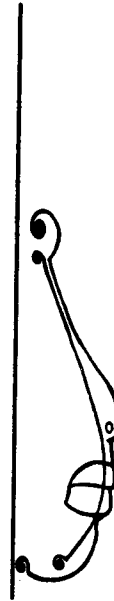
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(1)



‘Is this going to be a refugee or a detention camp, Sivan?’

The tall, gray-haired person asked in a nonchalant voice, as he walked with measured steps. There was an air of a refinement about him, so typical of a middle-class Jaffna man. He was in traditional dress, a *verty* and a full-sleeved collar-less shirt, a folded shawl draped round his neck, all white, befitting that retired head master of the local Tamil high school. The eyes, which appeared bigger behind the glasses, stared at his much younger and stouter companion walking by his side.

‘Of course the second,’ replied Sivan curtly. ‘Why doubt **Thevar maamaa?**’

The sneer turned his dark but pleasant, clean shaven face set with piercing eyes, look embittered. Sivan had thick

curly hair and he had a brownish leather bag hanging from his right shoulder.

Thevar, Thevarajan, liked the way this smart young neighbor addressing him as 'uncle', though they were not related. A gentle smile appeared on his lips under the white moustache as he said, 'anyhow, a lecturer like you should be better dressed than this ...,' the voice sounded reproving. 'And a decent appearance would surely impress them, wouldn't it?'

Sivan looked at his white sarong and the brown shirt carelessly worn and his lips parted in a silent smile.

'You really believe it, *maama*?' he asked. 'I don't think our dress would in any way change their opinion about us.'

'What makes you think so?' Thevar turned towards him.

'Do you think that they're yet to form any opinion about us?' He continued gravely, 'in their eyes, we are all culprits, people to be punished, for harboring their enemies! It is just because of that impression they're now herding us in here.'

Thevar did not say anything.

They were walking towards the long cemented concrete steps leading to a two-storied building roofed with dark brown tiles, in front. The house appeared dark and deserted. A big frangipani tree with its leafless branches like giant fingers, was brushing the high eaves.

Both stopped short. The whole place seemed strange, with an extraordinary eeriness in that vast compound surrounding the house. Even the entire vicinity remained frightfully silent.

'None of those soldiers seem to be here?' Thevar's voice was soft.

'It looks so.'

Maroon colored dragon flies flitted about here and there. The sky was cloudless and grayish blue, a colour particular to evenings of November, the only month with considerably heavy rainfall in Jaffna. The earth was clean, having been washed by the previous night's rain and the trails left by the water were still undisturbed and untrodden.

'Be careful, the stair is steep.' Sivan turned back towards his wife, who was closely following him, carrying their baby daughter in her right arm and a small blue plastic basket stacked with some bottles and a flask in the other. He went closer and gently touched the chubby cheeks of the child who was fast asleep. He smiled at his wife, as if to show that he was not dispirited by all that was happening around them. And indeed he felt a kind of invigorating feeling within him when he saw Suba reflecting the smile. With a prominent red *pottu* marked on her forehead, the lean, brown skinned woman looked reassuring and beautiful as ever. She was in a casual pink sari, something she managed to drape amid all that excitement and hurry.

'*Amma* must be tired,' Sivan thought of his mother as he looked at the frail old lady being led by his younger brother Ravi. Both of them were behind Suba.

Ravi, despite having the same facial features as his brother, appeared much taller and slimmer. He was leading their mother by holding her shriveled, bony arm in his.

He too was in a casual indoor dress, a blue striped sarong and a light yellow colored shirt. There was a small leather suitcase in his hand. Sivan went up to his mother as she was about to climb up the steps, raising her white sari above her ankles.

'I can climb by myself,' she objected.

'It's alright, let's help you. There are so many steps,' Ravi replied without loosening his grip.

Slowly they climbed up the stairs.

*

Though everyday Sivan had passed by this house often, this was the second time he happened to be inside. Incidentally this house remained a landmark in their village. The bungalow must be more than forty years old and was built a few years before he was born, his father had once told him. It belonged to an affluent trader, Kanthar, who ran a popular textile business in the city of Jaffna. Sivan first visited this house with his parents when he was a small boy to attend the wedding of Kanthar's only daughter, Kamala. It was a grand function. Spacious *panthals* were erected to accommodate the guests. The wedding was followed by a grand feast and the guests were entertained by lively musical programs provided by well known *melam* troupes. Even on that day there was a big crowd, like the one following him now. But that was a happy and cheerful crowd!

Sivan felt heavy in his heart and turned round to look at the people coming behind. He saw some of the villagers still waiting outside the broad wrought iron gates hesitating to enter or not.

'Why are they waiting there?' Sivan asked Thevar, his voice full of concern.

'Haven't they heard what those soldiers had said? We've to stay here tonight.'

And his voice changed as he continued as if murmuring, 'this'll be our home for God only knows how long ...'

'These people must know that this is not a matter of their choice,' Thevar stopped for a moment, and then turned round saying, 'after all they've been told to bring what they need with them!'

He then hurried down towards the gate, without paying heed to his wife shrieking, 'where are you running back?' The fat old lady looked much fatter in her thick coffee colored sweater, a woolen scarf and house coat. She had gold framed spectacles.

'Uncle is not going anywhere *maami*, he'll be back now,' Suba pacified her.

They removed their sandals outside on the verandah and walked in timidly, feeling the chill of the green cemented floor decorated with neat diamond shaped patterns.

'It's sticky,' said Ravi.

'Don't you know that no body uses this house at present except that care taker, Mani?' reminded his mother.

The elevated verandah was not so wide but very long. A lot of heavily framed pictures and some old family photographs were hanging in a neat row high above, along the white washed walls on three sides.

'Let's go in,' said Sivan and slowly walked ahead.

They went into the *koodam*, a square hall with a high ceiling. A musty smell pervaded the place.

'It's very dark here,' Suba said.

'All the windows are shut. Shall I open them?'

'No, let's wait for that Mani to come.'

Sivan ran his eyes over the place to choose a small area which would suit his family. He went to a corner away from the windows.

'Is this alright?'

He asked Suba in a low voice. She nodded in agreement, but her face was not as bright as it was a couple of minutes ago. He wiped the floor with a piece of old newspaper he had pulled out from his bag and carefully arranged all their belongings there. Sivan then turned towards Thevar's wife.

'Is this place okay for you, *maami*?' He pointed to the place next to theirs.

'What's there to choose, *thambi*?'

The panting lady replied with a sigh and quickly fanning the floor with a piece of cloth she pulled out from her shoulder bag, sat down immediately.

'True, we've to be satisfied with what we get at times like these,' agreed Sivan's mother and sat down beside Thevar's wife, leaning against the wall.

'You, too, better relax,'

Sivan told Suba, taking out a bed sheet and spreading it carefully on the floor for the child. The baby was still asleep on her mother's shoulder, her tiny thumb in her mouth. Sivan then turned towards his brother.

'You stay with them, Ravi. Don't go any where. I'll be back in a moment.'

'Okay,' said Ravi.

When Sivan came out to the verandah, people had already started coming in, though reluctantly. Most of them were still clutching the white flags in their hands as they were asked to do by those who had driven them there. The faces were dark and desperate. He went up to them. 'Just find a convenient place and occupy it. Keep your things there and relax,' Sivan told them in a soothing voice.

'This is our fate, *raasaa*. Leaving our comfortable homes and crouching in corners like this for no fault of ours and with our hearts filled with terror and uncertainty,' fumed the squint eyed Navam. He was a successful farmer who had acres of land at Pooneryn, just across the Jaffna lagoon, a place famous for its fertile paddy fields.

'No one seems to worry about our plight, even the One above,' moaned he. His tall wife and three teenaged children, two boys and a girl, were behind him, their faces fear stricken.

'You must've heard about what happened in places like Kokuvil and Jaffna town during the last couple of weeks and now it seems our turn,' remarked Navam.

'Look here, Navam, don't talk like that,'

Thevar went up to him and cautioned him in a soft but firm voice. 'Don't make others get scared. Why not be hopeful and optimistic? Leave everything to the Almighty.'

Naagu, a dark giant of a man with a slightly balding head, the miller of the village, came towards them excitedly. 'It appears that those soldiers didn't want to come in, *thambi*. They're still at the gate, counting the number of people coming in,' he told in a whisper.

'Don't worry,' Sivan replied calmly, 'let them do it; have to expect that.'

Mani suddenly showed himself up in the middle of the crowd and started addressing them in a low voice. He was noticeably nervous, and the bare body above his waist was very dark and lean. He had a slight stoop.

'You can move in, here also,' said Mani, opening the back door of the *koodam* which was ajar all the time and pointing them the place with a gesture of his close-cropped head.

'You'll find the four wings around the inner court and there's another large verandah behind. There's more than enough space for all, for the whole village even!'

'No rooms?' asked someone.

'Sorry, all the rooms are locked and the keys are with the owners in Colombo, as you all know.'

'What about the upstairs?'

'Yes, there are two small verandahs like balconies. You may go up there, if you wish.'

Lanky Logan nodded towards his people, and all of them, his wife, two children, his father and uncle and aunt walked towards the wooden stair case which was at the far corner.

'Shall we come to that place next to yours, Sivan? Is anybody else there?' The familiar voice made Sivan turn around and there was the smiling face of his friend, the Mathematics teacher of the village high school, fondly nick-named 'Pythagoras' by his students.

'Raju! You, too, are welcome. Nobody there, yet,' Sivan patted his friend's shoulder and smiled. 'We are always neighbors, even in a camp like this! Aren't we?'

All the people were in a hurry to secure a few square feet, which they could call their 'own' for the night or till they were allowed to get back to their houses again. Most of them carried a small bundle or a bag each, the only belongings they were able to bring in.

'Hurry up, everybody. It's getting dark and in no time you'll be able to see each other's face. Don't you know these are the rainy days?' Old Essem, the retired station master, asked them in his husky voice. His pot belly was protruding behind the mauve colored tee shirt. There was a black woolen muffler around his neck hanging like a shawl.

'I saw a couple of people bringing lanterns,' observed Mani.

'Ha,' cut in Essem, stroking his bald head with his palm, 'can you rely on just two lanterns for all these people, and especially when you don't have kerosene anywhere?'

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(2)



The night was quiet. Except for the brief cry of a child somewhere inside, there was no other noise in the whole house. Some were talking in the dark, in whispers, their agitation reflecting even in those hushed voices. It was not yet half past seven, but everybody had retired already. They were lying on that cold, bare cement floor, next to one another with scarcely any room between them even to turn aside. Narrow spaces, lined with old people or baggage, demarcated the boundaries between families. Virtually all of them, except for the children, were awake, their minds occupied with the same question, 'will they allow us to get back home at least tomorrow?'

'This is what our people called Fate,' Rasamma *aunty*'s voice sounded stoically from somewhere in the dark. 'Leaving all our comfortable homes and coming here and lying down in this cold bare floor like this!'

Somebody else, a woman again, laughed bitterly, 'how many of us are going to catch pneumonia tomorrow, one cannot say.'

'How many of us will be alive tomorrow, you tell me that first?' They all heard Eason now, 'they are going to kill us all here!' Before finishing what he wanted to say he broke into sobs.

He then continued, 'I've read about the concentration camps set up during the time of the Second World War and I surely know that this is going to be one like that.'

All those who heard him remained silent without knowing whether to pity him or themselves.

Thevar got up at once and consoled him.

'Hush, *thambi* Eason, nothing like that will happen. Don't be frightened like a child.' The old man flashing his dimmed torch went up to Eason who was still weeping and being comforted by his old parents. The yellow circle of light revealed the face of a well built youngster, the sharp features of which he seemed to have lost long ago. Thevar caressed his head, 'don't worry Eason. We all are here, aren't we? They'll definitely allow us to get back to our homes tomorrow, alright?'

Eason looked up, wiping his face, 'are you telling the truth?'

'Sure,' promised Thevar.

'He has been brought to this state by all our 'saviors', ' Thevar heaved a big sigh as he returned, 'and what a nice young man he was, helpful to all.'

'The worst thing was that he had to undergo the ordeal not once but twice or thrice; each militia suspecting the poor innocent chap for reasons best known to them only and penalizing him!' Essem remarked.

'How charming and energetic he was when we were in the lower forms,' Sivan thought of Eason, 'and still not forgotten that friendship. Tomorrow I must speak to him and reassure him.' He decided.

Silence reigned again.

A single hurricane lamp lit by Mani hung on a thin rod from the roof of the western wing, flickering. The pale yellow light seemed unable to ooze out of the chimney covered by soot.

Sivan and Thevar were seated on the cold white sand in the middle of the big inner court yard, each lost in his own thoughts. The star lit sky was clear, without a trace of any cloud and the air was still. Behind the tiled roof were the dark silhouettes of the tall areca nut trees standing by the well, in the back yard. A sudden screech of a *sudalai kuruvi* pierced that eerie silence and reverberated across the sky as it darted across, and gradually vanished in the distance.

'*Thoo,thoo,*' Sivan heard old Valli *Aachi* spitting, from a dark corner somewhere in an attempt to ward off any

possible curse imparted on the already cursed people below by the bird's cry, and mumbling, 'a bad omen...O, God.'

As if distracted by these, Sivan turned towards Thevar.

'Could any of us have ever thought that a thing like this would happen to us, *maamaa*?'

'This is like what our proverb says, *Vaeliyae payirai maeyuthaam* - the fence itself grazing the field,' Thevar scoffed. 'The same people, whom we looked up to bring us peace and protection, are doing this to us!'

'Have you both finished your dinner?' Essem appeared from the dark. He was holding something small in his hand which appeared to be a small piece of paper.

'What dinner at a time like this? Had just two balls of plain rice! My wife was able to bring at least that much in that hurry,' said Thevar.

'What about you?' Essem turned towards Sivan.

'Finished,' Sivan said briefly, thinking of his child. The little girl had to forego her usual string hoppers and milk tonight. Suba had forcibly fed her with a piece of rusk soaked in water with sugar and she herself nibbled another piece. Only their mother was able to have her dinner as usual, a single plantain and plain water...!

Are these sufferings only for tonight? Sivan felt that heaviness in his chest again.

Suddenly he thought of that small calf at home which was staked away from its mother in the morning for the afternoon milking. He got up.

'What's the matter?' The other two asked, in unison.

'I'll be back in a minute,' he walked towards the *koodam*, to the place where his family was.

It was a fairly difficult task to walk in that semi-darkness without trampling on anybody's limbs.

As soon he returned, Thevar and Essem asked again. 'What happened?'

'Thank God, Ravi had remembered to untie the calf,' he said. They understood. 'I've no cattle at home. That's a relief at times like these,' said Thevar.

'See? Everybody was in a hurry! And everybody had to leave everything and rush here helter-skelter,' complained Essem.

'First they said that their big man wanted to see us all at once. And it was that big man who gave us an hour's respite to collect our things before shepherding us here. They could've given us some more time, breathing space at least.'

'That must be their way of doing things and cannot be helped.'

'You know, I heard that they've code named this operation of theirs as *Pawan*, which means 'wind' in their language. But this is not going to be an ordinary wind, but a whirlwind, a real whirlwind which has come to destroy us, our lives, land and everything!' Essem laughed in a voice full of bitterness. The others were still quiet.

An owl was hooting somewhere in the backyard.

'I can't understand why they asked us not to close the front door of this house for the night,' Essem began after some time, lowering his voice.

'I too wonder about it,' Thevar replied in a grave tone. And then he asked, 'why not both of us go and sleep in the front verandah?'

'Why not,' Essem agreed, 'surely we're not going to have even a wink of sleep tonight, so it's better to keep vigil, at least.'

'There's no one else there, is there?'

'No. But, if we go, some other men too will join us.'

'Let's do that,' agreed Essem.

The people who were gazing in the dark without sleep started gathering around them one by one.

'Do you know what happened to our Sellar *pariyariar*? Navam started talking.

'He told me that his wife was then cooking their noon meals and the couple had to leave the half boiled rice with the pot and run here on an empty stomach!'

'Where's he?' asked someone.

'He's in the rear verandah,' replied Navam and continued. 'Luckily, my wife was able to bring whatever was left in our home and we were able to share something with Sellar and his wife now.'

'In my case, as I was about to recline in the easy chair after my lunch and was about to light a cigar,' Essem began relating his story. 'I heard somebody hammering at the gate... But didn't know who it really was and almost shouted at them. Then, thank God, I was lucky enough to recognize those foreign voices immediately and went running to the gate.'

Essem paused for a moment, took out what he had in his hand and started stretching and smoothening it. A piece of tobacco leaf! He went on with his story.

‘When I opened the gate, there were four of these strange looking men with guns, trying to tell me something. They knew neither Tamil nor English and in fact it took a couple of minutes for me to comprehend that they were summoning all of us to the school at once! Just imagine! Can you ask them why? Or can you explain your problems or difficulties? What I was able to get was only an excuse for a couple of minutes to get things ready!’ Essem then started rolling a cigar, pulling apart the tobacco carefully along the edges.

‘That was the story everywhere,’ said Raju. ‘My father was taking a bath and had no time even to wash the soap he had applied on and had to wipe it off! They were in such haste.’ Sivan noticed Ravi seated besides him.

‘Some people were so upset that they had forgotten to secure their houses! It was so terrible,’ Naagu remarked. ‘Anyway, if you compare, our army would’ve been a hundred times better!’

‘Your army?’ somebody asked from somewhere, baffled.

‘Yes, the Sri Lankan army. At least we would’ve been able to speak to them in one of our languages,’ said Naagu who had worked in a rice mill in Pollonaruwa when he was young and could speak Sinhala language well. ‘And further,’ he continued, ‘they’re all like us. Here, the mere sight of most of these people itself is enough to make us scared!’

The same person cackled from the dark, ‘yes, it’s always better to forget and forgive!’ The others were silent.

‘Pensioner’s house Kanagar was down with some ailment and his sons had to carry him in an arm chair, along with his pillows.’

‘Yes, I am here,’ the trembling voice of Kanagar came from the western wing.

‘Fine, *annai*,’ greeted Thevar, ‘sorry, I couldn’t see you all this time in this darkness. Hope your children are taking care of you!’

‘Why do they call him ‘Pensioner’s House Kanagar?’ Mani asked Naagu who was seated by his side.

‘Because his father had been in the Malayan government service for a long time and after returning here he was receiving the Malayan pension till he was alive, a very big sum the people say.’ Naagu, too, replied in a subdued voice.

‘There must be some more old people remaining in their homes, the people who are too weak to walk or have nobody to carry them, like Mylar,’ Thevar said.

Mylar was a flourishing cheroot maker for a long time. His specially made *koda* cigars were very popular throughout the country but he had to curtail the business and send his sons abroad following the changes in the political climate.

‘What is money going to do after all? He has enough wealth but there’s nobody to look after the old couple. A pity,’ Navam felt sorry for them.

‘But I don’t think that these men will harm such old people, who stay in their homes,’ presumed Raju.

The rest remained quiet.

Essem was lighting his cigar with his palms cupped around it carefully. Then he started talking.

'Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, gained independence in forty eight and from that time, except for the first ten years, we have been suffering continuously because of one or other unfortunate incidents. Haven't we?'

'Whatever you say about that independence,' came again the feeble voice of Kanagar, 'the time of the British rule was the best in the whole of our history!'

Luckily, Ganesan is not here, thought Sivan with a smile, otherwise he would have started a heated argument with this ripe old man.

'What makes you say so, *annai*?' Essem asked respectfully.

'What else?' Kanagar replied without hesitation. 'Even before the time of the British, there were so many troubles in this land. They were the times of the Dutch and before that of the Portuguese. During those periods the local people had to undergo so much oppression and suffering. Still earlier were the times of the native kings which meant the era of ceaseless wars and suffering.'

The old man must have derived energy somehow to express his thoughts. 'But, the British period was a period unlike those; it was a time of peace and progress. No wars, no fights. They made roads, rail roads and established estates. There was justice and fair play and religious freedom and all the people lived amicably, like one family. Didn't they?'

Our Jaffna people secured high ranking jobs here and went to Malaya and Singapore and earned their fortunes. Just think of those times! Whatever one might say about exploitation and colonization and so on, that was the golden period! Can any one of you deny it?'

The pungent smell of cigar slowly filled the air.

'But, let's come back to our problem. All these troubles are only for tonight, right?' asked Vellai with optimism. Vellai earned this nick name meaning 'fair' because of his fair complexion, and most of the people in the village had forgotten his real name now. Vellai then continued, 'most probably they'll allow us to get back tomorrow.' It looked as if he was consoling himself rather than others.

'I doubt it very much,' observed Sivan slowly, in a matter of fact tone.

'Why? Why do you say so?' Vellai's anxiety was reflected in his voice.

'Haven't you noticed what their big man said at the school when we gathered in front of him?' Sivan looked at Vellai.

'What did he say?'

'We'll allow you to go back once we finish our search operation,' he said. Do you think that it is possible for them to finish that within a day? Or more exactly, how can they do that within a night, that means tonight?'

The others were speechless, realizing the gravity of that argument.

'Don't imagine things. Don't start worrying too much. Grumbling or complaining is not going to take us

anywhere. We have no one to worry about us, neither leaders nor governments, to care for us except the Almighty himself. Haven't you heard our people say that God is the refuge of the helpless?

Thevar went on as if delivering a sermon. 'Just think of what had happened during the whole of last month, when these Peace Keeping Forces were trying to capture the other areas of Jaffna. They were firing shells every day and every night, weren't they? How did we feel at that time, when the shells hissed past just above our heads and exploded nearby? How did we put up with that and how did we survive them? Who gave us the power to endure all those? Who helped us then? Leave everything to that unseen power and wait till they allow us go home.'

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(3)



'In that case,' Essem spoke again, breaking the silence after a while, 'how are we going to deal with our needs here? We've got to think of a way to sort out these problems.' There was a shade of panic in his voice.

'We all came with the idea of staying for a single night at the most, didn't we?' wondered Jegan, a building contractor turned broker. He was originally from a far away Northern coastal village of the peninsula and he and his family were badly affected and their belongings lost during the military operation early that year, settled in this village, started their life anew and are now integrated fully with the local community.

'Even a single night's stay away from home is terrible, and that too, during the rainy days like these!' Jegan's wife, a chronic asthma patient, complained as if crying.

They heard a child whining and it was followed at once by the voice of its soothing mother. But the moaning did not stop.

'Why, daughter, why then is your child crying?' Thevar asked from where he was, even without knowing who that young woman was.

'Nothing, *aiya*...', came out a hoarse male voice.

'Is that your wife and child, Arumai?' Thevar identified the voice. 'Weren't you able to find time to bring anything for the child to eat tonight?'

There was silence for a minute and then it was broken by soft voices from several places in the dark.

'Arumai, why not give this rice?'

'We've some extra *rotti* and banana...'

'Would the child be willing to have some plain tea, may be a bit cold?'

'Come on Arumai, get up,' Thevar told him and then turning behind he called gently.

'Raju, go and fetch something for the child. Arumai may find it embarrassing to take from somebody.'

Raju got up and went.

'If what you say is going to happen,' Essem started again in a pensive tone and asked Sivan, 'what are we going to do?'

'What are we to do?' repeated Sivan, dejectedly. 'We've to do whatever they order us to do. That's all!'

'What do you think they have in mind? What are they going to do with us?'

'They say that they're going to do a combing up operation. That means a house to house search in the village while we are being detained here. And...'

'And, what else?'

'The chances are they might screen us, right here, at this place!' Sivan then turned towards his brother.

'Ravi, you've your Identity card and other documents safely, haven't you?' His voice was full of anxiety.

He could see Ravi nodding, even in that faint light.

'Yes *annai*.'

'But, don't worry too much,' Thevar consoled others. 'What can they do with us? We're innocent civilians, involved in nothing objectionable. We are all occupied, either with our studies or our work.'

'Fate is playing against us,' observed Essem in a grave tone. The others listened quietly as if agreeing with what he said and Essem continued. 'That great lady Indira died unexpectedly and if you don't call that our bad luck, then what is it? Even that good soul who was interested in our well being, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, MGR is in his sick bed at present. If not, things would've been definitely different.'

Sivan thought how the whole of Jaffna had mourned the death of Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, for two days, everybody grieving as if that lady had belonged to their own family. All the roads were deserted and shops and offices closed and there were only black flags and funeral decorations everywhere. The entire peninsula would've never seen such bereavement before.

'After all,' said Raju in a convincing voice as if to assure others, 'these forces have come here not to fight the Tamils or the Sinhalese! What do you say?'

No one spoke and Raju went on. 'We're all aware of the deteriorating situation which started in seventy seven and worsened in eighty three and ultimately reached the climax with the outbreak of this civil war. Over the last five years we have had more than enough troubles because of the actions of the various parties concerned. And now these people have come on the scene with an assurance of bringing us peace and a political solution.'

'That's what they say,' said some one, following a silence. 'But, you can't trust these Northern chaps, the most unreliable lot!'

'No Kutty,' making out the voice which came from the dark, Thevar spoke gently but firmly. 'We are not supposed to generalize about people or matters like that. Good and bad people are everywhere, no matter in which place, in which religion, in which race or in which country!'

'Everywhere, you say?' Kutty, the local librarian, asked.

'Of course, even in an army or even in a small classroom in a school there could be every type of people, the good and the bad. And above all, the present politics and this war have become too complicated for any one to understand. So it's better not to blame anyone or anything except our destiny...'

'What you say seems true,' interjected, Sivan. His voice was thoughtful and deep. 'I don't think that any of the players

in this present deadly game is up to anything contrary to their conscience. Each and every party is trying to do what they believe is good and right for the cause of the people but, it's a pity that their actions contradict one another and affect not only them, but worse, the innocent masses themselves in a very big way, for whose sake they claim they are doing all these things!...'

Essem cleared his throat. 'Yes, all of them may not only have their own view and own logic but their own way of doing things, too!'

'And all of them will have their own times for repentance, too,' interjected Kutty.

Wondering for a moment about what Kutty had said, Sivan went on, 'but, even if each one is sincere to himself, the weird or the pathetic reality is that the people disagree with each other! Is this diversity the driving force which makes things happen in the world?'

'Surely, there cannot be something called absolute truth,' Thevar spoke, 'and there cannot be a single place and time where truth resides. So long as everyone is true to himself, there is nothing for us to object to. Our agreeing or disagreeing with another is sheer coincidental.'

'Yes, life and the world are neither simple nor one-dimensional; we've to accept that,' Sivan concluded. 'The complexity and the resulting contradictions seem to be natural and unavoidable...'

'At times I also used to wonder about these things,' said the retired station master, removing the cigar from his

mouth. 'The gaps in comprehension among individuals or groups or even nations seem to me the greatest irony of life itself. This phenomenon must be the driving force for all actions and functions of the world as you said.' Essem wiped his mouth with the towel he had across his shoulder.

'We must accept one fact,' said Thevar. 'Each human being is subject to his own experiences, conscience and above all his inadequacies and thus liable to make mistakes.'

'The old ones are trying to be too philosophical.' Most of the people were able to hear now what Kutty said though he was murmuring. 'But why did this Sivan join them?'

'Kutty *annai* has his own way of thinking,' Ravi whispered into the ears of Raju.

'I don't know if they've come here to help us as Raju said or not,' Thevar started speaking again thoughtfully, raising both his palms in supplication towards the heaven. 'But, there's surely some one to help us. And help all! So don't worry, let's do what we can and let's wait even if it is for a few days, in case they want us to remain here.'

'This childless old man can come out with such crazy thoughts, but can we, those who have grown up children, remain in peace here?'

Balu, the Postmaster, who was leaning against the wall of the Northern verandah in the dark, whispered to his wife. His children, two sons and the daughter, Selvi, were also crouching by the side of their parents, and heard what their father said. Selvi's eyes were still wet with silent weeping. At once she tightly clutched the hand bag in which her ID and

a couple of other papers were kept securely. She remembered how her father, who had never spoken any harsh word to her in her twenty years, had reprimanded her for leaving that handbag at home, for forgetting the documents at a time like this. Yes, father was correct; this is definitely not a time to forget such things. Proving one's identity, especially for young girls like her, meant life or death or even more than that. And this afternoon, while the whole village was in turmoil, their family had to take the risk of running home again along the deserted lanes to fetch her documents! All those perils were due to her irresponsibility! No, it wasn't her irresponsibility, but the anxiety, the fear...

Selvi again felt the welling up of tears and tried hard to control her feelings. She was very well aware that, she was shedding tears not only for her mistake and her father's reprimand, but more for what was ahead of them. She had to worry about herself, about her two younger brothers and... yes, about Ravi, too, all of whom are either in their teens or twenties, the most vulnerable age group in the eyes of all those who come with the mandate of eliminating the extremists!

She had yearned to have a look at Ravi since the evening but to no avail. Now, it is more than two months since she had spoken to him. Till the situation remained comparatively calm, she was able to see him on her way to the classes, at least once or twice a week. But after all these unexpected and quick turn of events, everything had changed upside down.

She could now clearly hear what that Thevar *maamaa* was asking Ravi's brother.

'What shall we do then, *thambi*?'

'Better to be prepared. If they tell us to stay here for a couple of days, then we've to ask for permission tomorrow morning to go home to bring provisions,' replied Sivan.

'And also the valuables we left there,' Navam pointed.

'Don't mention anything about the valuables to them,' cautioned Raju's father, a person who had lost his well-paid job due to the closure of the KKS cement factory following the disturbed state of affairs.

'So, bringing things from home is priority number one and number two is to make arrangements here for an orderly way of life for all these people, even if the stay happens to last longer.'

'Water, cooking, bathing, washing, toilet...!' Essem counted on his fingers.

'There are only one water seal latrine and a well in this compound,' pointed out Mani.

'Before all these, I wonder about something else...,' started Navam and then stopped.

'Go, ahead,' said Sivan.

'After herding us all here, none of them came inside! Neither did they bother to see what we're doing here!'

'Ah, don't think so. They'll be watching us from outside!'

'They'll come in the morning only.'

'Do you know where they are staying, now?' Mani asked in a serious tone.

'Where, tell us?'

'Right in front, across the road! At Ratnam Master's house! That's where they're camped.'

'What?'

'Is that true?'

'Yes, I too, have noticed it,' asserted Vellai.

The sudden flare up of a quarrel from the Northern wing interrupted their discussion for a while. Typist Tharmu's voice was loud.

'I say, you can't take this much of space. If you want to sleep comfortably, get back home.'

Somebody else replied in a muted tone, as if grumbling.

'Let them settle it between themselves.' Thevar told Essem gently and then asked, 'where is Ratnam Master and his family? Are they still at Paddukkodai?'

'It must be so. He is a wise man, and lucky to escape all these torments.'

'So this company has occupied his house! What'll come of it when they leave it?'

'Who is to worry about the house nowadays? Ratnam must've taken his valuables with him.'

'Yes, lucky are those who have left the place!'

'You can't say so, because we don't know what's going on at Paddukkodai or at other places in Jaffna! All the people are scattered and the villages isolated and roads deserted. No way of communicating with one another for over a week.'

Again there was silence.

'I made the mistake of returning in a hurry,' regretted Sivan, 'after staying at Paddukkodai for about a month and then to return here on time to get caught in this trouble, like a fool!' He blamed himself and could not help sighing heavily.

The owl from the backyard hooted again and within minutes another replied. There appeared a cloud in the southern sky, like a wisp of smoke. The gentle breeze was very cold. 'What could the time be?' he heard Essem asking.

Sivan looked at his plastic digital watch, and gently pressed its light button. 'It's ten past nine now,' he replied.

'We could've listened to the radio news.'

'Has anybody got a transistor here?'

'I've brought one,' Jegan got up. 'But what's there to listen to? Does anybody tell you the truth?' He asked.

'You can at least listen to the curfew announcements, about advancing times!' Essem replied.

'And a curfew announcement is of no help to us. It's not going to make any difference for people like us who are under detention!'

They heard some rustling sounds in the western wing of the building and turned towards it. Some figures could be seen moving in the dark.

'Who is it?' asked Essem. No one answered. But they noticed Valli *Aachi*'s frail shape emerging from the dark and coming towards them tottering. Her already stooped figure bent further towards them.

'*Raasaa...*,' she called softly, 'look, those women folk there are facing a serious problem. They've been inconvenienced since they left their homes and somebody says that the lavatory here is in a remote corner of the compound. Is it safe enough to go that far in the dark, especially when we don't know if those chaps are around this place?'

'Here!' said Raju. 'This is what I told you. The real problem has started now! It's simple, but serious.'

'I know, I know,' said Essem who still had his dead half cigar between his fingers. 'If it is only for 'number one', you needn't bother to go that far. So, tell them to go to a fair distance away from the house and finish off. But if it's for 'number two' ...,' Essem didn't know what to say.

'No, *maamaa*,' said Sivan firmly. 'We are going to face the same problem again in the morning! So why postpone? Let's think about it now itself.'

'True,' agreed Thevar.

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(4)



'Chalo!' said the one who looked like the leader of that small group of soldiers waiting outside. He must be from the North, knowing neither Tamil nor English and was fair and tall with a sharp moustache pointing upwards. Sivan understood the meaning of what he said because of his limited vocabulary of Hindi. 'Let's go.' The *Jawan* took two strides ahead and stopped. He then looked back at both the men whom he was supposed to escort. Thevar and Sivan gazed at each other and gestured mutually, to go in front. And both very well knew that the gesture made by the other was not due to fear but respect. After a moment's hesitation, Thevar, appreciating the respect given to his age, strode in front and stood by the side of the soldier. Sivan went and stood behind him and turned towards the house. The high verandah was full of people. He saw his family standing in front of the others.

Though Suba was trying to make the child wave to its father, her face was covered by an obvious gloom. The faces of his mother, and Ravi, too, seemed to accuse Sivan for his stupidity in jumping forward to go and make arrangements for provisions. 'You, too, should've kept quiet like others,' they seemed to say. He thought that he was able to hear them wishing him well in silence and praying for his safe return. He smiled at them courageously as if suggesting everything would be alright and there was nothing to worry about.

It was a bright morning. The sun could not penetrate through the leafy-fronds of the palmyrah grove behind Ratnam Master's house. A peculiar silence prevailed everywhere, even beyond that house; even in the entire surrounding. This has never been the way in this village. What curse has befallen us mused Thevar.

'Chalo!' repeated the soldier and started walking in front with his chest pushed forward.

Thevar followed and Sivan, with a quick nod towards the verandah as if bidding farewell, stepped behind. Outside the gate, four other men, who had been waiting there, joined them. Two in front and two behind and thus formed an array. Ahead of them was Ratnam Master's house. What Mani and others had told him the previous night was true. It was full of *jawans* bustling around! They had made a well fortified sentry box in front with cement concrete blocks which they must have obtained by breaking some wall, somewhere nearby.

Seeing these two civilians, their heads popped up above the parapet wall and stood staring at them. The one on

sentry duty uttered something loud and the others laughed. The blended smell of ghee and groundnut oil hung in the air. They walked past the men, looking ahead. They had to walk slowly. The one going in front did not seem to be in a hurry. Sivan had an urge to turn around and have a look at Kanthar's house. But he gave up that idea fearing the soldiers might misinterpret his action.

Thevar walked in front of Sivan, at an arms length. As he walked, a measured screech came from his black leather slippers. Thevar was in his usual dress, the white shawl neatly wrapped around his neck merging neatly with his dense gray hair at the back. Usually he had holy ash and sandalwood paste on his forehead, but Sivan remembered seeing only the holy ash this morning, the sandalwood paste was missing. His appearance was as usual, even on a day like this! Sivan looked at himself- he had the same sarong, with the tail of his shirt hanging out, and the pair of brown rubber slippers. His usual 'off-day' wear, the ones he had worn after his noon bath the previous day. 'It's alright, I can change into freshly washed clothes once I return after attending to this provisions matter,' he thought. But, it was doubtful if he would be able to have a bath before afternoon when looking at that large crowd in the camp! Let's see to that after returning. The important thing is to make arrangements for three or four days' supply, at the least. How to allow those in the camp go hungry? Let alone the grown up people but what about the children? Nobody would consider our request seriously unless some people from the camp went and talked to them, the officer had said this morning. He was a

helpful sort of person. Captain B.C.D.Singh was his name. He must be in charge of the camp at Ratnam Master's house. A young man with a pair of spectacles and a fully shaven face, he looked more like an academic than a military man.

The whole area remained quiet, dominated by an unusual weirdness which he had never experienced in his village. There were small puddles of flood water here and there and they had to dodge them. The previous night's rain had washed the sand along the road side clean and it glistened in the bright morning sun. Their long shadows cast onto their left glided along the terrain. They walked, unable to enjoy the fresh and cold air. Where are they taking us? Where is the local Red Cross office? B.C.D.Singh had assured them that the officers would attend to the matter without delay. It would be fine, if they could finish it soon and let us return early. That temporary office of the Red Cross must be somewhere close to the *Amman* temple, at the far end of the village main road.

That's correct. The man going in front was turning left. They, too, followed...

What is this? Sivan was shocked to see what was in front. The fences on both sides of the road remained burnt and the parapet walls razed... Even the door boards of Kathiresu's grocery shop were missing... What on earth had happened? A heavy deathly silence reigned over the place. It was disturbed by the cawing of a lonely crow from somewhere in the neighborhood. Then it, too, fell silent. The entire scene was disgusting! Sivan looked at Thevar. Certainly, he too must have been affected by this dreadful sight. Thevar's careful

movements reflected that he, too, was upset. Couldn't they talk to each other? The soldiers, like robots, walked in front and behind. Why are they taking us like this, handling us like prisoners? Why such fuss and precaution for two civilians, thought Sivan.

The soldier in front walked cautiously with his gun pointed. His steps were watchful, his eyes scanning the surroundings! The pair of *jawans* who followed him, too, did the same. Though he couldn't turn round and have a look, Sivan presumed the pair escorting them from behind did the same. Where are they taking us in this way? Have we been deceived and trapped into this foolishly, mused Sivan. Suddenly he saw the burnt out remnants of something scattered between the patch of dense grass and the line of a small mound, which was once a fence... The tread of the soldiers' heavy boots on the road... That was the only sound they could hear now. A scary bleakness prevailed all over. 'Is this our village? Certainly this is not a dream,' wondered Sivan. They went on walking.

Atop the portico of banker Ponniah's house, there was a sentry post. The concrete blocks from the parapet walls that stood in front must have gone into its construction. A gun barrel projected out through a watch hole in that sentinel's house...

The fences of overseer Thurai's compound had been torn apart, the backyard clearly visible from where they were. In his car shed was the burnt-out shell of Thurai's old *Morris Minor*...

Where could the people have gone from this area, maybe to the *Amman* temple? Has this part of the village, too, been taken up by the soldiers, like ours? Or, were those people

wise enough to have gone elsewhere before this search operation, like Ratnam Master?

That same smell of ghee and ground nut oil again! It was getting stronger. They must be somewhere close by! There were two more sentry posts behind the green boundary walls of Gunam's compound, with guns jutting out from both. Beyond those there were another two! All built out of concrete blocks taken from Packia Akka's and Jothi's parapet walls! The corrugated GI sheets from the lean-to roof of Paddu's bicycle repair shop were also missing. They must be the ones atop those sentry posts! The whole place was ravaged, like the outcome after a fierce storm. Or who knows, the storm is yet to ravage? The man who led the column turned to the right. It was the private car-track, leading to Health Inspector Param's house. They followed.

What is this? There were so many men, crowded together like a swarm of caterpillars! Sivan could not trust his eyes. He shuddered. This, surely, is not a dream! Why did they bring us here? How could one expect to find the Red Cross office at a setting like this? How could this place remain so quiet with so many men? One would never believe that this blind lane could house such a crowd. Soldiers were found everywhere, either sitting or squatting, in neat rows along both sides of the track, silently smoking *beedi*. And the strong smell of it was trying to overcome the aroma of ghee. Sivan felt his stomach turn. Would any one have ever dreamt of such a thing happening? Ever dreamt that our village would be occupied by such a massive number of these elite soldiers, the Gurkhas? And what was the need for all these?

The column made its way between the two rows of men seated on the ground. Sivan heard a few grunts from here and there, some whisperings, an unexpected whistle...! All the faces remained alike, and wooden. The two tried to walk past without looking at them. Suddenly one of the seated soldiers raised his head and shouted at them angrily. It sounded something like 'LTTE'!

Sivan felt like laughing but controlled himself as he knew the possible consequences.

The file went straight to Param's house and as they entered through the gate and turned, the large compound came into view. It was full of tall coconut palms above and dense grass covering the ground. There was no one there. But, a little further away, in front, was the spacious portico, busy like a beehive. They walked further and when they approached a coconut tree, the *jawan* who had brought them there gestured for them to stop. And he went to report. So, this is their place, camp or quarters or whatever one might call it. The same portico where Param used to park his old motorcycle was their command post now! A patch on the floor darkened with the stain of engine oil could be seen from where they stood.

The portico was about thirty feet away and they could clearly see all that was going on there. In the middle was a man seated on a sofa. He must be an officer and looked like a Gurkha. Just away from him was a table with wireless sets on it. Three men around the table were issuing orders one after another. Orders sent out to various places perhaps! A tall man was standing behind the wireless operators, slightly bent, his hands clutching the

back of a chair, giving instructions. He was not a Gurkha. He was very tall and fair, his head and the youthful face completely shaven and was dressed in a full black uniform.

The *jawan* who brought them here went and stood in front of the seated officer and saluted and reported. He returned, immediately, taking his orders. Sivan and Thevar looked at him coming towards them. As soon as he came closer, he commanded. 'Aav!' This was the second word that came out of his mouth after 'Chalo!' which he uttered while they were about to leave Kanthar's house! Both the civilians followed him, their hearts thumping heavily.

The officer, not tall, was seated with his legs crossed. He was staring at them. His beret was on his lap and the streaks of grey-hair on his head were prominent. He must have been about fifty. It was only after coming close to him they found that there were no other chairs.

The officer remained silent, continued staring at them, piercingly.

'Good Morning!' greeted Thevar. The seated man frowned.

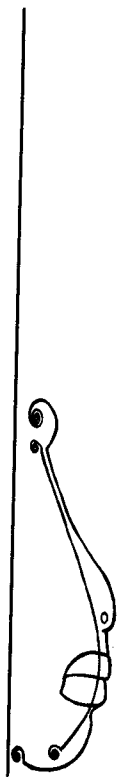
'Wait there!' he replied harshly pointing to a pillar, and then called. 'Vikram Singh!'

Vikram Singh, the one who brought them here, stepped forward, and standing at attention he listened to the officer's instructions. Then he saluted smartly and returned.

When he left the place, his four men also followed him.

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(5)



Sivan was shocked. Food or no food we should not have come here at all! The men who are going away are B.C.D.Singh's men. They've brought us here and are leaving now. Is it possible for us to return on our own? Would any man here take us back? At a time like this, we can't go alone even though it's only half a mile. By the way things are going it is doubtful if we would ever return! Sivan wiped his face with the back of his hand. Whether genuine or not, B.C.D.Singh had at least a pleasant smile on his face. But there's no trace of such a thing on the face of this officer seated in front. He looked fierce, as though he would devour them... Their hearts thumped.

A soldier came out of the house. There was a silver tray in his hand. It was full of small white pieces... Thinly sliced coconut kernel! He held the tray forward and the officer took a handful and at once started munching. Then the *jawan* took the tray to the shaven headed person. Sivan now noticed that the man's head was not fully shaven but there was a small, finger thick tuft of hair, tied into a knot. It looked so thin, like the tail of a rat and reminded Sivan of some of the characters he has seen in *Ambulimama* the popular children's magazine when he was a school boy. The *Ambulimama* man took a white towel with his left hand and wiped his face and with the other he took a handful of pieces of coconut kernel. The soldier then left the tray on a stool in front and went in. The two officers continued munching the pieces of the kernel without paying any heed to Thevar and Sivan who were standing in front of them. Sivan felt annoyed... These officers did not even have the good manners to offer them seats...

Sivan wanted to have a look at Thevar's face. Thevar was standing by his side, their shoulders touching. But, how could he turn? The name tag tied on to the Gurkha's breast was clear now and Sivan was able to make out the name ... a Major! Patha.

Pathaa or, Paathaa, he wasn't sure of the pronunciation. The other was a Captain. Vanpar. Vaanpar, or Vanpaar? 'You...', the Major seated in the chair with crossed legs pointed at Sivan, '...come, here.'

Sivan was affronted at the officer's rude manner. Does this alien know who I am? No one had ever treated me in this fashion. Sivan felt a mute anger. He went two steps forward.

'Can you speak English?'

It was my speaking English that made B.C.D.Singh send me here! Sivan now regretted revealing his ability to speak that language.

'A little...,' he said.

'You should answer me honestly... Don't try to come up with lies and deceive me...'

Is this military man trying to frighten me by looking that way? Sivan wondered. A fine way to solve the food problem!

'Are you a member of the LTTE?' -came the first question.

'No.'

'Don't tell me a lie. You must know what will happen...?'

'No, I am a state sector employee, a teacher... A family man,' replied Sivan defiantly.

'As a teacher, you must tell me the truth. Where are the LTTE? Who are the LTTE members here?'

'There's nobody here...'

'You're a young person. Surely you must have had contacts with them...'

'I've nothing to do with them.'

'Shut up!' shouted the Major, jumping up from the chair, his facial muscles quivering.

He frowned at Sivan, without batting an eyelid.

'Don't try to teach me', roared the Major, his facial muscles still trembling.

Without knowing what to say, Sivan stood there silent.

'Alright,' the Major started again, 'this place is considered to be the stronghold of the LTTE. You are a person from this area and yet you deny any knowledge of them. You want me to believe that?' The officer shouted and raised his hand as if to hit Sivan.

'That could have been...but I don't know anything.'

'How can that be...?' ridiculed the Major aggressively.

'Are you trying to make a fool of me?'

'Let me speak, sir...' said Sivan, determined to face the consequences.

'Now, you all are here. But we don't know how many of you are here. Who is an officer? Who is a *Jawan*? Where did you come from? Where do you plan to go next? We do not know anything. As far as we are concerned, you were here, that's all. This is what we would be able to tell anyone who questions us once you leave...!'

Sivan got alarmed, had he said too much?

Patha's gaze continued to scrutinize him. The small eyes under the arched brows narrowed further into slits and tried to bore through him.... Is he trying to test my will? Unfolding his arms crossed over his chest, Sivan wiped his face. After a momentary silence, Patha spoke. 'Look here! I could now ask you to turn and run away from here...But I would see how far you could run!' said the Major.

It took a couple of seconds for Sivan to understand the meaning of what the Major said! He couldn't have said 'I'll shoot you,' better than this. Sivan was alarmed. What's this man really up to? Is Thevar behind?

The Captain was busy with the wireless sets, handling two conversations simultaneously, his eyes roving...

'Get back,' hollered the Major.

'What's he going to do?' Sivan wondered, 'Is he really going to shoot me? Oh, God ...' He stood immobile, petrified.

'Go and stand there!' shouted the officer again and then turning to Thevar, called out to him. 'You come here!'

Sivan could not believe his luck. Has his life been spared by the Major for the time being? He stepped back, automatically. Thevar, stepped forward, adjusting his shawl.

'Now, you can tell us,' shouted the Major.

'What do you expect me to tell you, sir?'

The tone and Thevar's mastery of the English language must have amazed the officer.

'The truth, tell the truth!'

'We've a great respect for your country. Some even consider it their mother land...'

The Major didn't allow him to finish. 'Stop with that trick!' he shouted. 'We've enemies within our country, too!'

Sivan was affronted at the rough manner in which the Major treated Thevar, leaving that old gentleman to stand in front, without even having the courtesy to offer him a seat! How could this foreigner understand the old man's education, wealth and standing in society? How can they treat us this way and for what reason?

'So, you don't know anyone?'

'No sir!'

'Get back', shrieked the Major.

'Excuse me...' said Thevar, 'you've misunderstood us, I think. Your Captain B.C.D. Singh visited our camp this morning and informed us that the villagers will not be allowed to return to their homes till you give permission and till then, we have to make arrangements for food for all the people. That's why...'

'Shut up,' interrupted the Major at the top of his voice, his face red with anger and shining in perspiration.

'Both of you,' he pointed, 'go and stay by that wall.'

Facing the wall? Sivan once again felt the churning in his stomach, his whole body perspiring.

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The ground beside the wall was covered with green grass soft as a cushion. Param's flower plants also looked luxuriant due to the recent rains. What a wonder, there were the seedlings of the rare *sarakkontrai* in front of him! The plant with those swathing, beautiful golden yellow flowers would attract anybody. The seedlings he had been looking for all these days were within reach now! Call it a paradox?

Thevar stood beside him. They looked at each other. The old gentleman's face was full of perspiration. He removed the glasses and wiped his face with the shawl. Both wanted to speak to each other, but they were afraid to do so. 'They'll do anything to us...' Sivan turned and had a look at the portico. If we speak in a muffled voice they may not be able to hear. The Major was not there. The Captain was still busy with his wireless sets, surrounded by five or six of his men... They heard sounds

of washing of big metallic cooking pans and pots coming from the rear of the house. Maybe the meals were being prepared.

The men in the access lane must still be there. The smell of *beedi* lingered in the air. However, nothing could be seen from where they were. Both were tired. Not hungry, but thirsty. They hadn't had a drop of water since early morning.

'It won't take much time, you could finish your matter and return in ten minutes,' B.C.D.Singh had assured them. What a cheat! Anger, fear, grief and distress tormented them.

'Shall we sit down?' Sivan asked, looking at Thevar.

'Wouldn't they object?'

'Let's see.' Sivan scoured the grass with his foot and sat down. And at once he felt a sense of relief. Thevar, spreading his shawl on the grass, sat down next to him. Is anybody looking at us? No, no one seemed to care about them... Pulling up a stalk of grass, Sivan began nibbling it absent mindedly. What's going to happen?

The sound of something crashing suddenly, made them turn. The fence on the western side was collapsing and an advancing monster of a lorry was pushing it down with its engine roaring on top gear. The life stakes gave way one by one and that whole fence lined with strong stalks of palmyrah fronds yielded slowly, almost unwillingly, except for a stout *vathanarayani* tree which remained a challenge to the advancing lorry.

A soldier came running with an axe and started felling it down.

Beyond the fallen fence was the next compound which, too, was full of coconut palms. It belonged to Murugesu, the pharmacist, now working in a government hospital somewhere close to Kandy. There were some internally displaced people like Jegan and family who had been occupying that house for the last couple of years. What would have happened to them?

Beyond Murugesu's compound was the Mathavady road. The lorry must have come here bulldozing its way from there. Aware that heavy vehicles could not pass along the narrow lanes, the soldiers had found a way out by demolishing the fences and other obstructions that blocked their path. The giant of a vehicle zigzagged its way between the coconut trees and advanced with groans and growls. The peculiar smell of the fuel fumes engulfed the whole place.

The way things are going, it seems these people have no intention in leaving the place in a hurry... Suddenly Sivan remembered what Ganesan had told him at that time these troops poured in. The roar of low flying planes landing at Palaly Air Port one after the other seemed unending that day and Ganesan remarked, 'Sivan, I don't think they really have any idea of leaving quickly, look at the way they are teeming down! I have read about such large scale air lifts that took place during the Second World War.'

'Yes, instead of all these they should have pressed for a genuine dialogue between the rebels and the government here. That may have been more sensible and successful than sending in troops,' agreed Sivan.

‘Using military force will never bring peace, anywhere in the world. Even if it does it will be short lived.’

The men were now mending that newly made short cut... We would have never guessed that Mathavady road was so near. Beyond the road was the vast palmyrah grove which stretched up to the play ground of the primary school and further, the paddy fields where the Indian helicopters had landed like a dream, a few months ago, in July 87, sowing seeds of hope and anticipation in the minds of the tens of thousands of people who were affected by the prolonging war...

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(6)



When Sivan left home that day it was exactly a quarter to nine. That meant enough time for him to go leisurely, without pedaling fast and sweating all over. He was on leave that day to attend to matters regarding the family ration card without which people will not be able to get even a glimpse of many an essential item during such disturbed times. One cannot afford to lose such a vital document, and all other attempts failing, he had no alternative but to apply for a day's leave to go and speak to the officials concerned regarding issue of the card.

Sivan took the bicycle out and closed the gate behind. The thought of his motor bike lying dumped in a corner for the past several months due to the non-availability of petrol flickered for a moment in his mind. The school rush was over

and the lane remained quiet again. It was a pleasant morning with a bright yellow sun not yet hot. The cooling breeze of the southwest monsoon was gentle, unlike other times. He checked the tyres by pressing them and wiped his fingers in the cloth stuffed under the seat. When he was about to set out there appeared another one turning from the by-lane just ahead. He waited for it to pass. It was Selvam. He slowed down and stopped in front of Sivan without getting down.

‘Do you know there is something important about to take place near our *Amman* temple?’ His voice was low and grave.

‘What is there to happen now?’ Sivan asked in a care free tone. ‘There cannot be anything serious, because there is a big excitement everywhere about the peace talks.’

‘The Army is going to land, I heard the people say.’

Sivan laughed. ‘Absurd. That cannot be.’

‘If you don’t believe, go and see for yourself. But be cautious.’ Selvam pedaled away with a solemn face. Though he couldn’t accept what Selvam said, Sivan was baffled. Not to leave home at times like these was the first lesson the people learnt during these years. Why not attend to the ration card matter on some other day? He hesitated and troubles of the past flashed across his mind. The recollection of the havoc caused by an attempted landing in their village almost two years ago perturbed him. Suppose anything like that happens again? Yes, first let me check near the temple and then decide whether to proceed with this task or not. He jumped on to the bicycle and rode away. What a life this is, always facing some form of

trouble, uncertain of what would happen next! Sivan felt dejected. Nevertheless, that despair was only momentary and almost immediately another thought consoled him.

‘No, this is life, real life, confronting odds and living with uncertainty itself!’

Nothing unusual happened till he passed the community centre building at the village main road. But after that, from the Mathavady road junction onwards, were the ‘boys’, fully armed and alert. The traffic was also unusual, with those few bicycles and passers-by going only in one direction, towards the temple. Though Kathiresu’s shop was open there weren’t any customers. When Sivan turned the next bend, he saw, from a distance, a crowd standing by the road adjoining the temple. Indeed there must be something unusual, but how to know what it was and from whom was he to inquire about it? The crowd was much bigger than he imagined when he went near the temple. There were small gatherings even along the paddy fields beyond the wide front yard of that huge *kovil*. The ‘boys’ too were everywhere, standing on guard.

Sivan parked his bicycle by the roadside, locked it and walked across towards the people. Nobody seemed to know anything certain. They all came out with their own guesses... What to do? It was getting late and Sivan had to come to a decision quickly.

He walked towards the outer backyard of the temple, where there wasn’t any crowd, but only the ‘boys’ on sentry duty. He went straight up to the nearest one and asked.

‘Is there any problem, *thambi*?’

The tall dark boy with sharp features and bright eyes looked at him. 'No *annai*.' The small vial hanging around his neck above the khaki shirt was visible.

'There is nothing. You needn't worry.'

The voice was polite and assuring. Sivan wanted to find the reason for all these commotion, but how to ask?

'*Nantri, thambi*.' He thanked the youngster, turned back and walked towards the place where he had left his bicycle.

Better to go back home and inform Suba and others, and ask them not to worry and then to proceed. It wouldn't matter even if I got late by an hour, Sivan decided. The crowd, consisting mostly of men, was getting bigger and bigger every minute. More and more people came, in ones and twos, on bicycles and on foot, all exhilarated and in high spirits. Some of them, he noticed, were excited to the extent of speaking their thoughts out loud.

When Sivan got close to the Arasady junction he saw a white car coming in front, a *Peugeot 404* or a *Morris Oxford*, he was not sure. Must be one of those automobiles that ran on kerosene, he thought. The driver slowed down a little, probably in an effort to avoid the potholes which were omnipresent along the road. And suddenly the passenger seated at the back of the sedan caught sight of Sivan. By the time he could make out who that impressive bearded and turbaned figure was, the car had already passed him and was about to take the corner. However, the back of the turban was still clear through the rear glass. Yes, it was the diplomat whose photograph was

published almost daily in all three local news papers reporting the latest developments in the peace efforts. No doubt! Certainly something significant was going to happen soon. At once Sivan turned and followed the vehicle which had already gone a distance.

Like him so many other people must have noticed the gentleman in the car and a small group was running behind the vehicle which was still finding it difficult to move fast along the dilapidated road. The crowd was fairly large when the car approached the temple. But none of them were allowed to go beyond the clearly demarcated area and instead were asked to stay further away down the road. Even those who were already standing inside were sent out and now the entire area surrounding the temple there were the 'boys' and only a few other important looking people. Sivan, who was riding slowly behind the crowd stopped at an elevated spot by the road. From there he could see everything clearly, without getting crushed. The whole area was brightly lit by the sun which by now was fairly high and warm.

The car pulled up and stopped under the margosa tree standing close to the front hall of the impressive temple and those who were in, got down at once. Sivan was not surprised to see among those few, another bigwig, also a familiar figure, perhaps a colleague of the former. Identifying him was easy because of the peculiar safari suit he wore. Both the emissaries walked briskly towards the extending fields which remained bare since the annual harvest in January. But, after a few steps, they stopped abruptly and walked back towards the temple,

bent down and touched the huge step of the entrance and stood erect for a moment as if in prayer. Then turning around they resumed their quick strides. If they went to the middle of the fields which extended from where he stood to the primary school playground in the east, then it would definitely be difficult to see anything. Sivan decided to go to the playground.

When he went there, there were only a few people. He felt happy to find the location providing a better view of the whole area stretched in front. The towering *gopuram* of the temple stood majestically against the western sky, illuminated brightly by the morning sun. The large *maruthu* tree to its right looked dwarfed beside it. There were two ponds far away, one along the North and the other along the south of the extensive stretch. Both must have been dried up by now, at this time of the year. Almost at the middle of the vast expanse was that pad, with those black and white weather socks tied to tall staffs floating elegantly high in the air. Without any doubt, it was a helipad! Our village can boast of an air field today, that too, an international one! The playful thought made Sivan smile. Yes, the helicopter that was expected from abroad was going to land there to take the leader of the rebels overseas, for talks! It was known to all by then.

‘At what time is it coming?’ asked Veervahu the retired bank clerk, who was standing by his side.

‘No idea,’ replied Sivan, ‘but it has to come soon.’

‘Somebody told us it would arrive before twelve,’ said an unknown person who was standing a little further away.

‘Does it take so much time? I don’t think so.’

When Sivan came there it was about nine thirty. It would have taken only another twenty minutes at most for him to go home and get back but he didn’t want to because no one could tell the time of arrival of the air craft and if it landed when he was away he would miss the chance of witnessing a historical event! So he didn’t want to budge from that place. Let me see to everything else later. What if this takes a whole day? What is a day’s leave, compared to such an unforgettable event?

‘Anyway this is going to be a great achievement on our part, isn’t it?’ Veervahu asked.

‘Which one do you mean?’ Sivan could not comprehend what the other meant.

‘India recognizing our struggle and doing all these things,’ the old man smiled.

‘We’ve to wait and see,’ said Sivan thoughtfully.

‘Have you ever noticed something?’ Veervahu asked again, after some time.

Sivan turned and looked at him as if asking ‘what?’

‘All these important events related to the ethnic problem are taking place in July! Haven’t you thought of that?’ Veervahu went on listing them.

‘See, now this is July 1987. The pogrom was in July 1983; and earlier in July 1977 you and I came running here from Colombo, following the riots...’

‘Yes, a remarkable coincidence...’

There appeared a lot of people at the far end now. Men were running to and fro between the *maruthu* tree and the helipad. The place was full of people.

‘Why not go a little ahead and stand there?’

Veeravahu pointed to a shady spot in front and away to their left. They walked there. The men already waiting at the place were in animated conversation.

‘The people in Colombo would be aware of all these, wouldn’t they?’

‘India has shown again that it can do whatever it wants.’

‘Have you forgotten the *Operation Eagle*, the air drop of food in the Jaffna peninsula,’ asked Veeravahu.

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Whenever Sivan thought of the event he was reminded of that terrible roar of the *Antonovs* or *Mirages* as they swept past. That roar, no it wasn’t a roar, a thunder, a sudden blast, as if the whole world was exploding, made everybody rush towards the bunker, in that after noon. Bunkers were ubiquitous. Every household had one and beyond doubt, it was much more important than either a cooking place or a toilet. Wherever there were people, whether in an office, school, temple, hospital, or even at a junction or the sidewalk of a public thoroughfare, there were these underground structures, hidden under the branches of trees close by, providing safety to the people in an emergency. Indeed the people had to frequent these basements more often during the day than at dusk or dawn. Dug deep in the red soil and closely stacked with logs of palm trees and sand filled gunny bags on top and finally covered with either green or brown polythene sheets, the bunker had only a narrow opening enough for a person to pass at a time. The dark and steep stairs leading down began at the entrance

which was left open always, like a huge mouth, ever ready to conceal the people from any random bombing.

Unable to guess the direction from where the sound came, that day, the people ran panic stricken and jumped in, not minding the crude steps. They had to spend all those long minutes which followed in prayer and in pacifying the scared children howling in that sweaty and stuffy pit smelling of raw earth and fermented wood sap. Have those tyrants determined to destroy the whole of Jaffna today, thought the people. But, what a wonder, these machines seemed different. The people realized after a while that apart from the rumbling of the flying machines there weren’t any burst of bombs!

‘Something strange,’ they guessed.

‘They don’t look like the usual locals,’ said some daredevils who had the courage to stick their heads out after sometime. ‘And the very appearance itself was different, almost triangular, flat and flashing.’

When everything was quiet, the people waited for another five minutes and emerged one after the other cautiously. Within ten minutes, the news was spreading like wild fire!

‘The Indian planes have entered our sky and dropped food parcels for the people!’

Were they doing this out of pity or just to show their might and ability? Were they trying to convey a message to their neighbor across the seas? The people were perplexed.

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‘The helicopter will return to India. What do you say?’
Veeravahu’s question brought Sivan back to his senses.

'What else? First to Madras and then to Delhi, I suppose.' He managed to say and looked at his watch.

It is almost thirty minutes since Sivan came to this place. The crowd looked doubled now and even in this place there were about a hundred people, all excited, their faces bright with anticipation and happiness.

Are these people expecting too much? Sivan pondered. He squinted his eyes and scanned the western sky. Nothing could be found there. The bellowing of the heavy *cholakam* wind continued to sweep away the din of the crowd and the cawing of an isolated crow from somewhere nearby.

All of a sudden the people were tensed up and every one scanned the sky. Sivan listened, his ears attuned to any peculiar hum, the drone of some giant engine from far away, high up in the sky.

And at once, there was the long awaited whirr of the helicopter. However, the shout of the crowd drowned it. Sivan listened attentively. Not one engine but two. Both appeared on the south western sky, well above the tall coconut trees which lined the horizon. With the first sight itself one could say that they were different, different from their local counterparts which had continued to scare the people for a long time. But, instead of descending, the machines turned towards the North and disappeared.

Aren't these the ones?

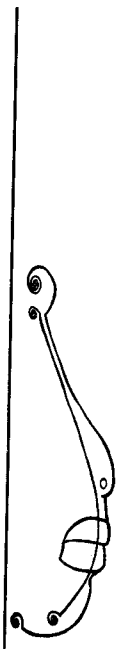
There fell a silence, the people astonished. Anyway, they must be the ones, and they had come, Sivan mused, so what's going to happen hereafter?

Peace is vital, there's no doubt. And at the same time justice, too. That is very important. Peace and justice are interdependent...

The deafening roar disturbed his thoughts. Both machines appeared at once, very much lower now. The dark green choppers with the insignia '*Indian Air Force*' on their flanks circled round the expanse. They looked much bigger than the local ones. While one was circling around at that level, the other one started coming down and turned with its cockpit facing the direction of the temple and descended slowly. The dust and the dried leaves swirled by the vigorous rotating of the giant blades spread everywhere like a whirlpool. The people shouted enthusiastically, their voices rivaled the roar of the machines. The slowly descending monster of a bird settled on the land.

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(7)



What a speedy development of events soon followed!

The Peace Accord was signed within a week, in the latter part of the same month. Subsequently the IPKF was brought in to implement the accord and establish peace.

The ceremony of surrendering arms by the rebels followed in early August, also at the same place in front of the Amman temple, and what a crowd was there to witness that! Sivan, too, was a drop in that ocean of people. Jaffna wouldn't have seen such a gathering in the whole of its history.

'The 'boys' have done a wrong thing today,' told Selvam, later that evening.

'You mean the handing over?' Sivan asked.

'No, no, no...' denied Selvam. 'I don't mean that and I can't understand such things.' He paused for a while and

then continued. 'But, I saw one or two of their sentries standing guard atop the temple roof. That's not good, a blasphemy!'

'I've seen several people, too, doing the same thing to have a better view of what was going on during the meeting.'

'Anyway,' Selvam said, '**they** shouldn't have done that!' His voice sounded not as an accusation, but regret...

This was followed by Thileepan's fast unto death in the vicinity of Nallur Kandasamy temple, in September.

'Some one from the country of the Mahatma who advocated such non-violent protests to the world should have intervened and saved his life,' commented Ganesan at that time...

Then, early in October, the tragedy of seventeen people in a boat, which proved itself a turning point in the accord and paved the way for unexpected turns ...

Later, the foiled helicopter landing in Jaffna University grounds and the immediate reprisal that followed at Pirambady, in which more than sixty innocent people, mostly women and old people, were shot dead and their bodies bull-dozed by '*chain blocks*' ...

What a quick succession of unfortunate happenings, as if driven by some sinister force!

Now, it's November and how many changes have we witnessed within these five months, and that too, contrary to all the expectations of all the people! Like how the old saying goes, *kinaru vedda pootham varukuthu*, the phantom emerges while digging a well! What curse befell on all those concerned?

Sivan was extremely thirsty. But where could he get water? On that side of the fence, in Murugesu's compound was a well with its tall well-sweep. And the bucket is still in place. A well in every compound full to the brim, and yet not a drop to drink! He felt so exhausted and wanted to lie down on the bed of cool grass. Won't their people in the camp be awaiting their return? They would've started worrying about them anyway. 'We were brought here and delayed on purpose with the intention of making us yield! But, what could we tell them about when we ourselves don't know any damned thing?'

The lorry parked under the mango tree was imprinted with the model's name *Shakthiman*. Its body camouflaged with paint was covered with dust, despite the recent rains. But the wheels were caked with mud.

The driver, a dark guy, was all alone and busy attending to the vehicle. He stopped his work for a while, and called somebody. When the other person showed himself up, the driver spoke to him in a loud voice telling something '*paani*'; '*paani*'. The other, without any reply, walked back towards the house. The driver, wiping his face, saw the two men seated by the wall. Sivan realized that the driver was looking at them but avoided facing him.

The day proved much warmer as the sun rose higher. Sivan looked at his watch. It was two hours since they had left their camp.

The one whom the driver had spoken to returned with a large silver jug, *sombu*. Could that be a *sombu* from Param's kitchen mused Sivan. The man who brought it handed it over to

the driver. The sight of the driver gulping down the water aggravated Sivan's thirst.

Thevar too must be feeling thirsty. He stretched out his legs and cracked his knuckles. 'Shall we get up?'

'Yes.' Sivan stood up.

Nobody noticed them. The driver, having finished drinking, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and handed over the *sombu* to the one waiting in front. Sivan noticed through the corner of his eyes that the driver was again looking at them. Was he coming towards them?

The driver stopped and called out to the other man again. The soldier returned. The driver took the *sombu* back from him, came up to Thevar and Sivan and stretched the vessel out to them.

'Would you like to have some water?' He asked in Tamil.

After a moment's hesitation, Thevar took the *sombu* offered to him.

'Thanks. Are you a Tamil?'

'You'd better drink this first...'

'Why have they detained us?' A trace of annoyance was obvious in Sivan's voice.

'What happened?'

Sivan related the story.

'They'll soon allow you to go. They're just making enquiries. Drink it,' he said and then switched on to English. 'No problem!'

'You're the only person who has considered us...and given us water...'

'Whatever it is, we are one people, aren't we?'

‘What’s your name?’ asked Thevar.

‘Gopalan’

Thevar handed the *sombu* over to Sivan. Sivan drank the water slowly, relishing each mouthful, allowing it to wet his parched throat, cooling the chest. He felt refreshed.

‘I’m a Malayalee...I’ve to take your leave now, *saar*...’

The driver, receiving the *sombu* from Sivan, walked hurriedly towards the lorry.

Sivan and Thevar looked at each other wondering what had come over the driver for him to leave them in such haste. Had anyone seen him speaking to us? Was he afraid of anything? What had made him withdraw from admitting that he was a Tamil? It all puzzled them.

‘Come, let’s sit down!’

They sat down once again. The cushion-like grass gave off a pleasant smell. How long should we continue to wait here? What on earth is going to happen? Both felt exhausted.

The group in the front lane must still be there. And the same five or six men were still busy in the portico in front. How many of them could be there altogether, inside and outside the house? Except that Gopalan, nobody had paid any attention to them. Where was he now? Where are those men who had mended the fence?

A gust of wind, blended with the smell of *beedi*, ghee, dust and diesel fumes wafted past them. Coconut fronds swayed in the wind like waves. Patches of shadows in front changed patterns rapidly. It was unusually warm for a day in the rainy season. All of a sudden Sivan felt the terror, the gravity of the situation.

What are they going to do with us? Are they really going to shoot us as that chap threatened, or detain us here? ... He felt the shiver running along his spine ... If so what will happen to my family, my people...? He turned towards Thevar.

Having finished softly reciting the prayer hymn *Kantharsashdi Kavasam*, Thevar began to recite another, a *Thevaram* beginning ‘*Naamaarkkum kudiyaalom, namanai anchom*... Subjects we are to none, nor do we fear *Yama*, the lord of death... when we surrender ourselves to those benign feet of Thee...’

It was mid-day. Sivan’s digital watch displayed the time- 12.02. As he looked at it, the .02 changed in to .03. The life beat of the tiny gadget was unaffected by this external turmoil...

If not for this present chaos forced on their land, the noon *pooja* bells would’ve started pealing by now in all the temples of the area.

Sivan tried to pray silently, his eyes closed.

Suddenly they heard the rattling of guns from somewhere. Thevar and Sivan looked at each other, their faces dark with fear and worry. Guns barked and went on non stop. Neither far nor near but certainly somewhere in the east, the direction they have to take to get back to the camp.

‘A shoot out...’ Thevar’s soft voice was heavy with fear and anxiety.

What will happen to us? To those back in the camp? The firing continued without respite. The guns rattled from two sides. What would happen next?

Sivan locked his hands round his knees and leaned forward... The shadow of his tousled hair fell in front of him.

They heard muted footsteps near the house and turned... The row of soldiers was gliding silently like a giant snake. That speed without even the slightest noise made them shiver. The men were fully clad in combat uniforms, their steel helmets camouflaged with twigs, the holsters bulging and guns ready in their hands. Their heavy boots made muffled thuds by pounding the wet ground in quick succession, like a rhythm.

The column was moving towards their direction. The man at the head of the line appeared close to them. Would we have to get up or not? Any movement on our part may result in misunderstanding... Besides, Sivan felt frozen. He could not move his limbs... Even Thevar remained motionless. Possibly, the soldiers in the advancing file did not care about the duo... Turning at the gate they went past. What about the men already waiting in the lane?

The column seemed non stop... How many men!

A tall soldier with a broom like moustache was rushing about; the thin long aerial of a wireless set on his back swaying according to his movements. More and more men went past. Some looked at them as they went by. One soldier passing by made some remark. It made no sense to Thevar or Sivan.

About two hundred odd men must have gone by and there were coming still more. Surely, there must have been soldiers in the neighboring house, too. The *Ambulimama* man emerged from the house. He was still in his black uniform, but was now wearing a helmet and carrying a wireless set on his back. Two of

his men followed him. He really had an impressive figure, handsome, too. Should have been a hero in Hindi films! No, there is none to beat that B.C.D.Singh if it came to acting, how he persuaded us to come here!

Captain Vanpar looked at them as he passed by and said casually. 'You may go!'

They were perplexed. Did he mean it or was he making fun of them? Are we to take him at his word and go? Suppose we did and then...? Sivan thought of the Major's threat. He felt his body sweating... Both looked at each other, baffled.

'Let's go,' said Sivan finally, his eyes looking around. The Captain was not to be seen anywhere now.

'Let's wait for some more time. Let these people go... If we leave now, it may cause problems...' Thevar advised.

They waited.

The men continued to march by. The column seemed endless. It was very difficult to differentiate one from the other. In complexion, height, features, they all looked alike! Sivan suddenly realized that he was watching the men unintentionally. Better not to look at them, he reproved himself. And when he was about to turn away he thought he saw a man come running towards them from their right... Sivan turned and saw a soldier breaking rank and rushing towards them, his gun pointed. What is this? Why hadn't the other soldiers stopped him? What was he shouting at them? And in which language, Hindi, or...

Sivan could only make out the last word. 'LTTE!'

When the man jumped at them, his face was just three feet away. A lock of hair out of the helmet was hiding

the forehead and his eyes filled with that hatred of a killer ...
The soldier thrust his gun on the chest of Sivan ...

Sivan closed his eyes.

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Later, Thevar confessed that he, too, had closed his eyes at that moment. Sivan and Thevar were then walking towards their camp along the deserted roads. The silence peculiar to noon times was overwhelmed by the scary quietness of the unusual atmosphere.

They came out of Param's gate and saw the column that passed them advancing in the direction opposite to what they had to take.

'That's good,' thought Sivan.

When they were about to turn on their way, they saw Vanpar watching them from the other side of the road. They were stunned and hesitated for a second. The Captain's retinue was behind him and he looked much taller among those men. He yelled at the duo.

'You go straight to your camp and if you happen to come across any of our people, just raise both your hands above your heads and stay where you are without moving.'

He advised when they went up to him, 'but don't try to hide from the soldiers or run away from them. That'll be a fatal blunder, remember. The full day curfew is still on!'

'Alright sir, thank you.' Both nodded and moved on. 'How could this chap tell such serious things so casually?' Sivan murmured when they were out of ear shot. 'He may be used to such things but it's a matter of life or death to us!'

'Bringing us here deceitfully and leaving us astray on the road during curfew hours!' Thevar said bitterly. 'You know our proverb, *sirupillaikku vilaiyaaddu, sundelikku seevan poachu*, what's fun for the child is death for the mouse!'

They plodded on. Every bend and every turn appeared a death trap. A gun-totting *jawan* could emerge from behind any wall, any lamp post...

The sun was above their heads, not very bright but very warm. The air too was stagnant and Sivan felt stuffy. And instantly he felt pangs of hunger and he remembered he hadn't had a morsel for the whole day. He had only plain water Gopalan had given him an hour ago. Today was not a normal day to go home expecting Suba to wait for him with a hearty lunch! That stark realization made him gloomy...

What'll be there for them to eat once they return to the camp? A situation he had never experienced in all these forty years of his life. Never mind him, an able bodied person. What about his child, his old mother, his wife and brother? What about all the others expecting the two with the hope that they'll bring provisions? Surely it'd be a disappointment to them. Not only a disappointment but a terrible shock as well!

They kept on walking, slowly, their eyes watching all around. The tarred road appeared like a straight long ribbon stretching into infinity. Sivan thought he saw mirages along the desolate road ahead.

'If we see the chaps in front we can put up our hands above heads. But suppose they see us from some

where without our noticing them, what'll happen then?' Thevar laughed at such a thought. He was obviously exhausted. What else could one expect from a person in his late sixties after such a trying day, however smart he might be? Covering his head with his white shawl to shield it from the hot sun, Thevar asked again, 'What'll happen to us?'

'Better not think of it,' replied Sivan, 'but somehow or the other, we'll be alright.'

'Yes,' agreed Thevar. 'Our merciful mother, *Amman*, the guardian Goddess of the village, will never let us down!'

They kept on walking.

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(8)



Sivan's mother and Suba started weeping when they saw him. The baby, who had become like a wilted tender seedling within a day, laughed happily showing her toothless gums. He took her in his arms and hugged her. They were all waiting at the verandah, Ravi, Mrs.Thevar, Raju, Essem and many others. The eyes of every one sparkled with relief when they saw Thevar and Sivan opening the gate. Essem came running.

'Why? What happened? Why was the delay? Were there any problems? What did they say about the provisions?' He asked questions in a steady stream.

'Let them come in first,' admonished Raju. 'Bring them some water,' he ordered his wife.

When they had both finished relating the story of their mission, the listeners seated along the wall facing the inner court yard, gaped in wonder, disbelief and sorrow.

'Leave their damned provisions alone, we should thank the Almighty for your safe return,' Sivan's mother broke the silence, her voice stuttering.

'Yes what else? O, God!' All agreed.

'Who needs their provisions? It's all because they detained us here without allowing us to go home,' grunted Naagu.

'Tell me, who among us here does not have food in his place?' Senthil, a short, middle-aged man, shouted. He had been running a small jewelry business in town till the beginning of these troubles.

'Ssh!' somebody warned them.

'They may be around somewhere close by. Don't speak loud.'

'Who doesn't own at least a sack of rice at home, tell me?' Senthil continued in a muffled voice.

'Who are we? We all are cultivators and have never bowed down our heads before anyone! They must know that!'

'Is this what they came here for?' Saras teacher's beautiful face was distorted in agony and hate. 'What they do is *maraththal vizunthavanai maaderi mithikkikkira maathiri*, like the bull trampling the man who had fallen from the tree!'

Is there a way out of this crisis, wondered Sivan.

'Who's going to ask them for food, if they allowed us to go home?' Senthil was still fuming.

Sivan bent towards Thevar and murmured something in his ear. Thevar's face brightened. He beckoned Raju towards him. Within a minute Mani was there. Thevar straightaway came to the point.

'Mani, you're not an outsider, you're one of us and you are not unaware of what has happened to all of us. Now I'm going to ask you something, in front of all these people. It's not going to be something hideous, but is an open matter. We've no other way and that's why I suggest...'

All eyes looked at Thevar in anticipation.

'And all of you,' Thevar addressed them, 'you, too, please listen carefully and come out with your opinion. This is going to be a collective decision.'

Mani was perplexed. So were the others.

'Do you know whether there is any rice in this house?'

Thevar straight away asked Mani, without beating about the bush. Those who were there looked at each other in astonishment.

'Even if there is rice, how can we take it? All the rooms are locked, aren't they?' Mani asked pensively, after a couple of seconds.

'Yes, that's another matter. But tell me is there any rice here?'

'I think there must be a few sacks in the store room. Not this year's harvest. I remember the house owner Kamala Akka storing the stuff when she was here from Colombo, last year.'

'Alright then, don't worry,' Thevar's face showed some relief. 'Let's break the lock and open the room.'

Mani's face changed a little.

'But you needn't worry, Mani. I'll address a letter to Kamala and give it to you now, stating that I'm responsible for this, with the assurance I'll repay and compensate all

the losses, and I'll do this as soon as these chaps allow me to get back home.'

'I, too, will sign the letter,' Sivan said quietly.

'Then, me too,' said Naagu.

'Me,' 'me,' sprang out several voices.

'We are all going to share the rice, and why not the responsibility?' Vellai asked.

'Ok, then, all those who wish can sign,' agreed Thevar. Every one looked at Mani expectantly.

'If you are all willing, I've got no objections,' Mani gestured with both his palms, smiling.

'We've to ask someone to take charge of the room and maintain a record,' suggested Sivan.

'Fine,' appreciated Raju.

'Essem will be in charge and let Naagu maintain the records.' All agreed.

*

When Sivan went in search of Suba while the cooking was in progress at the back yard, she was alone in their corner in the *koodam*, the baby fast asleep on a towel spread on the floor. He sat in front of her.

'Does she eat biscuits willingly?' He pointed at his daughter, 'what a pity, no other food for the child for a whole day.'

'What else to do?' the reply was brief. Suba pulled the plastic basket towards her and took out a small packet of biscuits wrapped in a sheet of newspaper.

Sivan looked at the baby turning to a side in her sleep. Suba stretched the packet towards him. It was more than

half full. 'What about you, *amma* and Ravi? Have you eaten anything?'

She turned her face away.

'Why, what happened?' He was confused.

'How can you expect us to eat anything while we were in such an agony awaiting your safe return?'

He didn't say anything.

'Why did you jump in before others, when there were so many people around the place?' She burst out. 'Are you a free man without any responsibilities? Did you ever think of your child, me, your mother and brother, when you did that?'

'It was because Captain Singh asked me in the morning.'

'That's what I'm also saying. Why did he ask you in the morning? Just because you started speaking like a leader yesterday afternoon in front of everybody! When they summoned all the people to gather and when all waited in front of him with their white flags in hand, why did you start answering his questions ahead of others, on behalf of them all?'

'There were no others excepting old Thevar and Essem who could speak English.'

'Whatever the reason may be,' she snapped, her voice heavy with concern, 'hereafter, don't go like that. Keep quiet, like the others, at least for the sake of your family. Do you understand?'

'Ok,' Sivan nodded, wondering, wasn't it I who thought about maintaining a good rapport with them, not for anything but for the safety of our people, our youngsters in particular? What a fool was I to think that being in their good

books might help someone like me, whose prime concern was to safeguard a well built, smart, unemployed younger brother from unnecessary suspicions...!

But, they have only one book for all of us, a book of suspicions!

*

'Thambi, we've a problem,'

Nathan came and sat beside Sivan. The one time popular football player of the peninsula was tall and slim with a wirybody though creases had already began appearing on his dark face.

Sivan and Raju were in the back yard in the shade of a big jak tree.

Nathan's voice was low, as if telling something confidential.

'You know my son, don't you?'

The boy wearing a cap was tall like his father. Sivan knew him studying at a leading boys' secondary school in the area.

'We all are worried about him, especially Rani.'

Nathan gestured towards his sister standing behind, her large dark eyes full of anxiety.

The beautiful young woman had lost her husband within a year of her marriage. The newly wedded man went to the town one afternoon and did not return. They knew nothing about him despite all their efforts.

Since Rani hasn't anybody else she had been staying with her brother's family for the last five years.

'Those merciless brutal chaps think every youngster is a rebel,' she told them in a gloomy voice.

'She is very fond of my children, especially this boy, the youngest.'

'I know your problem,' Sivan spoke looking at the boy's cap. 'Of course I have been thinking about it and it's really something we should consider.'

'How did you get that?' Raju pointed at the cap the boy was wearing.

'He hurt himself in the cattle shed,' replied the aunt, 'while struggling to tie up our cow, that useless brute.'

'Did you get it dressed?'

'Where else could I take him at a time like this?' Nathan said, 'Sellar's decoction and the poultice are working well, but there's much to heal yet.'

'For a youngster of his age and build, this wound may turn out to be a problem now.' Sivan noticed Rani's face getting darker as he was telling this and he felt sorry for her.

'What to do, they're looking at everything with suspicious eyes and will not be easily satisfied with whatever explanations we give and however genuine those explanations are.'

'The cap covers the dressing, but they may not like anybody appearing in a cap when they are around.'

'If we remove it, the dressing will be conspicuous.' Nathan said.

'What if we remove the dressing?'

'The wound in the forehead is fairly big.'

'How did you manage to come in without getting noticed?'

'This same way,' the boy smiled gently now.

'Don't expose yourself too much. Unless they want to query the people individually, there'll be nothing to worry about.' Sivan pacified them, 'even in case of any problem let's try to explain to them. Leave the rest to the Almighty.'

'Do you believe in such a thing?'

A youngster who must have been listening to all these from a distance, got up and came towards them. He was very fair with freak brown eyes and a broad face and his limp was prominent when walking.

'Yes, Akil?' Sivan turned.

'Those chaps asked me, 'why you limp?' while we were coming here,' Akil laughed bitterly. Others waited for him to continue.

'And without any reply, I raised my sarong to show my right leg.'

The whole village knew that the poor Akil had an attack of polio when he was a child. The youngster's face looked annoyed.

'Who are they to interfere with our lives and suspect whatever we do?'

The momentary silence was heavy.

'And you tell me, now,' Akil turned towards Sivan with a skeptical smile. 'Do you believe in such a thing called the Almighty, after seeing all these things happening around us here?' He asked again.

'Of course, we have to Akil,' Sivan replied in a soft voice, 'particularly at times like these, when we have no other means of consolation.'

Akil continued to stare at him. The dark rings around his eyes hadn't disappeared yet.

Akil had lost his father in a shell blast only about ten days ago. The man was busy in the courtyard of their house attending to some work when a shell hit a coconut tree in front. A splinter struck and killed him on the spot. Akil's mother who happened to be there in the verandah at that ill fated moment witnessed the whole tragedy. Not many people attended the funeral, because of the curfew. Those who took part in the funeral procession had to face a lot of risk in going to the crematorium which they all knew to be a very vulnerable place situated about two kilometers from the village, in the midst of large agricultural lands. Anyway, Akil and his brothers and uncle managed to take the body for cremation without worrying too much about either the rituals or their own safety.

However, in the case of Sri's mother from this same village, who died a fortnight earlier due to pneumonia, her people had to burn the body in the backyard of their compound itself, an unusual practice which was never heard of before! That was the only thing they could do in that situation. Luckily, the compound was an isolated one and there weren't many neighbors to protest about it...

'What are you wondering about *annai*?' Akil asked, touching Sivan's shoulder.

Sivan shook his head, 'nothing.'

‘Will they ever leave this soil, *thambi*?’ Nathan, who remained silent all this time, came out with his genuine fear.

‘Don’t worry *annai*. They will have to.’

While pacifying Nathan, Sivan remembered what Ganesan had told him.

#

(9)



Ganesan, an engineer by profession, was a neighbor, a distant relative and Sivan’s friend since their school days. Following the recent outbreak of this war, both were staying with their families at Paddukkodai together, at the house of their common friend Muthali, for more than a month. It was a place about ten kilometers from their village. Ganesan was always complaining and critical of the activities of the peace keepers in general, and their Government in particular, which, in his own words, manipulated by sending them here.

‘Sivan, they’re doing everything with a long term plan for their own benefits, the medium built, dark man with a broad forehead and straight hair would say laughing. ‘Do you think that the policy makers in that distant North are worried about us? They must surely have their private concerns and specific agendas.’

His thick-framed spectacles always gave this young intellectual a serious look.

‘You’re getting too cynical and rather pessimistic in this matter,’ Sivan remarked one day.

‘Don’t talk like a fool, Sivan,’ retorted Ganesan. ‘I want you to be sharp in your outlook. Could anyone deny that it was they who had driven a wedge deep between us, the Tamils and the Sinhalese of this country? Could anyone deny that it was they who had fanned the unfortunate embers of displeasure among us and managed to build out of it a flame of enmity in which whole island is burning now?’

‘What makes you say so? How could that be?’

Ganesan laughed. ‘Have you forgotten what happened ten years ago? Since the late seventies they’ve taken our boys to their land and given arms training to them. Why was that? They would sincerely have helped us to sort out the problem at **that** stage, instead of bringing it to this extent and presently showing themselves up.’

‘That would’ve been a premature intervention at that stage.’

‘Why? Do you think that those who are pleased to come in now couldn’t have interfered then, without having made things worse and complicated with the loss of thousands of lives and millions worth of wealth?’

‘But why should they do like this? The political situation at that particular time should have made the then government to act so. Now the situation has changed and it is a different matter altogether.’

‘Don’t talk like an illiterate, Sivan,’ laughed Ganesan and continued.

‘Change of governments has nothing to do with their long-term national policies. They did everything simply to safeguard their geo-political interests!’

‘But, how, I ask?’

‘Their policy makers would’ve thought that a politically stable and thus a strong state on their door step would pose a threat to them one day and felt that they could feel comfortable only with an unstable scenario here and making the Lankans rely on them either directly or indirectly whether in war or in peace.’ Ganesan went on non-stop, agitated, ‘and what I firmly believe is that they will never let any one of us win this war till the day and the way they want. Neither will they allow the Sinhalese or the Tamils to take an upper hand in this conflict of ours. They always want to maintain this situation in a state of unrest or at boiling point without it spilling over. And the main thing, they would never let the matter get out of their hands.’

‘It is very unfair for us to doubt their intentions,’ said Sivan as if he wanted to wind up the argument and Muthali interrupted then vehemently.

‘Are you then trying to say that even our Tamil brethren there aren’t concerned about us?’

‘I don’t say so,’ Ganesan shook his head firmly. ‘I trust them and I understand their feelings, but the reality is they are helpless! They would have mentioned about the troubles of the Bengalis in East Pakistan and the support given them at that time and exclaimed now the Tamils are in trouble but the Centre

does not pay any heed! Further, the rulers over there would've feared that the Tamils in their country, too, would be encouraged...'

'Encouraged, to what?'

'To seek separation and independence if the case of the Tamil cause is promoted here!'

Ganesan laughed and then went on. 'In a way, not only the Tamils in the South of that country, but the other people in the North too would have had their concern and sympathy towards us. But, the important thing is,.....' he paused for a moment.

'What?'

'Muthali, I want to make one thing clear,' Ganesan spoke looking straight into his friend's eyes. 'Though people like me are disappointed and dismayed with the present regional trends, we neither hate India nor the Indian people. The people there are also innocent like us, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. But, in any country, the rulers are different. Throughout the world, masses are masses and rulers are rulers! The rulers say that they do everything for the sake of the masses and ultimately, the masses are the ones who bear the burden of the follies of the rulers and pay for them. We shouldn't make the mistake of confusing the people of a country with the government of that country! People are not responsible for the deeds of their governments, and the power hungry politicians, wherever they are, will never hesitate even to make their own people scapegoats if needed, in order to achieve their ambitions.'

'So, do you say this is applicable to our South also?'

Muthali asked.

'Why not,' Ganesan snapped back. 'Actually there's no difference between the ordinary Sinhalese and the Tamils. It's a pity that the situation has deteriorated to such a level, beyond the expectations of all the people, except a few, in this island.'

'Then who is to be blamed for all what's happening around us?' Muthali asked in a temper.

'The vote hunting politics and a few power hungry, short sighted politicians,' the reply came at once.

'It's a pity that things have worsened to this extent! In my opinion this is an unwanted war and this quarrel is sheer madness, the seeds of which were sown after independence and nurtured continuously by all those politicians of the past who were not far sighted. Everybody contributed to this tragedy in his own way. The present sad state of affairs is really the ultimate sum total of all these! Can anybody with any sense say that there is a war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese?'

'No,' objected Muthali excitedly.

'I, or rather people like me, would never say that! We've never had anything against the Sinhalese; I mean the ordinary folk, who, too, suffer like us. They are like our brothers as you say, I agree with that. But at the same time it should not be forgotten that we've other grievances and our real complaint is against the rulers in the South.' Muthali was almost panting in excitement. 'This is really a war between those hegemonic rulers of the past and the oppressed ones, who were left with no other choice. It was purely accidental that the rebels happened to belong to another ethnic group.'

'I have to agree with you to some extent in this matter,' confessed Ganesan. 'But what I was trying to tell you was about something which created this so-called Sinhala-Tamil divide!'

Muthali was perplexed. 'What?'

'In my opinion two things have done all the damage to our country in general and to the Tamils here in particular-one is the different races theory and the other is the imperialistic agenda of outsiders.'

Muthali looked at him, unable to comprehend what the young engineer said.

'Yes,' continued Ganesan, 'the Sinhala-Tamil divide is actually like a house division in a school, the two factions divided at random and confronting each other in an inter-house match, a fatal match in this case!'

'What are you trying to say?' Muthali was really confused.

'I am trying to say is that this division is meaningless! Who are these so-called Tamils and who are these so-called Sinhalese? The same people! The same lot! If you want me to say more clearly, I even wonder at times if they belong to the same stock! It could be a strange phenomenon of a single race speaking two slightly different languages! Yes, don't laugh...'

Ganesan continued with a serious look in his face now. 'With humble apologies to those concerned, my long standing opinion is that those very same people who had introduced the different-races theory were the first enemies of this nation. Intentionally or otherwise, they had done an irreparable damage causing a hair crack among the people, which, with the passage of

time has created a chasm of unfathomable depth between the so called two sections of the divide! Certainly, the injection of this myth has hindered the whole future of this country...'

Ganesan was panting in excitement. 'Even if we accept the different race theory, you cannot draw any clear line of demarcation of ethnicity, because the people have been living together for more than two thousand years!'

'But weren't there wars between the Sinhala and Tamil kings throughout the history?'

'Yes, but those were wars between **kings** to grab power and lands and not between Tamils and Sinhalese! If you look deep into history, you will know this. Haven't you heard of the unending wars throughout history, between the *Chera*, the *Chola* and the *Pandya* kings, all Tamils? There were occasions when those three took sides with the Sinhala kings when there were disputes among them! So, it is wrong to look at history that way.' Ganesan removed his spectacles and began wiping them with the tail-end of the shirt left loose over the sarong.

Sivan thought of what his friend Guru, a lawyer practicing in Colombo, once asked. 'While the conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils has started as a contest between the elites of both groups for power, did it not spiral into an unfortunate situation, where people on both sides now began distrusting each other, despite personal connections and friendships?'

But, Sivan didn't want to mention that now, since he himself couldn't fully agree with Guru's view.

After sometime, Ganesan spoke again. 'Let's forget the past and look at the present realistically and especially at

the future. If India can survive peacefully and progress steadily with twenty or more languages, then why can't we with just two? They have developed a lot and what have we achieved?

'Thanks, at least you accept that,' teased Muthali.

'We have to appreciate what is good,' Ganesan said in a matter of fact tone.

'What you say about their progress is true,' Sivan interjected. 'Both countries gained independence exactly four decades ago, in forty seven and forty eight respectively and I've heard people saying that in those years that followed, Ceylon was at the top in everything, economy, education, standard of living and whatever it was! 1.) The value of Ceylon rupee at that time was above that of the Indian one, my father used to say. But, now it is the other way round!'

'What was the cause for all these?' Ganesan asked.

'I remember reading somewhere,' Sivan said, 'a bi-polar diversity with a clearly identifiable one big group and a small group is undesirable compared to a multi-polar diversity.'

'Whatever it may be,' Ganesan went on. 'Still the worst we have now plunged ourselves into this hell of a war which has worsened and become more complicated with the coming in of a third party. No one knows how and when all these things will be cleared up!'

The other two remained silent.

'Ha!' said Ganesan firmly as if he had become suddenly enlightened. 'They've come in against the wishes of the people in the South of this country. Have you forgotten the demonstrations

and protests in Colombo and elsewhere which revealed the strong feelings over there?'

Ganesan continued after some time. 'You mark my words,' he said firmly, 'both the local warring parties have to get united one day or the other, willingly or otherwise, to send this third party out!'

'You're talking like someone out of his mind,' said Muthali, getting up. 'Let's stop the argument with this. Too much theory has spoilt your power of perception.' He walked away murmuring, 'that's the whole trouble.'

Ganesan laughed.

#

(10)



It was dusk when they finished their meal. The whole thing reminded Sivan of a big wedding feast. Pairs of women pounding raw rice in the wooden mortar, taking turns; men bringing three bigger stones to use as *aduppu*, the tripod for a hearth and then collecting firewood which was aplenty in Kanthar's large compound. All worked, despite their hunger, fatigue, fear and worries.

When they had washed the *kidaaram* with coconut fiber at the well side, the ring-like handles of the big copper cauldron made a loud clanging sound. 'Don't make big noises sons; they may be around the place.' Valli *aachchi* who was supervising the cooking, constantly cautioned them. Sivan smiled when he remembered the reply she got when she told the same thing to the women, '*Aachi*, if you try pounding without making noise then you will not be eating rice, but the husk!'

The men drew water using *thula*, the well sweep, and filled the cauldron three quarters full and carried it to the fireplace inserting a pestle through its rings. Once the cauldron was placed carefully on the *aduppu*, Mani said, 'Navam, you'd better light the fire now, we'll soon return with coconuts.' And he took two of the men along with him to the thatched shed where he had stored the fallen coconuts.

'Be careful, you may find snakes or tarantulas in the heap,' cautioned Navam.

'What would happen if any of those chaps came here while we're cooking?' Vellai questioned. None of them was able to answer that question directly.

'They won't come. Have any of you seen those guys coming in since yesterday?'

'That Captain came up only to the front verandah this morning,' Essem had to take out the cigar from his mouth to say this.

The men planted an *alavangu*, a crowbar, into the earth and started de-husking the coconuts.

When Ravi carried the coconuts to the shade under the mango tree where the women were scraping the nuts, he saw Selvi among the girls struggling with the only scraper Mani had given them.

'Don't worry, why not remove the kernel and grind?' Ravi suggested, casting a quick smile at Selvi on the sly. Then he saw her coyly whispering something into the ears of Poomani *akka*, who in turn turned towards him and asked, 'why don't you break these fruits for us?'

'Sure,' said Ravi.

'Those who want to have a wash may start by now. There will be a crowd afterwards.'

Thevar, after a short nap, had a wash himself and was returning from the well, bare above the waist and a towel on his shoulder.

'Yes, but children and ladies first,' Essem told the people. 'And, everybody please remember the buckets; don't mix them up. Keep aside the one we use for the lavatory.'

*

They collected all the big yellow leaves fallen from the jak tree, washed and folded them into small cups and sat in a *panthi*, neat rows of people, to have their *paal kanji*, a thick porridge prepared by boiling rice in coconut milk. There was no salt and the little of what Mani had for his own use was added only for a small portion reserved for the children. Vellai and Raju served the *kanji* ladling it from a basin which they carried around. It appeared that they had all forgotten their present plight, temporarily at least, and enjoyed themselves as if it were a happy village feast.

The depressing mood descended on them only later, with nightfall. They retreated to their respective corners, lying crouched as in the previous night, most of them unable to sleep under the burden of uncertainty and praying in silence. The distant croaking of frogs and the sounds of night insects seemed nonstop.

*

'*Aiyo, Aiyo,*' the sudden scream of a female voice made everybody jump.

'Why? What happened?'

'Who is that? What is the problem?'

'Get that lantern down and make it brighter.'

The woman was now crying with pain, 'something has stung me. *Aiyo*, the pain is terrible.'

It was Leela, the wife of Karthi who runs a bicycle workshop. The family occupied a place in the west wing of the verandah adjoining the inner courtyard.

'Check what that was,' Essem shouted in his bass voice, 'unable to move around in this dark.' He struck one of his most treasured match sticks, but the flickering flame was short-lived and they couldn't see anything. In the mean time, Raju came running near her with the lantern in hand.

'Be careful,' said his father in his shaky voice from a corner, 'you don't know what the creature was and where it is, now.' Some children started crying on hearing these noises.

'Will somebody lend me a torch, please?' It was Karthi and he was really upset. Suddenly an electric torch flashed nearby.

'Here, take this,' said Navam. Sivan took it and carefully inspected the ground in front. By now a small crowd had gathered. There was a second torch and they all started searching for the culprit who had caused all this tumult.

Karthi was consoling the woman.

'Don't worry, Leela, it cannot be anything big.' Their two children were crying in a muffled voice.

'There,' shouted Mani, who was standing behind Vellai flashing the second torch, 'there under the step.'

'A scorpion!' cried Vellai, 'but not a big one.'

'Thank God,' said Thevar.

'Indeed so,' seconded Valli *Aachi*, 'luckily not any other big ones during these rainy days.'

Mani crushed the black creature with a stone. Leela was still moaning and Karthi hushed his wife, 'don't scare the children, please.'

'Nothing to worry, get some *chunnam* and smear it around the spot. I will give a potion in the morning,' said Sellar, who had come there.

'Here, apply this,' Valli *aachi* walked up to them with the small bottle of lime paste taken out of her betel bag. 'There is more than enough.'

They kept the lantern in front of the woman and Karthi opened the bottle and began applying the white lime around his wife's right toe.

'Luckily, the intruder was a scorpion, and not a 'bigger thing'.

They didn't even want to think of the word 'snake' at night.

'Look, what these dirty villains are doing to us,' raged somebody. 'Because of them we have to expose our children and ourselves to all these poisonous creatures moving around in these rainy nights!'

After some time Leela spoke feebly between her moaning. 'It was God's grace! Both the children were sleeping next to me and, the *nattuvaakkaali* had gone without harming them!'

Sivan suddenly remembered something and that made him wonder. '*My mother only said, Thank God, the scorpion picked on me and spared my children.*'

The exact wordings in an almost identical situation, reminded him of Nizzim Ezekiel's poem, *The Night of the Scorpion*, which he had studied in his college days!

The crowd broke up and returned to their respective corners. Now they had something else to worry about.

*

Sivan couldn't sleep. Though he was terribly tired and was longing to lie down, sleep simply seemed to escape him as soon as he stretched down. The night was not cold. He had only a big sheet of newspaper for a mat. His whole body ached and he turned aside without disturbing the child on his right. The baby was fast asleep between him and Suba who was sleeping by the wall. His mother's steady breath came from his left, past Ravi. There were five other families sleeping in the *koodam* as in the previous night. The front doors were closed but not locked and there were Thevar and others sleeping in the front verandah. Nothing odd happened last night.

'I made a mistake,' thought Sivan, staring at the dark square of window which remained shut in front. 'Instead of staying at Paddukkodai for some more time, I made a foolish decision in rushing back,' regretted he. 'What an idiot I was not to pay heed to Ganesan's advice!'

*

Thevar could see the flickering stars high above the hill like silhouette of the palmyrahs in front. Though

the sky looked clear now, it might start raining at any moment like the previous night, he thought. A mosquito was buzzing by his ear and he slapped it. Almost at the same time, he heard the gate outside screeching gently. What? Is somebody opening the gate or is it some stray dogs pushing it?

He remembered what they were told the previous day- 'not to shut the front doors' and felt troubled. Yes, the sound of approaching boots was clear. A shiver ran down his spine... Must be more than one person! Why are they coming? He felt numb, his body frozen, but managed to close his eyes and turn the other side. The sound came closer to the steps and stopped.

They called. He was neither able to make out that word nor understand the language. But that was a call. 'They're calling us!'

Maybe someone else is lying here awake? What am I to do? Before he could decide, he heard Essem's voice. 'Who's that?' And then followed the rustles Essem made in getting up in a hurry. Thevar, too, had no alternative but to get up as if waking up from a slumber, wiping his eyes with his palms, his heart beating fast.

He saw two *jawans* standing at the lower step, one holding a gun and the other with something like a big bucket in his hands. 'Food,' a hoarse voice called.

'What?' Essem was standing by now, trying to tighten his *verty* with shivering hands.

'Food, food,' Thevar saw the man placing the bucket on the top step and gesturing with his hands like eating. He understood.

'Food? For us?' Essem asked.

'Yes.'

'Eat, eat,' the one holding the gun said. And they turned and walked away, the sound of heavy steps receding.

Thevar looked at Essem as soon as he heard the screech of the gate again.

Essem, visibly, was dumbfounded.

Naagu was up now. 'What's that?'

'Food, they say!' Thevar replied.

'What do they want us to do with that?'

'Let's wake up Sivan.'

All the sleepless people followed them to the inner court yard and an excited discussion took place, in hushed tones. The bucket remained where it was left.

'We shouldn't touch that damned thing. Whether the stuff is poisoned or not, who knows?'

'You may find a grenade inside and it will blast the moment you open that bucket. Have you noticed the tightly closed lid?'

'We'll leave it as it is, without touching.'

'If they come in the morning and see the thing remaining untouched, what'd they do? Won't they be annoyed?'

'What shall we do, then?'

'Take the bucket to the back yard and dump everything for the stray dogs!'

'Do you want to kill those innocent dogs? Whose dogs are straying around here, you think? Aren't those ours, looking for their masters?'

'I'll tell you,' Sivan said quietly. 'Let's dig a pit and bury the whole stuff.'

'Good idea!'

Mani dug the pit behind the *cadjan* shed, while Raju held the dimmed, smoke-spitting hurricane lantern closer.

'Stop, that's enough,' said Naagu. 'Are you going to bury an elephant?'

He took that white bucket to the pit and cautiously removed the lid with a stick. The bucket looked three quarters full. Naagu waited for a while and then emptied the contents slowly into the pit.

'Have a look,' his voice came almost a snarl.

'What?' The other two wondered, if there was really a grenade inside.

'Take a look yourself!'

Raju held the lamp close to the pit, looked into it and started laughing in disgust, 'it shows who they are!'

'Do they think that we are ordinary fellows here? They've brought us all the leftovers of their rotten *chapathis*!' Mani's anger reflected in the way he pounded earth while closing the pit.

'And look at the amount they brought, even if these are fresh, they won't be enough for fifteen people!' Raju walked ahead fast, the lantern swinging in his hand, showing his annoyance. The ghostly shadows around them danced.

'We needn't be so harsh,' Sivan said softly as they stepped into the rear verandah. 'There could've been another possibility...'

'What could it be?' Naagu wondered.

'Why should we think they were all merciless people? There could have been one or two kind-hearted men there, who would've really felt sorry for us and had tried to help us with whatever they could get...'

They all went in silently.

#

(11)



The lame old Ponnu pushed off the blanket and got up from his bed of gunny bag spread over the thick mat woven out of palmyrah leaves. He yawned, wiping his eyes and raised both hands over the head. 'Murukaa....,' Ponnu whispered the Almighty's name devotedly. The right hand then mechanically groped under the mat in search of the box of matches and the half cigar which he had kept carefully after crushing the fire out just before lying down the previous night. Ponnu used to sleep on the *thinnai*, the high dais made of red clay, in front of the house by the main door. That was his usual place irrespective of the weather. His only son and family were inside the small house built of concrete blocks and roofed with corrugated iron sheets.

It was fully dark outside. Even the usual murky night lamp hanging from the eaves turned out to be a thing of the past.

Nobody in the village dared to take a risk by showing any sign of activity or by allowing even a ray of light to escape out from their house after seven in the evening. Each and everybody strictly followed this, as if they had collectively decided to do so, from the day the months-long, over-night curfew was imposed by the foreigners.

Even the stars were not to be seen at this time. Was it going to rain again in the morning? While lighting his cigar, Ponnu mused about not hearing the gentle bleating of his treasured he-goat which was tied carefully close to him in the pen adjoining the house and he became concerned a little. Of course, one cannot predict the activities of thieves, even at times like this. The old man got up at once and went limping towards the pen with his narrowed eyes now accustomed to the dim light. He bent down and had a look, and was satisfied to make out the silhouettes of all the four animals inside and turned back with relief. He then sat again leisurely on the edge of the dais, and smoked his cigar. It warmed and comforted him in the enveloping cold.

Ponnu couldn't make out the time. Previously, the bell from the *Vairavar* temple about half a kilometer away from his place would start ringing sharp at half past four and continue non-stop for a couple of minutes, as if to wake up the whole village. The bell would awaken him.

There was another sure way, too, of finding the time; by looking for the *vidivelli*, the bright glittering morning star, just above the top of his short mango tree. But with the sky overcast for most of the time it was difficult to tell the time at day break.

Time was important for the old man because he had to go and look for the palmyrah fruits, that had fallen the previous night, though now it was past season, and collect them before any one else could. He had also to collect all the jak leaves fallen during the night, to feed his goats, especially that prized male goat, which would fetch him a fortune in another couple of months if he continued to feed him properly.

Rearing of goats was his main occupation as well as his favorite pastime since the time he was a boy. If Ponnu was late somebody else take away everything from the vast compound of *Vadali*, the palm grove adjoining the graveled lane. True, the curfew would still be in force, but Ponnu would avoid the public lanes and reach the *Vadali* via the short cuts he knew; by just crossing over the fences of a couple of private compounds in between.

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The uniformed men showed up for the second day, too, almost at the same time as in the previous morning. That was the time people queued up in front of the lavatory as well as at the well, brushing their teeth with short pencil-like twigs of *poovarasu* chewed and made into brushes or with a pinch of ash taken from the fire place. Even the ash was a thing out of reach the previous day but this morning the folks were blessed with it as a result of the last evening's cooking. The early birds somehow managed to finish their morning chores, though hurriedly, and were now squatting in the front verandah not knowing what to do next. Was the house going to be a prison for them?

Sivan, whose sleep had been disturbed by meandering thoughts and worries which cropped up since the moment he was awakened by the mosquitoes had no alternative but to get up and sit. He looked at his watch. It was half past three. He couldn't sleep again, even after much effort. He got up quietly, without disturbing the others. He knew that they deserved to sleep well in order to get over their gnawing worries in the previous night. When he went to the lavatory with a box of matches tucked into the folds of his sarong, he realized that he could see clearly despite the darkness of the pre dawn hour. He pulled the well sweep without making much noise and lifted the water carefully. It was not as cold as he expected. While washing his face, he thought that he heard the report of two successive gun shots not very far. Sivan stopped and listened, heard nothing but the cry of some startled bird. That was all, and everything was quiet. Nobody spoke about the gun shots when he returned to the front verandah. What he heard must have been something else, he concluded.

Before dawn, Suba came in search of him with the baby who was already awake. They sat side by side silently, with the child on his lap.

Soon, the sky above the line of distant coconut palms started changing colors gradually, and at last, the first rays of the sun succeeded in plating the crowns of the towering palm in gold. Vellai stood staring beyond the parapet wall, his mind deep in thought of all the work awaiting him in his vegetable plot, which had been unattended for the second consecutive day.

He was the first to notice the men coming at a distance.

As soon as the news spread, there was an immense silence on the verandah. Most of the people hurriedly retreated inside the house.

'You, too,' Suba tugged at Sivan's sleeve, 'don't wait there and get involved in unnecessary things as you did yesterday.' Her voice, though muffled, was firm. What troubles are they going to bring us today, she pondered.

'Hurry up, let's go in,' Suba told him a second time and turned towards the *koodam*. Sivan did not wish to look at that deceitful Singh's face again. He would have gone in even without his wife's prodding.

He followed her, but curiosity made him turn his head to look towards the gate. What he saw made him pause. It was not that khaki clad, bespectacled Captain he saw leading the group, but the tall and fair Vanpar in his black uniform. Sivan hesitated for a moment near the door.

'Where are those two people?' he could hear Vanpar's hoarse voice. Sivan didn't need even a second to realize who the officer was looking for and immediately felt the pangs of fear gripping his guts. He turned numb, unable to move any further. And going in was not going to help him anyway!

'Aandavaa...', he pleaded to God.

Vanpar must have noticed him. 'You,' he called raising his hand towards Sivan, 'come here.'

No escape.

Sivan did not want to show his fear in front of all the people. He walked towards the Captain with a smile on his face and greeted him. 'Good morning, Sir.'

'Good morning.'

Sivan never expected the officer to return the greeting after having experienced such ordeals the previous day. The Captain looked fresh today. Was he smiling, too?

'How are things?' asked the Captain. Sivan wondered what to say. People started gathering around them, one by one, hesitantly.

'Where is that old gentleman?'

'Gentleman' he had said? Have I heard it correctly?

'Ask Thevar *maamaa* to come here,' Sivan turned to some one near by.

'What are you doing for your meals?' Vanpar adjusted his beret.

Sivan did not know how to answer that question. Without waiting for an answer, the Captain went on.

'I can give you two hours respite to go home and return. You can bring your food stuff...' Sivan was astounded.

'Thank you, sir,' he mumbled.

'...but, all can't go. Maximum two from each household will be given permission and they have to be back within two hours, at the most. Our men will enter the names while the people leave and check when they return. Do you understand?'

'Yes sir. At what time will we be able to go?'

'Now it's going to be seven,' Vanpar looked at his watch, 'you can leave at seven thirty and return before nine thirty. Those who fail to come at this time will have to face the consequences. Tell it to every body, clearly.'

Though the officer's voice was kind it sounded firm.

'Okay, sir. Thank you.'

When Thevar came there in a hurry, the Captain was looking at the portraits hanging on the wall of the verandah in admiration. There was reason for his interest. Besides the big faded photograph of Kanthar with his puffy eyes and handle-bar moustache behind the framed glass, there were many large printed portraits of Indian national leaders: Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, Rajaji, Subhash Chandra Bose and Bharathiyar. Vanpar's eyes betrayed his pleasant surprise.

'Not only here in this house, but these portraits were a common sight in almost all the middle class houses of Jaffna in the past,' Sivan informed the Captain.

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'You should have asked that chap when we could go again and bring our provisions,' whined Logan. Sivan remained silent.

'So, have you decided to stay in this place for ever?' Sellar teased Logan.

'Even if it were so, for how long could you continue to bring things from home without attending to your work there?' Mani came and stood in front of them with a laugh.

'Shops are not allowed to open and where the hell are we to get sugar or salt or anything?'

'Let alone opening, who knows if the shops are still there?' Sivan at once thought of what he had witnessed the previous day on their way to the camp, of what was left in Kathiresu's shop.

'The officer who came in the morning seems to be a good sort of man,' said Essem holding the unlit cigar between his fingers, 'not like the one who came yesterday.'

The rest agreed.

'Lesser of the two evils,' Raju intervened, breaking his silence. 'But these can't be their individual decisions. The army is a mighty machinery and there's no place for individuals. They are all parts of that machinery like bolts and nuts and teeth and wheels.'

'We don't even know about what is happening in the other villages around. Do you think the same thing, as here?' Sellar's voice was grave.

'Who knows? May or may not be the same...or even worse! The way things are, I feel they are trying to clear a few villages in one operation,' observed Essem.

'Absurd,' Jegan intervened, 'that will only be a game of no ending and these fools are only going to harass the innocent people like us!'

Sivan was tracing haphazard patterns on the ground with a stick, unable to take part in any of these discussions. His mind was preoccupied with all that had happened after Vanpar left the place.

As soon as they brought the things from home, he put the parcel by the side of his family and went towards the well. Even then, there was a crowd at the well and a few more people near the lavatory. He had a hurried wash and returned to his family. He took the baby on his lap and started playing with her.

'You look so exhausted,' said his mother.

'I'll make tea for all in a minute, now that you've brought everything,' said Suba untying the bundle. 'Mani is boiling the water and has made arrangements to serve it to all who need it.'

'I'll go and get it,' Ravi got up. 'You've brought mugs, haven't you, *annai*?'

'I've brought every thing you requested.'

The hot tea was refreshing despite a slight stench of smoke due to the water being boiled in an open container. As soon as he finished it, Sivan went in search of Thevar.

The curls of smoke were slowly spiraling up, its pungent smell pervading everywhere. The dancing flames around the cauldron remained mostly indistinct in the yellow sun.

'This is a good thing, isn't it?'

'What?'

'Cooking collectively like this, with everybody contributing whatever one has!'

'There's a problem, though,' said Logan dryly.

'What?'

'I suppose all know the proverb, 'you bring a measure of rice, and I, a measure of husk. Let's both eat together.' Sivan stood up and started walking away slowly.

What a man this Logan is, to talk like this here, and at this time! Better not to discuss such matters in front of Logan... 'Sivan,' called Raju. He had been watching what was going on around him all the time.

'Have you forgotten what they asked us for when we returned?'

'What? Give them a complete list of inmates in the camp?' Sivan asked.

'Let's go to the front verandah,' he said and walked in front.

They remained silent for a long time, seated along the edge of the high verandah, their legs dangling. It was hot there but quiet, as most of the people avoided the front side.

'Now do you agree that Luxmi had in a way made a sensible decision, though risky?' Sivan asked at last.

'What?' asked Raju.

'You heard Luxmi's reason for not coming here with the rest of us, and now, the sort of remark Logan made?'

'Whatever it may be, it is really dangerous for her to stay like that, I think.' Raju said, 'especially after what we came to know from Naagu and his father in law.'

'I agree, but now there's no way of us contacting her and asking her to come here, at least for the sake of her children.'

Silence again encompassed them.

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(12)



When they left their camp in the morning, it was exactly half past seven. The soldiers were waiting just across the road, by Ratnam Master's gate. One was seated at a table with a sheaf of papers in front of him.

'Carry your white flags with you,' he warned those queuing up in front of him. The ones who had forgotten their flags rushed back to fetch them. As soon as the names were called the people were allowed to go.

Sivan and Raju walked together, behind a few others. It was a difficult decision to make for all the people as to who was to go and bring provisions and who was to stay behind, since it was a matter of families getting temporarily separated, especially when nobody knew which was risky, to remain in

the camp or to leave, or both! Sivan asked Ravi to stay behind with the family while he went with Raju, who had no one to take along with him, except his old parents, wife and the widowed sister.

'I can bring every thing by myself,' Sivan told his brother, 'you had better look after our people.'

'We'll go to your house first and then to ours,' said Raju.

'That's not going to make any difference. But we've to be together! That's the important thing.'

Thevar, Vellai and others took a walk along the *Puliyady* lane. The old man had nobody to carry things for him, and Vellai, a relative and neighbor, volunteered.

'I'm not going to bring much *thambi*, except the medications for my old woman. Don't be scared', he told Vellai jokingly.

As they walked, the people went their ways in twos and threes and when they came to the banyan tree junction, Sivan and Raju found themselves alone. They removed their slippers by the side of the bifurcating path and walked towards the small yellow-washed shrine under the huge *Aal* tree. The flame of the *Thoondaamani* lamp hanging inside the shrine room had died and no one had lit it again. Both of them stood in obeisance in front of the shrine for a while, praying.

'The Lord *Vairavar* will never let us down,' said Raju when they resumed their walk. 'I have now made a vow to proffer a grand *pongal* as soon as we are released from this camp.'

It was a lovely morning which would have made everyone happy and active during normal times. The bright sun

was cast long shadows on to their right. They walked slowly and silently. A dog barked from somewhere, and was followed by the whining of another elsewhere.

Was some one moving around there? Who could it be other than those men? They looked at each other. However, the dogs were silent after that.

Holding their white flags prominently in front, they walked cautiously.

What would have happened to our dog? Sivan felt sorry for it. Suba was wise enough to put all the remnants of food in the plate of Toto before leaving and it would have managed upto now.

If I can give something today then it will go on for another couple of days, but what will be there for me to give him? Maybe, Toto would've gone searching for us?

They heard a rustle and stopped suddenly, their hearts pounding, almost ready to raise hands above heads. But it turned out to be a *senpakam*, hopping and chasing something along the fence, its reddish brown wings spread wide and the black head cocked in front.

Sivan always wondered if he had ever liked this local pheasant or not. Always hunting for small creatures and insects in their compound, the bird had an eye for those horribly poisonous tarantulas hidden under the crevices of trees, and at the same time determined to destroy the beauty of his garden pond - pulling the beautifully spreading lily leaves and catching the cute tiny toads and even fish. Suba had once told him that it was the one which had destroyed the honey comb high above the mango tree.

When they took the next bend, something at the small junction ahead bewildered them. The small structure was surely a watch hut like many others Sivan had seen the previous day. 'We shouldn't hesitate or turn back, but keep on walking.'

Nothing happened however, no jutting guns, no peeping heads. The makeshift sentry box occupying a large part of that junction appeared vacant. They walked past it quietly, the flags still in their hands, raised high above.

Beyond that point the fences which had remained intact till the day before yesterday afternoon were missing.

So, the chaps must have been there yesterday! Perhaps may be still around, staying camped somewhere here, nearby? Fortunately, the narrow by-lane leading to their houses remained as calm as usual, unaffected.

The fences were still there and with no boot marks crisscrossing the wet sand along the lane... It had taken about ten minutes for them to walk this distance, about half a kilo meter from their camp! They still had to walk cautiously.

First they went to Sivan's place. His own house looked forlorn and frightening to him. The gates remained closed and the compound quiet, no indication of any trespass. But there was no sign of Toto anywhere and its plate remained untouched. He was worried but afraid to call its name aloud. If it was around, Toto would've come by now hearing these noises and smelling out his presence. It must've gone somewhere! Perhaps stranded when it went in search of his owners? Sivan remembered how Toto had followed them the other day when they left for the camp and how he had managed to chase it back.

The remembrance of those eyes filled with fear and anxiety made him to worry more. 'It will come back,' consoled Raju. They had decided not to tell his family about the missing dog.

Despite the calmness, Sivan was reluctant to go to the back yard or to the well. He cautiously opened the door, entered the house, hurried with the tasks as if somebody was poking him from behind.

'Even if Toto comes now what can I give him? No food, nothing here.' Remembering something, Sivan went to the kitchen and searched the cooking pots one by one. The putrid smell from the unwashed pots of two days nauseated him. Luckily there was some rice left in the pot, but again with that musty smell.

'Doesn't matter,' he emptied the contents into Toto's plate, 'at least this is something.'

Having made sure he had taken all that was needed, he locked the doors again securely. It hadn't taken even fifteen minutes for him to finish his job.

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Sivan waited at Raju's verandah nervously. Raju was quick and was back in ten minutes.

'We've only these plants to look after,' he showed the beautiful little garden in front, 'but this being the rainy season, there's nothing to worry about.'

When they came out, the sun was higher, trying to penetrate its rays through the thick foliage of the huge trees in the vast and well secured neighboring compounds. The lane was still quiet, except for the rustling of the wind.

They started walking, each carrying a fairly big bundle of provisions on their shoulders.

Passing by the bulky jak tree at the bend of the lane, they heard something, like somebody calling in whispers from the other side of the palm covered fence. Taken aback, they paused, looking at each other. Is someone calling them? The *padalai*, a small gate, which remained unrecognizable along the fence on to their right opened slightly and a head appeared in the narrow gap.

'Luxmi!'

'Come inside, *annai*,' Luxmi called and closed the gate after them and secured it. Both looked at her, astounded. She appeared forlorn but calm, her forehead smeared with holy ash. She was as usual in her house-coat. The dark face gazed at them with a hint of a smile.

'What are you doing here? We thought you would've gone to your in laws' place!' Both asked in unison, their voices revealing their astonishment.

'I didn't go anywhere and I didn't want to go anywhere either,' she paused. 'I've never depended on any one since my husband was shot dead by some unknown gunmen last year. You know that, don't you?'

Suddenly they heard the long whining of an animal and a dog showed up itself as if from nowhere, and jumped at Sivan. It was Toto!

It whimpered and licked him all over, wagging not only its tail but its entire body. Sivan bent and stroked its head, not knowing what else to do.

'He's very friendly with our Jemie and has been here for the last two days,' said Luxmi, 'but refuses to eat anything.'

A little girl came running from behind a hedge of fully blossomed shoe-flower bushes and clung on to her. 'The youngest,' said Luxmi caressing the head of the child. She then continued, 'where can I take these five children, when I don't have any money in hand or any food to take with me?'

Sivan saw the glittering beads of tears in her eyes.

'Where are the other children?' asked Raju.

'Inside the house,' she pointed towards a small house, nestling in the midst of a beautiful vegetable garden, the fruits of her toil. 'I've told them not to make any noise or to come out unnecessarily, unless I call them,' replied Luxmi.

'Are you alright here? Nothing untoward had happened?' Raju looked fondly at the small girl in her skirt who was staring at them with her big eyes from behind her mother.

'Thank God, nothing so far,' Luxmi replied quietly.

'Didn't they come this way? Weren't the children afraid?' Sivan felt sorry for the young ones.

'They didn't come here at all, even on that day they took you. In case they come here and find us, I don't think that they'll do any harm when they look at these innocent small ones. I'll tell them the reason for our not leaving. The children are not afraid, either. And above all, our Almighty *Vairavar* is there.' She pointed towards the big margosa tree under which there was the holy Trident installed on a neat, small platform and decorated profusely with flowers. 'Everything is in His hands.'

'Wouldn't you like to come with us at least now?'

'No *annai*. If I stay here, we can somehow manage with what we get from our garden. The manioc is in plenty this season and we have other vegetables, some poultry and a milking cow. How can I leave all these? Even if I leave these and come to the camp, then I'll have to depend on others to feed these siblings, and have to listen to unpleasant remarks.'

Realizing the gravity of her reasoning, Sivan spoke after a couple of seconds.

'In a way what you say is correct. All of us are eating Kamala *akka*'s rice since yesterday!'

He laughed sourly.

'When will they allow you to get back? When will things return to normal?' Luxmi asked anxiously.

Sivan and Raju looked at each other. 'Only God knows,' said Raju.

'Okay Luxmi, we have to leave now,' Sivan looked at her. 'You've to be very careful for the sake of the young ones.'

He was still wondering at the strong will in that frail body.

'Why not wait for a while *annai*? I'll ask my elder boy to pull out a couple of manioc plants for you to take some tubers.'

Sivan felt a sudden surge of tears in his eyes but he controlled himself.

'No, *thangachi*, we can't wait any longer and have to be there within another half an hour. You had better take care of yourself and your children.'

And after a moment he pointed at Toto and said with some reluctance, 'please look after that, if possible.'

Holding the dog's neck strap, she smiled, 'don't worry.'
They bade good bye to her and the child and started walking, their hearts heavier than the bundles they were carrying.

When they approached the banyan tree junction, they saw Naagu carrying two big bags, followed by his bearded father-in-law. The old man had only a big bundle of *murungai* leaf in his hand. Both seemed frightened and dazed.

'What happened?' Sivan and Raju went up to Naagu.

'You know *vadali*, the palmyrah grove?'

'Yes, the big plot that belongs to you? Adjoining your compound?'

'I think I saw a body there!'

'What?'

'Yes, a dead body lying among the palmyrah palm trees.'

'Utter nonsense! I didn't see any damned thing there,' hissed the old man from behind, 'and he is frightening me, too.'

'To hell with his eye sight,' cursed Naagu.

Sivan suddenly remembered the shots he had heard while washing his face that morning.

'Who could it be?' Raju asked.

'All our people from that area are with us in the camp, but... ' Naagu thought for a moment.

'What but?'

'Some people from Sempaadu, the area adjoining the farm lands, used to come there to collect palm fruits in the early mornings,' Naagu's voice was dry.

'But they never take the public lanes but always walk across the private lands.'

'So, this cannot be considered a breach of curfew! Is that what you want to say?'

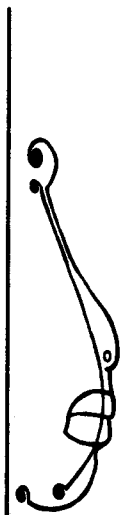
'What then?'

Sivan laughed. 'That's not going to make any difference. According to them you are expected to stay only at the camps assigned to you and not even at your own houses.'

'So, that must be some innocent chap from Sempaadu?' Raju asked.

'It looks like that lame Ponnu, the goat keeper, who used to go there quite often.'

(13)



The sun wasn't bright but the whole place remained filled with a sticky heat. The inmates seemed busy in the backyard, in a hurry to finish their limited chores before the impending rain. Raju turned towards Sivan.

'We decided not to tell that matter to any one, but do you think that Naagu chap will keep quiet? He was really disturbed.'

'I guess he won't tell, for two reasons,' replied Sivan. 'One is the shock of seeing the shot body lying there...'

Raju interjected, 'and the other?'

'The body was lying in their property itself! I think he's taking this one more seriously.'

'But the old man swears there was nothing like that.'

'That is why the four of us have decided not to mention anything about this to others, at least till we are sure.'

'I doubt Naagu. He'll tell his wife. If the news spreads, it'll upset all the people here.'

Somebody coughed.

'Are you preparing a new list?' the question came from behind and when they turned, they saw Essem coming towards them with some papers in hand.

'Here's the list we prepared yesterday to work out the amount of rice we needed.' Essem started furnishing the statistics, adjusting his spectacles. 'According to this, there are a total of one hundred and eighty seven people from forty four families, sixty three males, eighty four females and forty children.'

'This is a commendable job, *maamaa!*' Sivan laughed appreciatively despite his worries, 'but we've to update the list by giving all the names, ages and other particulars needed by them.'

'Then let's do it after the meals, and let's get some help from one or two of these young men here who have good hand writing. Keep these with you.' Essem thrust the papers in Sivan's hand and walked away. Sivan browsed through the thin sheaf quickly. A methodical man he was, indeed, had done a neat job. The sheaf consisted of blank papers torn off from wherever possible and a few unused leaves from an old exercise book which Mani found in a dusty box lying in a corner of that dark, stuffy, cobweb ridden store room. All papers neatly trimmed, fastened with a safety pin and the details clearly written...

Something appeared printed on the back of the cover paper and he read it.

'*Sigmund Freud compared the human mind to an iceberg which floats with only 17 percent of its volume*

above water. The small tip that floats above the water is the conscious part, and the huge region under the surface comprises the unconscious...'

Does this carry any meaning for them, for all these people, in a situation like this? At present, their one and only priority is safety and safety alone. Safe and peaceful existence is all what they yearn for now. Sivan thought of his collection of books in a big shelf back at home on which he had spent a considerable sum of money from his salary every month. All those seemed absurd and of no use. What collection for camp dwellers?

When Jegan came in search of them afterwards, not even half of the list was completed.

'A nice thing has happened Sivan,' Jegan's voice was apparently serious despite a half smile on his lips.

'What? What happened?' Sivan looked up from the sheaf of papers on his lap.

'The lavatory is blocked up!'

'You mean the lavatory pan?'

'Yes, the flushed water is not flowing down. We have tried everything to clear it up. But it's not working.'

'Hell of a problem that one,' Essem got up, 'everybody had to wait for hours even when it was working properly.'

'How are we going to manage with all these people?' Sivan followed Essem, stuffing the rolled sheets in his shirt pocket. 'If it is a block we can clear it somehow,' he said.

'What else could it be?' wondered Raju.

'There's a strong chance of the pit getting filled up!'

'What? You mean because of the number of people using it?'

'Yes, because of the number of users and the rains! After all this is the rainy season and the earth is thoroughly soaked up with all the heavy showers of the past weeks and there is no way for the flushed water to soak out easily from the pit.'

'We're finished if that's the case!'

'Why worry? Kanthar's compound is very vast and won't Mani lend us one or two *mammoties* to dig?' laughed Essem. 'As you said, the earth is fully wet and it will be easy to dig sewer holes!'

'You know what one of those *jawans* asked somebody during a road check one day, last month? 'You have your own compounds and houses, separate latrines and a well in every plot for every family here in Jaffna and what on earth are you fighting for?''

'A very wrong equation obviously,' Raju commented, 'and now they're trying to deprive us of all those!'

'We have to attend to the lat before it is dark,' said Sivan, 'otherwise it'll be terrible.'

There was a small crowd in front of the lavatory. Logan, bare-bodied, with only a sarong around his waist and folded above his knees and tied firm with a knot, appeared busy in the middle. He was stretching his right arm in front and they saw Mani covering it with a thin polythene shopping

bag up to Logan's elbow and tying it. 'A bit tighter,' said Logan, testing the free movement of his fingers inside the bag.

'It seems okay, now, bring the next one.'

Mani started covering the first bag with another one.

'How is my glove, *maamaa*?' Logan turned towards Essem.

'Are you going to put your hand inside?'

'We've failed in other ways.'

Logan spread an old sheet of paper on the lavatory floor and placing his knees on it he carefully bent towards the squatting pan.

'Let's not disturb him,' said Sivan softly to Jegan in admiration, 'Logan is really someone different.'

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When Raju and his wife came to the well, there was nobody else there.

'All are busy with their meals now and you've chosen a nice time to have a leisurely bath,' said Raju to his wife in admiration.

'I haven't come here for a leisurely bath, now,' Thevi replied sharply. 'I want to speak to you in private, regarding something.'

Raju, unable to understand, looked straight into her eyes, 'to speak about what?'

'We have no time to waste and I can't come out with these things in front of others,' her voice was hard. 'So I've to tell it now, straight away.'

He was puzzled. 'Tell me, what's so important?'

'Yes, it's very important,' she replied and only then Raju felt that his suspicion about her coldness during the last couple of days must be genuine.

'Your friendship with that Rani is a bit too much and I want you to put a full stop to it at once!'

He was bewildered, not knowing what to say about those baseless allegations.

'Thevi, what are you talking about?' Raju managed to ask.

'I know what I am talking about and have decided to talk to you only after watching your movements carefully during the last two days.'

'What has happened to you? Why are you thinking this way?'

'I've been watching you talking to her often and discussing things with her, away from the sight of others.'

'Don't be silly, I've got nothing to do with her. It was only about the safety of that...'

'I don't want all these. Leave those matters like 'safety' and 'well being' and so on to your friend Sivan and to that old head master. You better keep away from all such things, and especially getting intimate with women.'

Thevi's voice sounded like a warning. She went and grabbed the bucket. 'I have to have a bath now, at least for the sake of others.'

Without knowing what to do, Raju went and took the bucket from her hand and started drawing water for her.

Not a word after that.

When she was about to dry her head, they saw Sivan and Suba coming towards the well.

'I've got your share of kanji and left it with your father, Raju. Go and have it before it turns cold,' said Sivan.

'What about you? Have you both finished?' Raju asked, as if nothing had happened.

'We prefer it cold,' said Sivan and walked towards the well, followed by Suba.

'Unlike the ones in Paddukkodai, our wells here are very deep and now more than three quarters full owing to the recent rains. People have to be careful.'

Sivan handed over the bucket of water to Suba, while tightly holding on to the thick rope of the well-sweep in his hands.

'I wonder what is going on in Paddukkodai now.'

'There's no way of knowing,' replied Suba gently and started pouring the water on her head.

'It is not that cold,' she returned the empty bucket to him and hurriedly rubbed her body under the house coat she was still wearing.

'Do you regret returning from there?' he asked.

'We didn't rush back foolishly. We weighed all the pros and cons and then only made a decision to return, didn't we? Then, why worry?'

He threw the bucket into the well and pulled the sweep down forcefully, feeling the thick rope gliding between his palms.

The bucket hit the water with a splashing sound.

'Who knows what would be the situation there now?' She continued, 'maybe it would've turned out to be worse than this.' Feeling the bucket immersing under the water and getting filled up, he pulled the rope up again with a jerk.

'Just imagine how we managed with all those shells bursting around us day by day?' she said again. Sivan didn't know what to say, continued drawing water in silence and after the ninth bucket she said, 'one more is enough, a lot of people are waiting outside.' He, too, saw the legs under the half screened fence surrounding the well and a couple of towels and clothes lying on the *cadjan*. Suba changed the wet clothes hurriedly.

'Let's go without delaying them.'

They quickly left the well.

'If this Vanpar allows us to go home again tomorrow, I must have a leisurely bath at our well and return,' Sivan said. They were standing by the side of a long clothes line, which was already sagging under the weight of an assortment of clothes spread on it. Suba was wringing her rinsed housecoat.

'So, you, too, have made up your mind for a long stay in this place?' she smiled. 'Why not think about returning home for good tomorrow and having a bath there leisurely?'

'I shall be happy if I could do so,' Sivan stopped near the back door leading to the house.

'You'd better go in and look after the baby and ask mother to come here if she wants a wash. I'll wait here.'

He sat at the edge of the long step, his thoughts filled with the lines of a free verse Muthali had written in Tamil.

(14)



*'The Epic's being rewritten,
With events never dreamt of by any!
Rama's army now punishing
Helpless Sita herself whom
They came to rescue, all the way.*

*Innocent Sita, still imprisoned
Immersed deep in anxiety...
Is Hanuman the messenger,
Setting fire to the sari she wore?
Fence devouring the plants?*

*True?
Umpire punches a wrestler?
Who is being distressed now?
Is it not the poor innocents?
Not their hopes and truth?'*

Ganesan laughed as soon as Muthali had finished the poem. '*Machchan*, you refer to the epic *Ramayana* in which Lord Rama's army marched into Lanka to redeem Sita who had been kept captive by King Ravana, don't you?'

'Exactly,' said Muthali.

'Dear friend, I am sorry for you and your like, for making wrong comparisons and for expecting wrong things from the wrong direction and eventually lamenting the failure!' Ganesan teased Muthali. 'Hanuman set fire to Lanka then, okay! And who did burn down the two local dailies of Jaffna about three weeks ago, and why? Just to keep the people in the dark or to threaten the media? Isn't it ironical for those speak about democracy to lay hands on press?'

'I knew you would say something like this,' Muthali replied. His attempt to reveal his usual friendly smile apparently failed.

Sivan looked at them both, wondering, 'am I somebody in between these two? Are my thoughts something of a hybrid of theirs? At times, what Ganesan says seems practicable and down to earth and at other times what Muthali says appears true! Anyway both of them are firm in their respective stand, but, what about me? Am I wavering?'

...All these happened about a month ago, when all three of them were seated under the tall *vilathi*, the wood apple tree, in the courtyard of the big house which was in the custody of Muthali. It was at the end of a month of their staying there together, with their families. A poet who had

earned a reputation in the local Tamil literary circles, Muthali, was also a well-to-do cultivator at Paddukkodai. He had studied with Sivan and Ganesan at the leading boys' secondary school, Hindu College, in the city about two decades ago and their friendship had lasted long and steady regardless of their changing ways and ideologies in the years that followed. Muthali came in search of them when he heard of the worsening situation at their place. 'Come and stay with me in Paddukkodai till the tension at your place eases. You know my elder sister's family has gone to the UK and I'm looking after their house next to mine. That's very big and had been vacant from the time they left, big enough to accommodate two or even three families...'

Indeed it was a very big *naatsaar* house in the traditional Jaffna style, in which the four wings of the building enclosed an inner courtyard. The structure which looked a century old with its very thick walls and low doors was still very strong and surrounded by an enormous compound full of huge trees. What attracted Sivan most was the vast paddy lands stretching beyond the barbed wire fence of the backyard and at the time they went there, the fields appeared like green carpets. There was always water in the fields because of the continuing rains and there were mosquitoes which proved to be a problem during nights. Luckily, Muthali had gunny bags full of margosa seeds collected during the dry season and burning a handful of them at nights helped to keep the buzzing insects at bay. Lying under the blanket in the dark of a cold night, with the aromatic smoke of the margosa seeds filling the room and

listening to the ceaseless croaking of frogs in the distance was surely a sweet experience if not for the intermittent exploding of distant shells which made the roof and doors shudder and even the floor to tremble...

That was a pleasant evening, and even the barrage of gun fire reaching them from far away from the east sounded muffled.

'Muthali, I'm sure, you would by now have learnt to differentiate between the rumblings of thunder and the explosion of shells,' observed Ganesan in a lighter vein.

'Of course,' replied Muthali.

'Not only you, me, too,' replied Ganesan. 'In fact, almost all the people from Jaffna regardless of their ages were able to tell you not only that, but the different sounds made by the bombers, the *Avro* or the *Y 12* or the *Siai Marchetti*. And nowadays they can also differentiate between the sounds of Indian helicopters and the Sri Lankan ones on hearing them at a good distance! The people have learnt a lot in these years.'

'Shall I relate you a couple lines from the Vietnamese poet Che Lan Vien, which I came across a few years back?' Sivan started reciting the poem without waiting for his friends' reply:

'It isn't easy, being a mother in Vietnam.

.....
*In other lands on Earth, the mothers teach
 Their children to recognize
 The sound of music and the songs of birds.*

*Here they must learn the difference
between the roar of a B-52
And that of an F-105...*

'Human experience and feelings are the same everywhere irrespective of language, nation and even the division of time, aren't they?' said Ganesan.

'Sure,' said Sivan, 'you know, last year I was able to get all the four volumes of the famous novel, *'And quiet flows the Don'* by a popular Russian author Mikhail Sholokhov. For some reason or the other it also reminded me of another masterpiece, *'Farewell to Arms'* by Ernest Hemingway, an American you must have heard of. Both authors won the Nobel Prize for literature and both novels speak of wars, two different wars in two different places and times. Indeed as I read them I felt I was a character in them. You know why.'

There was a ringing of a bicycle bell at the gate.

'That must be Chinna,' said Muthali. He got up and walked towards the gate. The tall and lean Chinna with black-framed thick glasses and the locks of unruly hair falling on his forehead, walked in pushing his bicycle. He was wearing a pair of brown shorts and a blue shirt left loose over it.

He pulled the bicycle up on its stand. There was a big bundle of green leaves on the carrier.

'*Vanakkam,*' greeted Sivan and Ganesan.

'*Vanakkam,*' Chinna walked towards them with a smile.

After closing the gate Muthali came up to them, and asked Chinna, 'taking fodder for the goats from your garden?'

'Yes,' Chinna sat on another stone in front.

Muthali turned towards the other two, 'you know, Chinna actually is a three-in-one personality, an employee of the Agricultural Institute at Padukkodai, a part time farmer and a free lance journalist.'

'So, how is the reporting-work going on? Got any hot news?' asked Ganesan with a smile.

'Didn't you tell them?' Chinna sat in front of them and looked at Muthali.

'What?' the other two asked in unison.

'There was a discussion today,' Muthali started.

'What discussion? Where? And when?'

'There was a discussion of the Citizen's Committees of the area held at our institute. It was a sudden development, I understand,' explained Chinna.

'All the Hindu and Christian religious leaders of the area took part in it and I happened to be there by chance when I went to meet Chinna,' said Muthali.

'What did they decide?' Sivan was interested in knowing the outcome of the meeting.

'To send a memorandum to the Prime Minister of India through the DMK party leader of Tamil Nadu, describing all the hardships the people had to face because of the actions of the peace keepers,' Muthali replied.

Ganesan jeered, 'one of the best jokes I have heard recently.'

'May be a good thing, but I too have my doubts about any solid outcome,' observed Sivan with a smile. 'But let them try and see.'

'How are they going to send it, then?'

'Through some International Volunteer Organization, said those who arranged the discussion.'

'That's very good. Best of luck,' Ganesan's voice was full of sarcasm.

A flock of birds was flying high above the clouds towards the west, as if floating. The foursome remained silent for a while.

'At times I wonder if the 'boys' have made and are still making a big blunder, a historical blunder,' Muthali began slowly after some time as if talking to himself, 'by going against the PK forces.'

'Why do you say so?' asked Ganesan who seemed interested in knowing the reason for the statement.

'Instead of using the electric power on hand to their advantage, why should they try to put their hands into the mains?'

Ganesan puckered his lips, saying nothing.

'Absurd, an irrelevant metaphor,' retorted Chinna, 'they have every reason to take this stand. Recollect what had happened within the last six months, please.'

Chinna paused for a moment and then continued, 'further, we must remember that they are not part of this agreement under which these forces were brought in here.'

'Whatever it may be, Chinna,' Muthali spoke in a quiet but firm voice. 'Aren't we wasting a historical opportunity? We are going to repent for this irreparable mistake in the future. That's what I think.'

They heard a barrage of shelling.

'Seems to come from parts of our village, doesn't it?'

Sivan looked worried.

'Heavy fighting must have been going on for the last couple of days. Wonder if any of our houses are spared.' It was Ganesan's turn to sigh now.

'All the children are terribly scared. Every time when there's an explosion, they get upset. I'm afraid if this is going to traumatize them.'

'Even the feeble among the grown ups are suffering. Didn't I tell you about the people who fainted on hearing a shell exploding?'

'Psychological damage must be more severe than the physical damage.'

And then Muthali started reciting his poem aloud again, his voice trembling.

The silence prevailed for a long while even after he had finished it. They remained lost in their own thoughts. The sky was getting darker now with cumulus clouds showing themselves up in the horizon and the gentle breeze turning cold. The chickens belonging to Muthali's wife were busy around the mango tree, flying up the low branches, for roosting. The distant bursts of those terrible projectiles resumed again after a short break, more severe this time.

'The best fire works we have ever had for a *Deepavali!*' Sivan tried to be jovial in an attempt to overcome the depressing feeling inside him.

'You must've heard of the way we celebrated our *Deepavali*, last week...' sighed Chinna, his eyes staring at

a distance. 'Haven't you heard what happened to twenty one employees of the Jaffna General Hospital, including doctors, who were on duty on that day, the 21st of October?'

Chinna stammered in his excitement, '...apart from several other innocent patients who were there.' His voice was full of mute anger and helplessness, 'a cruelty never heard of.'

Ganesan laughed bitterly.

'This is a terrible irony and a big joke; a festival symbolizing the defeat of Evil coming across at a time in which that Evil itself reigns!'

'I was listening to the news bulletin one day last week...

Sivan started with a sour smile and the other three looked at him expectantly.

They knew well how ritualistic Sivan was in listening to all the news bulletins in Tamil and English from Colombo and Madras, even when times were quiet. He had an innate interest in contemporary affairs around the world. When Ganesan mentioned something about this habit during a conversation the previous year, Sivan had replied with a laugh. 'Now we ourselves are living in the midst of news and have become the makers of news for which the whole world awaits eagerly!'

But that was something of the past. Of late, with no power supply for months and with the severe scarcity for torch cells, the Colombo broadcast was feeble and at times beyond comprehension especially when those cells are weaker. Sivan had had to restrict his use of the radio gradually and during the last few days he had limited it only to the noon Tamil

news from across the Palk Strait. This 12.40 bulletin was comparatively audible and clear with the faint voltage seeping from the two cells, probably replenished after being dried in the sunlight for a couple of hours a day. In this rainy season, with the sky remaining overcast for most of the time of the day, even this 'adventure' turned out to be impossible sometimes. He knew about people using bicycle dynamos for this purpose, but he did not have one.

Sivan continued. 'That was an announcement which followed immediately after the news, of course with their public interest in mind.' He then repeated the announcement with a laugh:

"Don't fire crackers along the roads and other public places and thus cause panic and inconvenience to fellow citizens. It's our responsibility not to make anybody scared, especially the small children'...!'

Ganesan, too, chuckled.

'Wasn't it two days back you told me their telling in this same newscast about a big shot there, slipped and fell in his bath room?'

The friends laughed sourly.

'Am I to presume that we are strictly following our great Tamil Saint Valluvar's advice, '*Idukkan varunkaal nakuha*,' - When thou meetest with misfortune face it with thy best smile?'

remarked Ganesan, half joking.

'Are they really telling all such things at a time like this?'

Chinna kicked a pebble in front of him angrily as he listened to his friends.

'You can't blame the ordinary people over there, because they have no way of knowing what's going on here,' continued Ganesan.

'Who is going to tell them about the real situation?'

Muthali, too, looked fed up.

'What happened at the hospital was really something inhumane,' he muttered.

'The people now say the initialism of the troop's name fits in nicely with their deeds here,' Ganesan ridiculed.

'It's really disheartening,' Sivan could not stop coming out with what he really felt, 'to see that they are punishing the very same helpless masses, who, anxiously awaited their arrival and warmly welcomed them with great hopes and anticipation!'

'And what a welcome it was, with garlands and the traditional ceremonial *nirai kudam* and *aarathi*! A welcome befitting only heroes and saviors!' Ganesan mocked.

'Do they really think that they'll be able to eliminate the rebels, this way?' asked Muthali after a while, as if talking to himself.

'Only fools will say thus!' Chinna laughed.

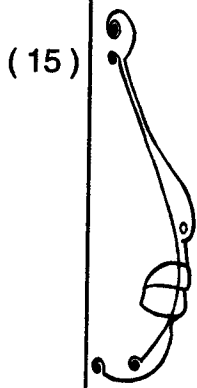
'But, on the contrary, they are earning the dissatisfaction of the masses in a big way, and going to help the rebels to win over more cadres!' He then continued after a pause.

'Even if they win this war and destroy all the rebels, the problem will not be over there, until those concerned can find a reasonable and lasting political solution to the festering crisis.'

They all realized the weightiness in Chinna's argument and none of them were able to speak.

A cricket started its shrill call from a jasmine bush close by.

#



'Ah! You're here Sivan? We have been looking for you in the front.' That voice brought him back from his reverie. Raju approached him.

'Logan has done the job. The lat is working properly now.'

'Great! Logan is really great,' Sivan got up. 'Come, let's have a look. That was really a big job and we all have to thank him for it.'

The lavatory indeed worked properly. Sivan and Raju poured a bucketful of water and watched. The water vanished down immediately with a gurgling sound.

'Fine,' smiled Sivan, 'come, we'll go and congratulate Logan.'

When they turned round, there was Jegan coming towards them with quick strides. 'What's wrong?' asked Raju. 'Nothing serious, but you come and see for yourself.' Jegan turned and walked ahead of them. What could it be? They wondered and followed him inquisitively. When they came to the verandah Jegan went up to a side from where they could not be noticed by those occupying Ratnam Master's house and pointed to something at a distance, 'look, there!'

On their left, and over the top of crotons, they saw a large herd of cattle at a distance, along the bend of the road! The animals were around a pool, their heads lowered.

'Do you see them? They are our cows, drinking the dirty rain water stagnating at the road side.' Jegan couldn't finish, his eyes filled with tears.

'The chaps must have set them free,' said Raju.

'That's something better than the animals remaining staked and dying of hunger.' Sivan sounded optimistic, 'and the more, with the passage of time, the hungry dogs, though they were domesticated, might also try to attack the cattle if they remain staked.'

His eyes were searching for their coffee-brown colored cow with patches of white on its flanks, and more eagerly for the cute little calf which resembled a deer.

'But, why is this?' Jegan controlled himself and went on. 'Why are they doing this? Why are they keeping us here in captivity and destroying our whole way of life?'

'They won't detain us long.' Sivan tried to console Jegan, though he himself doubted what he said.

'Another wise thing the chaps had done was to remove the ropes from the necks of the cattle, so they would not get entangled in any bush or fence while they moved. The animals are totally free,' observed Raju. But there was something else which made Sivan relieved; he spotted their cow and its calf while the herd started moving on.

*

Jegan felt his stomach churning. He had been to the toilet four times since the morning and fortunately no one had seen his going there repeatedly. He did not tell even his wife. Why I worry her, he thought. But he himself was worried now. What could be the reason for this? Had he consumed anything bad? No chance, what's there to eat after all except the *kanji* they had? It must be the water from the well and even the small children could tell that it was unsafe to drink any water without boiling, during rainy season... No, that could not be, because all the inmates had consumed the same water, in the same way during the previous five days and nothing had happened to any of them. Then what else could it be? How did this start? Am I going to cause an epidemic among all these unfortunate folks? He decided to consult Sellar *pariyariyar* the next morning, in a casual way. But now, to add woe to his worries, when he went to the latrine for the fifth time, just after dusk, it was still occupied and he saw somebody waiting outside.

'My wife's in,' came Vellai's voice.

'I'll come later,' said Jegan, moving away. And after another five minutes of agony, he approached that small building in the remote corner again. But even from a distance

he saw the faint flicker of a flame coming out of the fanlights. What was he to do? The urge was uncontrollable. He felt for the box of matches in the fold of his sarong and found it. Praying to God *Murukan* and chanting a *Thevaram* in his mind, he quickly walked past the well and walked further and further into the backyard of Kanthar's large compound, splitting the pervasive darkness. The shrill note of some unknown insect stopped abruptly on hearing his foot steps. By the time he reached the bottom of the compound, he felt relieved to some extent to find that his eyes had got used to the gloom and he was able to see clearly the silhouettes of trees around. Jegan almost ran and squatted behind a tree which looked like a small tamarind. And what a relief, O, God!

The stars already flickered in the isolated patches of the sky visible through the dense foliage. It is not going to rain tonight, he thought. What time could it be? May be seven? Better wait for another couple of minutes and then return instead of running once again to the latrine, Jegan thought. Kanthar or his heirs could have built another latrine for such a big house and a compound like these! Jegan got up and walked carefully, with a sense of guilt for not having the excreta buried. He should've brought a *mammoty* but that would've been impossible in that hurry. One of the stray dogs would see to it, he consoled himself.

Just then Jegan stumbled on a big stone, but somehow he managed to escape a fall. Then he happened to hear that low voice and his whole body shivered. Was that someone whispering? He stopped, holding his breath, without

knowing where and how to hide himself. Yes, no doubt, some people must be there. He heard two voices. May be those chaps?

Jegan almost felt like crying out but managed to control and listened carefully. One seemed a female voice, followed by another which sounded like that of a male. Were they talking or moaning? Had they too come there like him or-? Suddenly he felt as though he stepped on the waste he had just left uncovered! Who could it be? And that too at a time like this? The nausea he felt had immediately turned into great anger, though against whom, he couldn't tell.

Within seconds Jegan resumed walking. Composing himself, he tried to walk fast without making any noise. Shall I go and wait near the well side for them to come? Shall I tell Sivan or Thevar about this? Was it something real or was it a hallucination? Jegan was unable to come out of the confusion even after he had finished his ablutions. He walked towards the house.

*

Vanpar did not appear the following day, though all the inmates eagerly awaited his arrival to get his permission to go home and bring things again. The sky was cloudy since the morning. By ten they gave up their hopes and decided to begin their cooking with whatever was available from the previous day.

'If he comes and if we are allowed to go today then what we bring will be useful for tomorrow.' They all agreed with Essem.

The preparations started as on the previous day, everybody contributing whatever they could and it appeared that they all had forgotten their plight, at least temporarily.

'Suppose that man doesn't turn up, what are we going to do for the morrow? Are we to take rice again from the house owner?' Raju asked, while they were washing the cauldron at the well. He was scouring it with coconut fiber.

Before any one could answer, they heard the sudden crack of a gun shot, somewhere close by. There was a silence. They looked at each other in panic. They heard shouts in a foreign tongue. Sivan walked hurriedly towards the house, followed by Raju. Somebody was closing the front doors.

'Don't,' stopped Sivan, 'they might misunderstand us. We've to remain as we were. Just go in.'

While they were retreating into the *koodam*, they heard the outer gates being pushed open. Thevar got up and went upto the verandah, slowly. Sivan wanted to follow him, but he felt Suba pulling him back from behind. He stopped and tried to peep through the door. Some civilians appeared at the gate reluctantly. They were being forced in at gun point by a couple of *jawans*. Who could it be?

Vikky master, his wife and children...Kasi and his family!

What happened to these people? Where were they all these days?

The frightened group walked in timidly, towards the verandah. They were all in their everyday clothes and looked terribly shaken. The *jawans* watched them walking in from the gate and then left.

'Master,' Sivan stepped towards Vikky, the bristle haired, blinking man. The women in the group were weeping.

'Get in, please.' They climbed up.

'What happened to you? Where were you all these days?' asked Thevar. People from inside the house gathered around them, one by one.

'When did you all come here?' Vikky asked them in return without answering their questions. 'Was it they who brought you here?'

'We were in our homes. We didn't know what was taking place around us because we never came out. This morning these soldiers came to our houses, about half an hour ago ..., the dark skinned Kasi started telling.

'You'd better come in first.' Thevar turned and walked in front of them, 'better not to talk from here.'

'Please come in, you're going to stay with us. Aren't you?' Sivan made room for them to follow Thevar.

Vikky didn't move. 'Kala..., he said and stopped, his voice trembling. The women cried.

'Yes, where's Kala? And where's her child?' asked those in the camp, only then remembering that young woman.

'Come in and tell us,' Thevar pulled Vikky's hand.

Kasi again related the whole event.

'The soldiers came to my house and asked why we were remaining there without going to the camp. I innocently asked them what camp they were referring to and one of them slapped me! Then they took all of us to the lane and there we saw Vikky master's family already standing there...'

'They were terrible and threatened to kill us!' interrupted Kasi's wife, wiping her eyes and blowing nose. 'But it was not our fault, we didn't know about their order to come here. They must've missed the houses on our side, may be due to the intricate pattern of the lanes.'

Sivan at once thought of Luxmi and her children. If we get a chance to go out again somehow or other we must bring them here, he decided.

'What happened then?' Thevar asked.

'They chased us all out even without giving time to lock the doors. They repeatedly accused us that we had stayed back to provide food for the LTTE cadres...'

'And what happened to Kala?'

'Kala's husband went to see his parents at Tellippalai the previous week. He couldn't return on time due to the long curfew lasting for days and she had to stay all alone with her child at her cousin Vikky's house, just in front of ours.'

'When these chaps came today she was washing her clothes by the well,' said Vikky. 'They didn't even allow her to take the sleeping child from the cot!'

'She begged and argued, but to no avail. They almost tossed her out without paying any heed. When I went to explain the matter, one of them took his gun and fired a shot up in the sky, as a warning. We had to come running out,' wept Vikky, 'leaving Kala who didn't want to budge!'

The people remained speechless.

'Haven't you heard of the stories about women, nowadays?' someone said hesitantly.

'Don't worry, nothing will happen,' Thevar tried to calm them and turned to Sivan. 'Why not we go and speak to those men?'

Sivan went up to Suba. 'Only up to the gate,' he begged. She looked deeply into his eyes and nodded gently, though her face remained dark.

When Thevar and Sivan set out, Vikky and Kasi also followed them. The moment they stepped out of the gate, to their sheer surprise and relief, they saw Kala coming towards the camp with her child and being escorted by two soldiers. Sivan and others retreated quietly and climbed up the stairs again. Everybody in the verandah looked at them in surprise.

'Why?' Essem asked, 'why have you returned?'

'Kala and child have come.' Sivan signaled the people to go back into the *koodam*.

Kala climbed up the stairs her blue dress not yet fully dry, still bewildered and hugging her child tightly. Her hair was disheveled and strewn across the face. The child had only a panty on and was staring at everybody without knowing what was taking place. One of the soldiers who looked like a petty officer was grave.

'Who is she?' He demanded those in the verandah in a harsh tone, as if to verify.

'She's my cousin,' Vikky came forward.

The man screwed up his eyes. 'Don't lie to me. She looks like a jungle-trained cadre!'

What fools are they, thought Sivan. What had made him think that way?

Perhaps her wiry and frail build and her dark sun-tanned skin had led them to assume that she was a cadre?

'No,' objected Vikky, 'she is a house wife.'

'The girl is in the government service, working as a clerk,' Thevar came forward, 'she is one of us.'

The man frowned at them all for a while, waited for another moment and then climbed down the stairs silently and went past the gate, followed by his sub-ordinate.

*

The cooking went on mechanically. The deceptively relaxed mood which prevailed in the morning was lost. Vikky master's wife and Kasi's wife were still weeping even when they were asked to eat. 'We couldn't bring a red cent or anything. All the money and jewelry is at home with the doors wide open.'

Kala seemed better now, apparently relieved as she had succeeded in bringing her child safely with her. 'That's more than enough for me,' she heaved a long sigh.

'And she had locked her house already, you know?'

A female voice was heard murmuring somewhere nearby.

'No need to worry. There won't be any thieves tonight!'

'Ha!' laughed somebody from across the courtyard, 'What about those chaps themselves?' He asked in a very low voice. They went on eating in silence.

'None of the people have eaten enough,' Mani was later heard complaining from the fireplace, 'a lot of food has been left behind even from the meager amount we prepared. That's not good in these difficult days.'

*

Vikky's wife accompanied Kala when she went to the backyard and asked gently. 'Kala, can you fetch me a bucket of water from the well?'

'Of course *machchal*,' Kala readily agreed, 'come, let's go there.'

Vikky's wife was relieved to see nobody else near the well and when Kala had finished draining the water, she went close to her and whispered, 'wait Kala, I want to ask you something...'

Kala was puzzled. 'What's it *machchal*? Ask me,' she managed to say.

The older woman went still closer and after making sure there was no one around, came to the matter bluntly. 'Tell me the truth child, had anything happened there?'

Kala was really upset now. 'Where? What?'

'Did anything unpleasant take place when you were alone in the house? Those men are nasty...'

'No!' screeched Kala, 'how could you ever imagine such a thing?' Her sobs prevented her from speaking further.

'Hush,' Vikky's wife silenced her. 'Please, don't cry. I just wanted to ask.'

'You think that I would be alive by now if such a thing had happened?' Kala's eyes turned fiery. 'I would've jumped into this well as soon as I returned! What made you think such nasty things?'

Vikky's wife didn't know what to say.

'I swear by the name of our Almighty *Amman*, **nothing** happened!' Kala cried.

'No, no, child,' Vikky's wife was really shaken now. 'I'm sorry. Excuse me for asking such a stupid question. I thought it was my duty to show my concern.'

Kala went on crying, her face turned away. Vikky's wife went and touched her.

'I beg you to forgive me. Please forget about it. There's somebody coming this way. Wash your face and get back soon.'

#

(16)



Somebody tapped gently on his shoulder and Sivan, who was hanging his rinsed shirt on the clothes line, turned. It was Navam, standing behind him. Navam's face was grave and he gestured towards the front verandah as if asking Sivan to go there.

'What?' Sivan couldn't understand, 'anybody looking for me?'

'Yes,' said Navam and then remarked disdainfully.

'Who else would visit us at this place *thambi*?'

'You mean our front door people?' asked Sivan in a lighter vein.

Navam nodded, 'yes, urgent they said.'

'What's the matter? Is Thevar uncle there?' Sivan wiped his hands in the towel. 'I was about to take a bath. But it's alright, come, let's see.' He flung the towel across his shoulders and walked in front. Navam followed.

Unable to decide whether to tell Suba about this call or not, Sivan walked round the house towards the front yard.

It was B.C.D. Singh himself standing there, his face turned towards the gate. A small group of his soldiers were in front.

Neither Thevar nor Essem was to be seen. Only a handful of people were looking surreptitiously at what was going on from behind the front door. The others must be down somewhere inside, dozing. When Sivan got closer, he saw someone in the middle of the group of *jawans*, apparently being questioned.

'Come here,' the officer called Sivan impolitely, with that piercing look of his through the glasses. 'Ask who he is.'

Sivan went near and the others gave way. In the middle was a youngster, a tall fellow. Could be in his early twenties and he was obviously exhausted, even finding it difficult to stand. He was in fear and agony. He had only a brown-colored sarong round his waist and the ebony looking bare body above, revealed long bruises. A crumpled dirty white shirt was in his hand and the sharp-featured face under the disheveled hair appeared swollen. He must be an innocent villager, a farmhand, perhaps, Sivan guessed at once. But he was not a man of the area. Who was he and how did he get caught?

'Ask who he is,' prodded B.C.D. Singh who was in front of them both now. Sivan repeated the question in Tamil.

'I am a toddy tapper, sir,' he replied in a feeble voice. Sivan translated and the Captain listened with a sarcastic smile playing gently on his lips.

'Ask for his name and village.'

'Muthu, from Puthuveli, the next village,' he pointed towards the North raising his left hand slightly.

He then took out his national identity card from within the rolled up shirt and extended it with a shivering hand.

'Hell with that, he is always showing that! Anyone can get one like this,' shouted the Captain. 'Ask him why he came here, then?'

The unfortunate man's story was a bit long. Though he is from Puthuveli, Muthu's sister is married to a cousin of theirs from Sempaadu, a sector of this village. Muthu visited her the previous week but was unable to get back home because of the prevailing conditions.

He was worried about his helpless old parents at Puthuveli and their anxiety of not seeing their son back.

Every time Muthu attempted to set out, he was stopped by his sister and her family.

But today he was given permission half-heartedly, because the father of his brother-in-law had gone missing since the morning of the previous day. The son was highly worried and wanted to find out if the old man, who is also Muthu's maternal uncle, had gone to his sister's at Puthuveli. So, Muthu left this morning homewards and the journey would have only taken half an hour on his old rickety bicycle.

But it was his bad luck that he was spotted by one of these soldiers while crossing the road near the school.

'Wasn't he aware of the curfew? Ask him.' B.C.D.Singh shouted.

'Yes sir. That was wrong of me. I had hoped to go along the bye-lanes, avoiding the roads. Tell them to pardon me, please.' The youngster wept again.

'Ok, let's accept that part of his story. Here comes the most important question and let him answer that,' smiled the officer. 'Ask him to show both his hands.'

Muthu stretched his hands, unable to wipe the tear rolling down his cheeks. The flanks below both the elbows were severely calloused and were darker.

'Do we need any other evidence to prove that he is a fully trained cadre of the rebels? Aren't these marks the outcome of his guerilla training?'

Sivan found it hard to control his laugh, but managed to question Muthu.

'They are asking me this again and again, *Aiya*, and not prepared to believe me,' Muthu now directly started pleaded with Sivan.

'Please tell them. I'm a toddy tapper and climb ten or twelve palmyrah trees a day in the mornings and in the afternoons. These marks are the results of those daily tasks.'

'What's he trying to tell you?'

Sivan explained.

'Are you trying to protect him?'

The officer's anger was now turned towards Sivan, 'you know the consequences?'

Essem's voice was heard somewhere close by. 'Excuse me,' the retired Station Master stepped forward.

'What they both tell you is true, sir,' the old man told humbly, 'the tappers' hands are like that.'

'Damn you all, the same cursed lot,' B.C.D.Singh stamped his foot, apparently baffled.

'Sir, if you don't mind,' Sivan started with utmost politeness as if begging; 'shall we ask him to show you the way he climbs trees?'

The officer, biting his lips, scrutinized them all for a couple of seconds.

'How and where are you going to demonstrate it?' He asked with a sneer.

'There,' Sivan showed a palmyrah tree standing by the roadside, beyond a bare and lonely electric pole, not far away from the gate.

*

Muthu moaned heavily, and others were unable to tell whether he was making those sounds in his slumber or in pain. The young man was rolling on the rear veranda on a torn mat that Mani managed to get for him from the storeroom. He collapsed even before gulping down two mouthfuls of *kanji*. All were scared.

'Not to worry,' Sellar calmed them after checking his pulse. 'He is alright. The man only needs some rest, let's not disturb him.'

Navam thought of how Muthu had turned towards the direction of Amman Temple and bowed, clasping both his palms in prayer, the moment B.C.D.Singh allowed him to go. He whimpered '*Thaayae*,' and crumbled down in front of them. They had to carry him inside.

'Thank you, sir,' Essem and Sivan went and thanked the officer. B.C.D.Singh walked away without a word and the *jawans* followed him.

'A pity he got caught like this,' Navam remarked afterwards.

'No, you've to say he is fortunate because they've spared him with this much! Haven't you heard about the real unfortunate ones these days?' Essem corrected him.

'Sellar had given him a fomentation of medicinal leaves and herbs available in the compound and mixing them with hot ash,' said Thevar with approval.

Sivan remembered how his mother, unable to witness the sufferings of Muthu, had come forward and offered him the pills of *panadol*, the pain-killer, which she was carrying as a treasured possession in those days.

'Now his problem is over but what of his people?' Mani began telling something and Naagu interrupted, "over for the time being, you have to say!"

And the miller went on, 'we ourselves don't know what's going to happen to us in this place!'

There was silence and then they heard Thevar's angry voice, 'I had asked you all not to talk in such a way. Why not think positively? Think of good things and good will always happen.'

'Sorry, *aiya*,' murmured Naagu.

*

'Everybody says that we gained independence in nineteen forty eight,' Naagu was talking to someone.

'But what did we gain in the forty years that followed, except losing everything and now being made virtual refugees in our own village? Who is to be blamed for all these?'

There was a sudden rush of cold wind and the sky darkened quickly, turning the after-noon look like dusk.

Sivan felt an urge to talk to his wife but wondered how to begin. They were both together in the *koodam*. He saw Suba seated just in front of him, her head bent. She was folding some clothes and arranging them in the bag. Mother was snoring faintly during her afternoon nap, her hands round her grandchild, who too was fast asleep. Ravi was busy in the inner yard, helping those washing the cooking utensils. Nobody else was around.

Sivan wanted to tell Suba a lot - explain things. But he hesitated, anticipating any harsh retorts from his wife. He cleared his throat and started, 'I...'

'It's okay,' she looked up, and in a quiet voice she said, 'I know your nature. Kala's plight, too, is very pathetic... But...'

He looked at her unbelievably, and she continued, 'be careful in all matters. Try not to poke your nose into everything. You're not a child.' Her voice was calm as if dismissing the whole matter. Doesn't she approve what I do, wondered Sivan.

'Don't worry,' he assured her, 'I'll try not to get involved hereafter and be more careful.'

He smiled apologetically.

It was warm, dark and quiet, everywhere.

'I want to see Ravi,' Sivan got up and walked away.

Ravi and Raju were busy stacking the dry firewood, with the help of some other boys, in Mani's shed.

'It'll rain any moment,' said Raju, 'and we've to save the fire wood from getting wet.'

'Even cooking may be a problem, if there were heavy showers in the days to come.' Jegan came up to them, 'why not think about putting up a lean-to shed with *cadjans*?'

'It seems a lot of people are becoming fond of this place and want to stay here,' Essem teased Jegan.

They heard Naagu's loud voice coming from the back door. 'Sivan, Thevar *maamaa* is calling you.' They saw the big-built man rushing towards them.

'Why are you so excited?' Raju asked, 'what's the urgency?'

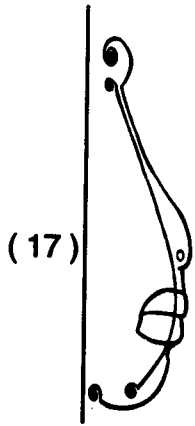
'They've come,' said Naagu, panting, 'the officer, that big man!'

'You're the only big man we know,' Raju taunted him.

'*Madaya*, this is not the time for you to crack your silly jokes,' Naagu retorted half seriously and turned towards Sivan who asked him, 'the one staying in front at Ratnam Master's house?'

'No. Not that dreadful fellow, but the other one, who allowed us to go and bring things. The black uniformed officer, that good sort of a man!'

#



Vanpar was in the inner courtyard talking to Thevar. There were about five or six *jawans* behind him.

'Good afternoon, sir,' Sivan went up to him. Vanpar accepted the greeting with a nod and remained silent for a moment. His dark eyes scanned the people crowded around the four wings of the house. He is not happy as he was yesterday, realized Sivan. Vanpar stared at him. 'I want to address your people,' he said quietly, 'and you are going to translate what I say. Ask everybody to come here, at once.'

What could it be, Sivan wondered and turned towards Mani who was standing beside him. 'Tell all the people to come here, without delay.'

Thevar stared deep into Sivan's eyes. 'They want us to tell them about the presence of the LTTE in this area.' He said this in English for the benefit of the officer, realized Sivan.

'Only if there are any,' Sivan too replied in the same manner, smiling dejectedly.

'Surely there must be,' the officer's voice was determined. 'I want to ask all the folks here.'

The people started coming in, obviously upset. 'Ask them to sit in an orderly manner.'

Sivan explained the Captain's orders.

Vanpar went up to the centre of the court and his escorts stood guarding each door.

The people looked at them nervously. The mood was turning tense, fear apparent in most faces.

Once old Nanniyar managed to check his cough; a child started crying and its mother tried to calm it.

'You,' Vanpar beckoned at Sivan, 'get closer.'

Aware of Suba's penetrating eyes from among the crowd, Sivan went and stood up by the Captain.

There was a pin drop silence.

'*Achcha*, you all must be aware that we have come here to help you ...,' Vanpar straight away started and turned towards Sivan. Sivan translated.

'But, the LTTE is obstructing us and giving us lots of trouble. That is very ungrateful...

'And we have no other way but to stop them from harassing us...

'They are your boys and girls and you must surely know them...'

The people listened carefully, looking first at Vanpar and then at Sivan.

'Who are they, where do they stay, how do they move around, and the like...

'It is your duty to tell us what you know and help us to make your life safe and peaceful...

'If you try to hide anything from us, then, I'm sorry, we've no other alternative but to consider that as an act against us and take stern action.'

The people were aghast.

The silence was disturbed by a sudden drizzle. Vanpar and Sivan had to get into the house.

'Why are they silent?' The officer asked, brushing away the rain drops from his uniform.

'They know nothing, sir.'

'You can't reply on their behalf,' the voice was stern. 'Ask them!'

Sivan had to shout, as it was raining heavily, the water rushing down the roof through the gutter pipes and there forming a stream in the courtyard, and flowing towards the outlet drain. There was a heavy wind and the water splashed into the house.

'We know nothing, sir,' Raju's voice came uneasily and he was followed by others.

Sivan translated them for the Captain:

'We don't know anything.'

'Nobody joined them from this village.'

'We haven't seen any of them for months.'

Sivan rendered them into English.

Vanpar was standing erect, his hands on his hip, head cocked towards each person answering. The eyes turned intense towards each face in front.

There fell a silence again.

The rain, too, seemed to have stopped, suddenly.

'Is that all you've got to tell?' Vanpar's voice was harsh. No one replied.

'We have come here to help you and none of you have ever bothered to understand that fact,' he ran over his eyes over the people in front.

Sivan was wondering whether to translate it or not. With his hands across his chest and with a bent head he stood staring at the ground, trying hard to wear a polite smile.

A new *jawan*, probably from the camp in front, appeared at the eastern door, stood at attention and saluted the officer. Vanpar beckoned and the *jawan* went up to him and told something, saluted again and turned and strode away briskly.

'Listen,' the officer then looked at the crowd in front and announced sternly. 'I'll give you all some time to think, a night, a whole night. And when we come here again tomorrow morning, you must confess what you know. That'll be good for all. That's all what I can say.'

Vanpar then turned round and followed by his soldiers walked away with long strides, an exhausted and beaten figure. Sivan felt sorry for the Captain.

Is Vanpar, too, a helpless victim like us, in this whirlpool of events, though he is from the opposite camp?

Does his heart, within that uniform, fill with agonies and feel for us?

'You Sri Lankans!' Sivan could clearly hear Vanpar while leaving, his voice full of pity and helplessness.

Sri Lankan!

An identity long forgotten! An identity long denied to them, by all concerned!

Yes, whatever differences there are, in the eyes of the foreigner we are all Sri Lankans!

For a long time afterwards Sivan wondered about the complex feeling he had when that officer called them Sri Lankans.

#

(18)



The frogs started croaking from a puddle of rain water stagnating somewhere nearby. It seemed a non-ending chorus accompanied by the humming sounds of nocturnal insects.

'Have you noticed the officer saying that they had come here to help us?'

Essem came up to him.

'Everybody claims that they are fighting for our sake and trying to safeguard us, but the irony is that we don't know how to escape from these saviors!' Jegan who was there, replied.

Sivan did not know what to say and just grunted. It appears that these people had come here in a hurry, totally unprepared, not clear of the aim of their mission and even without a proper idea...

The thought suddenly reminded him of what a colleague had told him during the time of the arrival of

these forces. 'You know, a petty officer told me the other day that they had come here not to leave but to add two new states to their country!'

Had their political system pushed them too, into a dilemma, apart from making us suffer? Did they have any definite aim when they launched this operation?

Whether they win or lose in this battle, this mission is bound to be a failure, a political setback.

Sivan thought about what Essem had told on the night they came to this camp.

'Each of them may be correct and everyone may have his own valid reasons...'

It looks that even if the intentions are good, people are liable to make wrong decisions at critical times...

Sivan then thought of what Muthali had called the historical blunder. A certain misunderstanding between the two sides is costing us, the people, much agony and hardship beyond words...

Who is to be blamed?

The chain of thought seemed endless.

'The radio broadcast says that both parties have agreed to a ceasefire the following Saturday,' Jegan's voice came first and then his figure emerged from the semi darkness. Sivan saw him coming towards them carrying carefully the radio in one hand and the pack of cells in the other.

'Who?' Naagu asked.

'Who else could it be, other than the LTTE and IPKF?'

'Let's listen, first!' Ravi pointed to the radio and hushed them.

'A ceasefire has been agreed on for forty eight hours from 7am on Saturday, the 21st of November, to have some discussions.' That was the essence of the broadcast.

'Do you think anyone in Jaffna will believe such con?' They heard Navam's dejected laughter, 'and if they meet, then let them first ask for each others whereabouts, instead of harassing us, and let us return home. Why torture the innocent civilians like this?'

No one spoke and each remained engrossed in his own thoughts.

*

The sudden sound of firing awakened all those who were fast asleep. It must be nearing midnight and the gun shots sounded so close they were all terrified. The rattling went on non stop.

What's going on? Is there a confrontation in front of this house? What's going to happen to us all? The inmates were horror-stricken. Children started screaming and yet the mothers themselves were too weak to quieten them. The people couldn't even speak to each other.

And what was there to speak of? Who knew anything worth telling? It was a shock, a real nightmare...

Sivan gently touched his daughter. Luckily, she was still fast asleep. He spread his palm over the little chest as if trying to protect her.

Suba heaved a long sigh and Valli *Aachi's* prayer drifted faintly from the dark of the inner wing, chanting *Thevarams* in a muffled tone. The frail old voice seemed to quiver more in fear and anxiety.

Suddenly it dawned on Sivan: The shooting was from one side only! There was no return fire! Who is firing at whom? Are the 'boys' attacking the *jawans* or have the soldiers spotted any movement in this vicinity?

Then an abrupt burst just above their roof made them all shiver. It was like a big fire cracker exploding.

Next came that thud from the front verandah followed by the tinkling noise of broken glass pieces falling on the cement floor.

A deadly silence followed for a while.

'They are shooting at the house,' Sivan murmured to Suba.

'Are they going to kill us all here, like what happened in... ' the sobs prevented her from speaking further.

'Oh, don't think so,' Sivan gently stroked her hand. 'They're trying to frighten us I guess; a desperate attempt to wrench out any information!'

He got up and she stopped him.

'I'm not going anywhere,' he protested and raising his voice a little, asked nobody in particular, 'is any body out over there, in the verandah?'

'No,' Essem's voice came from somewhere in the dark. 'Nobody out there tonight, all are sleeping indoors fearing the cold and the rains.'

Then everything turned silent, and remained quiet as on any other ordinary rainy night. But all the people were terror-stricken and seated frozen. They couldn't have a wink of sleep till dawn, their nerves taut and finding it difficult even to lie down. Intermittently, there came one or two muffled weeping sounds from the darkness.

*

Even after the first light, none of them dared to go to the front verandah for a long time. And finally, when Thevar went out with Essem, they saw the scattered pieces of broken glass shining on the floor. Naagu, who had followed them, pointed agitatedly.

'Look there, *maamaa!*'

Thevar looked up.

Mahatma Gandhi's picture was hanging awkwardly from high above the wall in a tilted position, a hole in the right top corner, its frame broken and sans glass.

The child-like, magnetic smile was there, still unaffected.

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Glossary of Tamil Words

Aachi	:Grand mother
Aandavaa!	:O, God!
Aiya	:Sir
Akka	:Elder Sister
Amma	:Mother
Amman	:Goddess
Annai (or Anna)	:Elder Brother
Cholakam	:SW Monsoonal Wind
Chunnam	:Lime
Gopuram	:Temple Tower
Koda	:A special additive to improve the flavor of Cheroot
Kovil	:Temple
Maamaa	:Uncle
Maami	:Aunty
Machchal	:Sister-in-law
Machchan	:(Literally, Brother-in-law or cousin) Way of addressing an intimate friend
Madaya!	:Fool!
Mammoty (Manvetty)	:Local Pick-axe
Nantri	:Thanks
Nirai kudam and Aarathi	:A Grand, Traditional welcome
Panthal	:Canopy
Pariyariyar	:Native Physician
Pongal	:Offering of Cooked Milkrice to God

Raasaa

:(Literally, King)

Fond way of addressing
a male, especially a
Younger one

Sombu

:Jug

Thaayae!

:O, Mother Goddess!

Thambi

:Younger Brother

Thangachi

:Younger Sister

Thevaram

:Hymn

Thinnai

:Dais

Verty

:Traditional white Long Cloth
tied on waist.





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