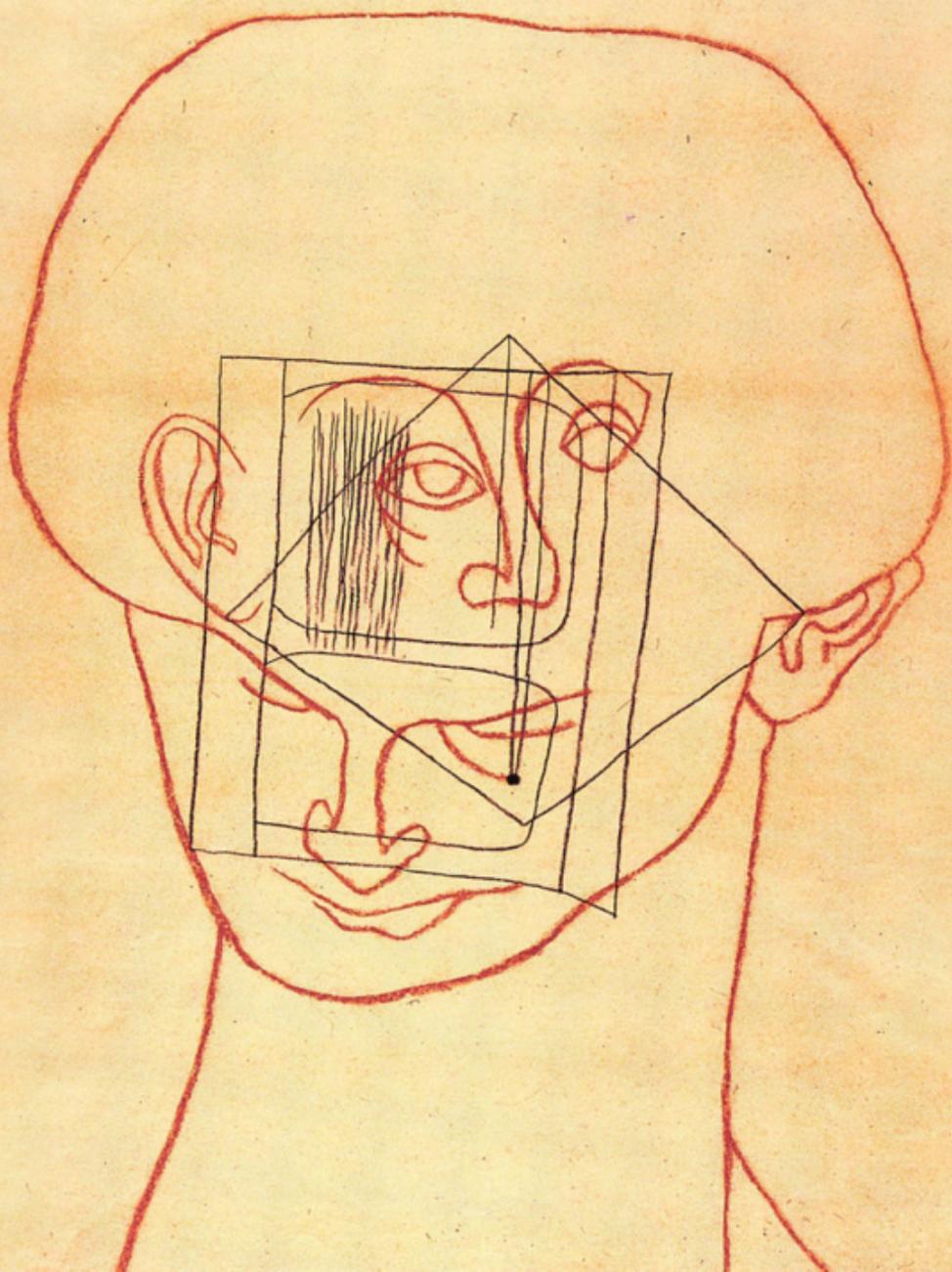


The Girl Who Loved the Engine Driver

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Translation: E. Madhavan



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(English: Novel)

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The Girl Who Loved the Engine Driver

A note by the translator:

This translation of the novel, 'Engine Drivare Snehicha Penkuty' could not be completed while the author was alive. He had seen the draft and perhaps felt that it needed a deft editing. Although some improvements could be made since, translator is not sure if this version has done justice to the original novel which is written in a unique style exemplifying the novelist's empathy and affection towards working girls and his elevated sense of humour. The novelist has dealt with a very serious social issue of dowry riding on an interesting plot with astute characterization and humour. The humour is as much fascinating as it is subtle, at times reminding the Italian writer Giovannino Guareschi. It was a challenging task even to bring out a shade of that humour in the translation. The gloom of the translator's failure in this effort was somewhat alleviated by his brother E. Asoka Kumar who helped to improve the quality of translation, especially the nuances by careful editing.

Day One

The push-pull train from north arrived half an hour late and lugged itself along the Number 3 platform of the railway station and halted with a jolt. Nancy was imagining the type of day that lay ahead while she was involuntarily lifted by the milling crowd which was rushing up the stairs of the foot-over bridge leading to Number 1 platform. It was a new day, but merely as new as an old tattered dress after a wash, like in the advertisement of the washing powder! Jesus, you need not have betrayed me like this! As her struggle to float—like a log in the floods—ended, she had to balance herself on two legs to avoid a fall while stepping on the broken floor of the Number 1 Platform. Meanwhile, while she was crossing the crowded bridge, almost floating across, she had to jab, with her safety pin, the proprietor of the probing fingers as they were taking too much liberty with her. Avoiding the face of the humiliated offender who squirmed, “aah...” with pain, she came out of the railway station.

So far, so good, what next? Nancy wondered. The horde of passengers from the vast expanse in front of the station flows into the road and forms a river of humanity which starts flowing. By the time it reaches Jose Junction, people depart taking either the street to the south or the one toward north. In this city where bus stops are known by the names of cinema theatres, Deepa is in south and Shenoy's in north. She has to head towards south.

As she was about to cross the road, the policeman on duty stopped the vehicles, smiling at her as usual. This is a daily routine. On seeing her, he would first beam at her and would stop vehicles with a hand gesture to let her cross the road—only for her. He would signal the traffic to move on, to the disappointment of the elderly women who come rushing after her. ‘Silly fellow!’ she would murmur as she walked past smiling.

Opening the glass door, she entered the shop. Malathy had already started work sitting in front of her computer. Bhaskaran Sir was working on her computer. When he saw Nancy, he threw a deliberate look at his watch.

After placing her bag on the floor, she stood behind her boss looking at the monitor—Looks like a new job order is received.

‘Is it a new job?’

Busy importing a graphic from Clipart, he did not respond.

‘Sir, please get up, I will do that.’ Again, there was no response, except that with a hand wave he signaled her to wait.

‘I don’t like it a bit sir, you looking at your watch when I arrive a bit late,’ she said.

‘But I didn’t say anything.’

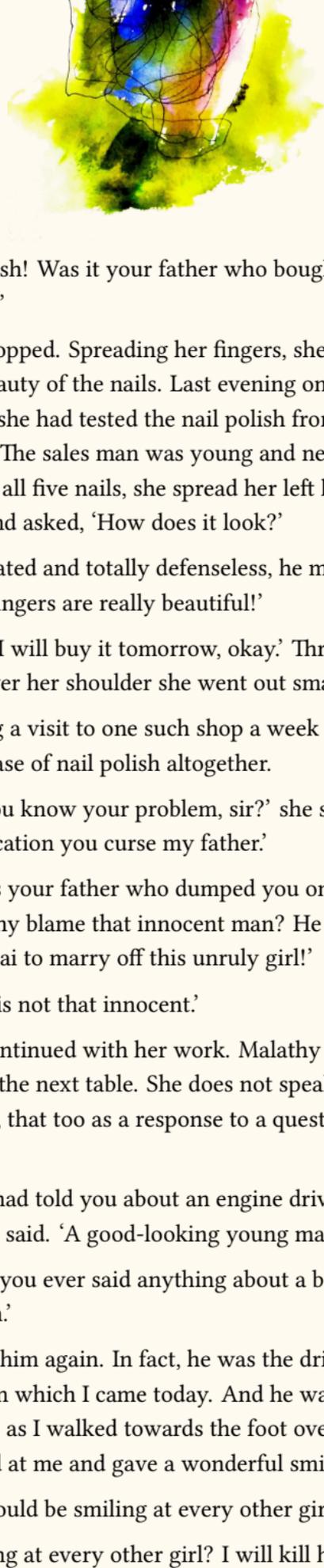
‘Sir, you don’t have to spell it out! What can I do if trains run late?’

By now, the graphic had been imported to the required file. He gave instructions as to how to proceed. He told her that the work is to be completed before evening. Customer will be here to collect the finished work by 4 o’clock.

She sat in front of the computer and started to work. ‘You will spoil my keyboard with those long nails.’

He said, looking at Nancy’s long polished nails in red.

‘Then we will buy a new keyboard...’



‘Rubbish! Was it your father who bought this keyboard!’

She stopped. Spreading her fingers, she appreciated the beauty of the nails. Last evening on her way home she had tested the nail polish from a Ladies Store. The sales man was young and new. After polishing all five nails, she spread her left hand before him and asked, ‘How does it look?’

Infatuated and totally defenseless, he mumbled, ‘Baby, your fingers are really beautiful!’

‘Then I will buy it tomorrow, okay.’ Throwing the bag over her shoulder she went out smartly.

Paying a visit to one such shop a week could save purchase of nail polish altogether.

‘Do you know your problem, sir?’ she said, ‘With no provocation you curse my father.’

‘It was your father who dumped you on me, isn’t it? But why blame that innocent man? He is toiling in Mumbai to marry off this unruly girl!’

‘Papa is not that innocent.’

She continued with her work. Malathy was working at the next table. She does not speak. Only a few words, that too as a response to a question posed to her.

‘Sir, I had told you about an engine driver, didn’t I?’ Nancy said. ‘A good-looking young man.’

‘Have you ever said anything about a bad-looking person.’

‘I saw him again. In fact, he was the driver of the train in which I came today. And he was waiting for me as I walked towards the foot over bridge. He looked at me and gave a wonderful smile.’

‘He would be smiling at every other girl.’

‘Smiling at every other girl? I will kill him, silly fellow!’

Malathy laughed but Bhaskaran Nair did not. Stroking the grey hairs nearing extinction on his bald head he said, ‘If you don’t complete the work in three hours’ time, it will be my turn to kill you. Customer wants to give it to the press this evening.’

‘Sir, if you threaten me like this, I will have to go in search of another job.’

‘Am I so blessed to be rid of you?’ Bhaskaran Nair asked.

Anyway, out of concern for her own life, she started working.

Bhaskaran Nair went inside the glass chamber built in the corner of the shop. That chamber was built recently. Malathy says that it is to escape from Nancy. No irksome noises reach inside.

Bhaskaran Nair started this business only because he found it difficult to remain at home. His wife is always nagging. She gets upset almost about anything and everything. A delayed phone call from their son or daughter-in-law living in US is enough to make Nalini upset. Naturally, his peace of mind is also lost. After receiving her daughter’s letter from Chennai, she would be listing out her hardships. Housemaid has stopped coming; elder son studying in second standard is getting low marks... so on and so forth. Never ending worries. A daughter to send letters full of complaints and a mother to dance to her tunes. It is better to come and sit here peacefully, instead of listening to those silly chats. Two nice girls. Both of them work hard. Malathy speaks less. But that void is taken care of by Nancy. Time passes for him listening to her witty talk. The shop generates just enough funds to pay the rent and the salaries for the two. That’s all. But, is that not enough?

Nancy says it is not enough. She says they should purchase two more computers and appoint two smart young boys as type setters. What good is an office without smart boys!

Bhaskaran Nair promptly senses Nancy’s intentions. However, he appreciates her alacrity to improve his business. He asks, ‘We really require two boys, do we?’

‘Naturally; here we are two girls.’

‘I can appoint one. And I am here as the second man.’

‘Sir...’ she was hesitant. Then looking at Bhaskaran Nair’s balding head and sagging face she said,

‘That’s Malathy’s choice.’

He laughed out aloud.

Day Two

Morning.

Nancy woke up with the foreboding of yet another day dropping heavily upon her. Oh God, was that really necessary, just an ordinary day? What I am to do with it! Have to get up, brush teeth and take a shower, she thought (though bathing is limited to body wash). She washes her hair in the evening. If you wet your hair in the morning, it is difficult to get it dry. Elder sister has a dryer. Her husband brought it last time when he came on leave from Dubai. Sister considers it a precious treasure, so has kept it in the almirah without using. Nancy got ready and sat at the dining table. There was Puttu and Kadala for breakfast... Puttu and Kadala! Oh God, you must nudge my sister's mind, so some day she prepares something more palatable!

Hanging the leather bag with golden colored buckles over her shoulder, she opened the door. She embraced Nelson who was sitting on his knees with an expectant face and brought him towards her. His face was smeared with ice cream. She searched his face for a spot to plant her kiss. There was not an inch left!

'Chechi¹, why do you give ice cream to this child in the early morning itself?'

1. Elder sister.

'Come on, you think he needs my help?'

True. Nelson opens the fridge, gets one or two tins, places one above the other and standing on them reaches for the heaven, the freezer. Thereafter, he digs into the ice cream with his hands.

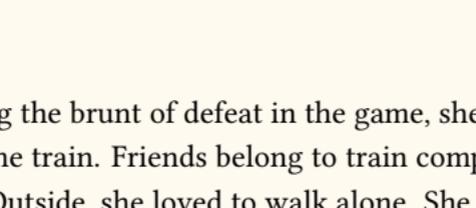
'How am I to kiss this guy?'

Stopping the futile search, she blew a perfunctory kiss at his face and went out of the house.

She saw a train coming as she entered the platform. Maybe a late running one. Shall board it. Chances are that by the time it reaches Always, she would get a vacant seat. Then she dismissed that thought. Let the regular push-pull train come. That provides something to look forward to; something she had been missing for the past three months. Maybe be just a glance, but that would be enough to make her day.

Push-pull lugged along the platform with vigor. Returning the smile which flew out from the engine room, she hurriedly boarded the next compartment. As she ensconced herself into the seat that her gang keeps reserved for her, she thought: I have once again entered the garden of love that exudes the finest of fragrance. She felt proud in bringing out such intense words from within. Deleting temporarily from her mind the handsome face in the engine room, she started chatting with her friends. When the train started moving, they resumed playing Anthakshari from where they had stopped. It is always like that. They stop the game when the train halts at a station and resumes from where they stopped as it starts rolling. Its exactitude has surprised her. Never ever has anyone forgotten the line where they stopped or never ever did anyone fail to continue. They manage the one or two minutes of boredom during the stopover at a station by filling the temporary folders of their minds with songs they retrieve from memory. Thus, as they leave behind each station, they roar like a vehicle with a tank full of petrol.

Nancy knows pretty well that she is no match for them. It is not that she does not like songs, but fails to remember them. More important things occupy her mind. Needs to find out the reason as to why this man who was seen for two days continuously has disappeared the third day. Needs to fill the gap that may arise if the handsome boy at the lady's fancy store suddenly disappeared after landing into a better job. With these preoccupations, it is difficult to memorize songs. She watches movies to know the latest fashions in churidars and ornaments and also to see the heroes. Songs never had much of an impact on her.



Bearing the brunt of defeat in the game, she got down from the train. Friends belong to train compartments only. Outside, she loved to walk alone. She never allowed anyone to intrude on her privacy. Her privacy resided right at the middle of the street... that's a different aspect indeed! Instead of taking the foot-over bridge, she walked along the length of the train towards the engine. The driver is smiling. There is query in his look; "why was she crossing the railway track instead of using the foot over bridge?" She too had questions; where was he for the last three months. When unasked questions brewed irritation inside, she got angry. Without responding, she turned her head and started crossing the railway track. Ultimately what she was left with was the hazardous exercise of climbing across two trains which were standing on the tracks. Noting this loss in the day's profit and loss account she climbed over to the Number 1 Platform.

Malathy was already there in front of her computer. The spot light in the cabin from above gave the illusion of a Nilavilakku² lit on the bald head of Bhaskaran Nair sitting there. Her first instinct was to go in and stand with folded hands to pray, as if in front of the sanctum sanitorium. She used to visit a nearby temple just as she visited her church. Her chechi used to rebuke her for that. 'Visiting temples etc. is not appropriate for our religion. We have to keep our faith and they have to keep theirs'. But Nancy thought much above that. She was not sure whether God existed or not. When one sees certain things, one concludes that there is no God like, not getting tickets for a Mohanlal movie which you badly wished to watch. Or like the boss returning just at the moment when the boy with whom you were chatting over phone in boss's absence was about to say that he loved her. When such tragedies occur, she would feel that there was no God. Still she did not want to take a chance. No problem if there is no God, but what if He exists? Then in every probability, He will be there in the temple as much as He is in the church. Foreseeing this possibility, she started going to the temple as well. Moreover, she liked to see the semi naked body of the young handsome priest in the temple, fair and with hair on his broad chest. She would compare this with the fully covered figure of the pastor in the church. Pastor is also young and handsome. But the difference in costume gave extra credit to the priest in the temple. While handing over prasadam the young priest's eyes roved over her body in sheer adoration which made her feel awkward and she did the same to the priest making him also feel embarrassed. As she came out of the temple, profit and loss would have balanced.

2. Traditional oil lamp.

'What happened today, you are on time!' Bhaskaran Nair called out. 'Miracles do happen, don't they?'

'Look here, I am in a foul mood.' she said, 'now don't you make me angry too.'

'What happened daughter?' he asked, coming out of the chamber.

'Nothing.'

'Didn't the engine driver smile at you?'

'He smiled, and that is what is annoying me now.'

Bhaskaran Nair was perplexed. The person who stood in front of him was the one who got angry, only if a young man failed to smile at her. So, the problem is something else. He handed over the work to her and returned to his chamber.

His son's letter has come. 'Dad, please subscribe to internet. Then I can be in touch with you daily through e-mail. I can send emails to you from America at the cost of a local call. Please let me know how much would be the connection charges. I shall transfer the amount to your account.'

He is crazy!

Day Three

Day three. Holding the pen still in between writing her diary, she slipped into a reverie. Is this going to be a 'Kathakali' performance to be spread over several days? Nancy has become an 'expert' on Kathakali by reading the contents of the brochures which the volunteers of the local 'Kathakali' club used to bring for type setting. 'Nalacharitham'—second day or third day. The man who brought the matter for type setting had a childlike face with a dark shade around his large eyes. Nancy, at the first encounter itself and without any sense of regret or sacrifice had ceded him to Malathy. While she was typing the notice, the artist was talking to Malathy. Listening to their conversation, Nancy got some basic information about the forms of 'Kathakali' characters like 'Kathi' and 'Thadi'. Once he leaves Nancy would say mockingly, 'Let him sit near me for five minutes, milk will start oozing from my nipples!'

Nancy returned from her reverie. Her intention was to write the day's diary. Avoiding the foot over bridge and walking confidently towards the end of the platform in the morning, it happened. He was gesticulating from the engine room—'Mudras'³ with his fingers and 'Bhavas'⁴ on his face. As she was not proficient in the sign language used in 'Kathakali', she had to consult Malathy after reaching the shop.

3. In Indian dance, every hand gesture has a symbolic value and a precise meaning. These gestures are called 'mudra'.

4. Bhava indicates the emotional condition displayed by a character in the dance form.

He had first touched his wrist watch. Then spread five fingers at her. After that pointed one finger to the first platform. This was followed by his facial expression connecting him and Nancy. Not knowing what was happening, she stood on the platform dumbfounded. Maybe he was trying to convey something important, but how can one understand? Realizing that she is standing on the platform astounded with hundreds of passengers rushing by, she regained composure, adjusted her shawl which was about to drop from her shoulder and walked on.



Malathy thought for a while listening to Nancy's narration of the incident. Continuous interactions with the Kathakali artist came to her help. 'By all probability, touching the watch could be to convey the time, she said. The five fingers spread out immediately after, could therefore indicate five o'clock'. Nancy looked at Malathy with adoration and appreciation. She encouraged her to decode the remaining 'mudras'. Malathy continued her analysis.

'It maybe to indicate the platform that he pointed one finger to platform number one. But what could be the interpretation of the 'bhava' on his face connecting both of you?'

'Ah, who knows?'

'Did he touch his eyes?'

'No, he didn't.'

'If he had touched his eyes, that could be the sign to let you know that he wants to meet you.'

'Jesus!' it was only then that Nancy saw Bhaskaran Nair, standing right behind Malathy. He had come out of the chamber.

It appeared that for quite some time he had been standing there. In her effort to get the mudras translated, Nancy failed to notice him behind Malathy. Suddenly Nancy returned to her keyboard and started typing. As Malathy had not seen the threat personified standing behind, she continued.

'You do one thing. Just go there at five o'clock. Anyway, it is the time of your train. Let us see what he has to say.'

Nancy was typing hurriedly as never before. It appeared to Malathy that Nancy has lost interest in the topic. It was then that Malathy saw Bhaskaran Nair.

Oh 'God!'

Bhaskaran Nair has been talking for the past half an hour. Nancy estimated the time. He has literally wasted half an hour. From quarter past four to quarter to five. His speech was about human character formation. 'Never ever fall in love with an engine driver', he said. 'Their lives are on wheels. Rolling wheels cannot stick to any place for long. Bit by bit, people travelling on wheels also get those characteristics', he said. 'The rolling wheel slowly finds its place in their blood and marrow. Another issue is that they travel on straight and long rails. That prompts them to think in a single track. Means their own affairs. You will be sorry later'.

By the time the speech was over, it was quarter to five. She thanked him and went to the wash room to get ready. After those critical five minutes she came out a beauty and proceeded towards the railway station. There at the entrance of platform number one she saw him standing. The engine driver!

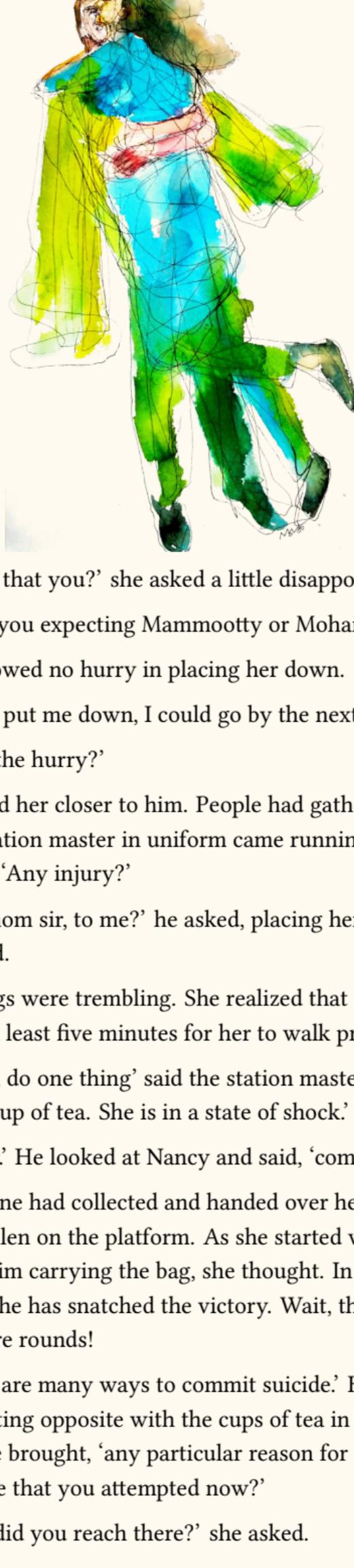
Day Four

I have no intention of turning this into a silly romantic story, Nancy told herself. As she lay awaiting sleep, she took stock of the day's events. Another wasted day. She had noticed the engine driver's roving eyes from a distance. It was clear that he had not seen her. Three or four trains start from that station within an hour in the evening. The station premises milling with passengers would look like the quadrangle of a church on a Feast Day. It is not easy to find a person in that crowd. He had positioned himself at the wide entrance to the station, maybe with the intention that his sweet-heart should not have any difficulty in locating him. Malathy's decoding was on spot. He intended to meet her at five o'clock at platform number one. For no apparent reason, she abruptly changed her course and took a deviation towards right. She entered the platform through the cloak room and sneaked into the compartment of a train which was about to move. Guard was waving the green flag and the train started moving. At that time it occurred to her that it would be wise to check the train. To the query put before the person standing in front of her, she got the reply. 'Venad Express.'

'Jesus, this train goes in the opposite direction, to Trivandrum!'

She jumped out of the train. It won't be accurate to say she stepped out; rather she dropped herself out and really fell down from the train. As if saying in style 'here I go', she nosedived. While falling in slow motion she imagined what would happen next. Stretcher, ambulance, a glamorous trip to the hospital!

Defeating her expectations, she fell into the strong arms of a man. She opened her eyes at the face of the proprietor of those strong arms. That was the engine driver.



'Oh, is that you?' she asked a little disappointed.

'Were you expecting Mammooty or Mohanlal?'

He showed no hurry in placing her down.

'If you put me down, I could go by the next train.'

'Why the hurry?'

He held her closer to him. People had gathered around.

The station master in uniform came running and asked, 'Any injury?'

'To whom sir, to me?' he asked, placing her on the ground.

Her legs were trembling. She realized that it would take at least five minutes for her to walk properly.

'Rajan, do one thing' said the station master. 'Buy her a cup of tea. She is in a state of shock.'

'Ok sir.' He looked at Nancy and said, 'come.'

Someone had collected and handed over her bag that had fallen on the platform. As she started walking after him carrying the bag, she thought. In the first round he has snatched the victory. Wait, there will be more rounds!

'There are many ways to commit suicide.' He asked her sitting opposite with the cups of tea in his hands that he brought, 'any particular reason for selecting the one that you attempted now?'

'How did you reach there?' she asked.

'Meaning?'

'You were standing outside the station.'

'So, it was to avoid me that you sneaked through the cloak room, isn't it?'

'You are intelligent. Correct guess. And I give you full marks.'

'Had this been known earlier, I would have pushed you nicely on the track with my foot, instead of holding you.'

'You brute.'

'Shall I bring something to eat? Vada?'

She was taking count of profit and loss. I am suffering as a result of my attempt to avoid this guy. It is better to eat to cover up some loss at least. So, she said.

'Masala dosa, maybe.'

'I didn't mean anything so grand, just a vada or banana fry. Anyway...'

He got up and walked to the counter. He returned carrying two plates of masala dosa. Sambar and chutney were filled in the circular cavities of the plate.

'Hope you have no objection if I have a dosa.' He said extending one plate to her.

'It is me who fell off the train. What is the need for you to eat a masala dosa?' She said rather disappointed at the sight of one plate moving away from her. 'Ok, doesn't matter.'

'It is my wage for bearing the load.' He said.

As they were eating dosa, he asked, 'any objection in telling your name?'

'Nancy.'

'Ah! so, you are a Christian? Despite that you wear the sandal paste on your forehead?'

'I get it from the temple.'

'So, you are a devotee?'

'No, I go there to see the priest. He is handsome.'

Nancy closed the diary. Chechi was fast asleep. Nelson was lying close to her. His thumb remained inside his mouth, drawing on it as if he suddenly remembered not to break the habit.

She lay down on bed spread out on the other side of the room. 'Not for Pooja, but the Poojary, isn't it?' She recalled what the engine driver had said. 'Not the music, but the musician!' 'Not the engine, but the engine driver' she added.

Day Five

'I discovered that the engine driver has a name!' Nancy said.

Bhaskaran Nair was not surprised. All engine drivers will have names, he said. He added that people without names will not be engine drivers. What Nancy says is no big deal.

'I am going to write to your Papa,' he said, 'I must ask him to fix you somewhere before your engine derails.'

'I know that sir is capable of doing such things.'

'There are two things: One is that you will learn to behave. The second one, and that is more important, is that you will be taken off my head.'

'In that case, I will no longer be with you, sir.'

She was really angry. Of late she had been having this feeling that she is a burden on Bhasakran Nair. Why has this man appointed me on a salary? There is not much work in that shop. And I am not doing that much work also. It is for the singular consideration that she is the daughter of his friend. Malathy was there right from the beginning. In fact, the work available is just enough for Malathy. Any additional work could be handled by sir himself.

During the train journey, the girls used to talk about their offices also, apart from indulging in Anthakshari and ogling at men. That is how she came to know about the vacancy for a computer operator in Latha's office. She had mentioned this a week back. Not sure whether that vacancy still existed. She thought of going and checking out during the lunch recess. Nancy kept it to herself.

She finished her lunch quickly and got out of the office. Bus stop is nearby. As she sat in the bus going via Padma, her only prayer was that the vacancy should not be filled up by now. She melted in the afternoon heat. She was not feeling the summer heat inside the air-conditioned office. It would be just warm when she reaches the office in the morning and by the time she gets out in the evening, heat would have abated.

Latha's office was large. Nancy entering through the large glass door was fascinated by its expanse. In the soft sofa-sets arranged in the visiting room, twenty persons could easily sit. On one side was the reception counter. Behind the charming receptionist and across the glass partition, the large hall was full of young men. Handsome guys—how nice it would be to work with them, she was ready even to forgo her salary!

'They are nothing.' Latha said sitting near Nancy. 'You must see in the evening. There are fifteen salesmen, all handsome guys. They move smartly in our office, wearing white shirts, ties and brown pants. Awesome! Now, all are outside on sales calls.'

Nancy had made up her mind.



The person who interviewed her was middle-aged. He was surprised, why this girl who works on Corel-Draw and PageMaker is ready to take up this utterly boring job, and at a lower salary? The job was to prepare inventory on a database. A job which requires no intelligence, no imagination; in fact, a boring job. "Those with some imagination either escape or commit suicide within a year", he said.

'You said you can do graphics also, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

'DTP is an art, especially if you do graphics. In my opinion, you should not join this office for doing this boring work sacrificing the infinite possibilities of graphics. Moreover, it will take two years in this company for you to receive the salary you are earning now. Think twice and inform Latha. Once you make up your mind, you can join on the first.'

Before leaving, Nancy thanked him for taking the interview, even postponing his lunch. As she walked towards the bus stop, she thought. I left my heart there. Let it be; doesn't matter!

Sitting in an inclined position, Bhaskaran Nair is having a nap in his cabin. He has this habit of taking half an hour catnap every day after lunch. Malathy is playing 'free cell' on the computer. Nancy stood behind her. She was not concentrating on the card game. Her mind was blank. Malathy was also not saying anything. She gets into a tense mood once she starts the card game. She would not even reply to any questions posed at her. Nancy did not know how long she stood there like that. On hearing the voice of sir, she returned to reality. Bhaskaran Nair was standing near her watching Malathy playing the game.

'Take diamond nine and place it below ten.'

He was suggesting to Malathy. Once the nine of diamond was taken out, all cards in that column could be put in positions. Bhaskaran Nair did not object to their playing when they had no work.

Cards flew to their respective positions. Malathy closed the game.

Occupying her seat, Nancy said, 'Sir, I got a new job.'

'Very good! Congratulations.'

'Sir, you need not be so sarcastic.'

'I didn't mean to make fun of you. Okay, which is that company?'

'Big company. Markwell Trading Corporation.'

'Good.'

'Yes.' Nancy said, 'They asked me to join on the first. I shall no longer be a burden to you.'

Suddenly he went gloomy. Malathy was asking, 'Are you really leaving us for a new job?'

Without saying anything Bhaskaran Nair went to his chamber. He was wounded. Daughter, who taught you to use stinging words? To whom are you uttering them? He slipped into a trance. Memories flooded his mind. It was on the next day of his wife's death anniversary, that Varghese brought his little daughter.

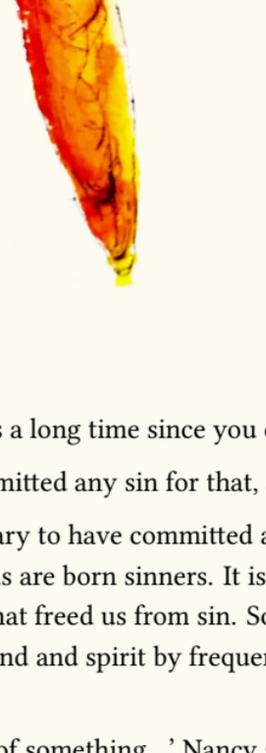
'I am entrusting her with you sir'. He said. 'We are letting out our house. She will live with her elder sister. Her husband is in Dubai. Now on, you are her father.'

Gradually grief filled all corners of his heart. He experienced its heaviness.

Day Six

Nancy realized to her delight that instead of Before Christ and After Christ, her time line has now been reduced to Before Meeting Engine Driver and After Meeting Engine Driver. I need to write as sixth day ED. Must ask Rajan to grow a beard. With a beard he would look like Jesus. There is a picture of Jesus in deep prayers in her sister's room. Below the picture are placed a gold coated cross and a candle stand. Nancy suddenly started liking that picture. She expressed her intense liking by lighting a candle before the picture as soon as she returned from the office... Mary was surprised. Normally, Nancy has to be dragged to the church and even then, she would be spending time chatting with boys if she finds them. She doesn't pay attention to the Holy Mass. Father Valiyedeth had called Mary once or twice before and had rebuked her. Mary was advised to keep an eye on her sister. 'This age is treacherous. Better be careful. How long has it been since she confessed? Ask her to come up to the 'Pallimeda' and meet me'

That very same girl is now eager to light the candle in front of Jesus Christ as soon as she returns from office! Mary was relieved to note the change. But it did not take long for the relief to revert back to concern. As she was getting ready to go to the church on Sunday morning she called out to her sister, 'Valiyedath Father said that he must see you.'



'See me?'

'Yes, he said it is a long time since you confessed.'

'I have not committed any sin for that, sister.'

'It is not necessary to have committed any sin to confess. All of us are born sinners. It is the holy blood of Jesus that freed us from sin. So, we have to purify our mind and spirit by frequent confessions.'

'I was thinking of something...' Nancy said looking at Mary.

'What?'

'Why instead of becoming the bride of the Lord you settled as the bride of my brother-in-law Mathew?'

'Get lost.'

'Serves right,' Nancy continued, 'so our Lord is saved!'

'Are you coming? It's time for the Qurbana (Holy Mass).'

'Sister, I had told Rajni that I would visit her today. Her brother has come from the Gulf. She promised to get me some items he brought at a discount.'

'So, this week also you are not going to attend the Qurbana!'

Qurbana! Nancy thought. Nowadays, everything's for name sake. She saw in her mind the royal entry of young priest Father Valiyedath cutting in the middle, the song by brother Peter who has been singing in the church for long. With the two thin Altar Boys on either side, the priest stands at the altar and shows the sign of cross.

'Praise the Lord living at great heights, may all the good hearted on earth get peace and hope, always and eternally. Amen!'

Father's words never falter. It is the result of years of devoted practice. He wished to keep his sheep in bondage with those words. As for those who would not agree to be tied with words, he did not try too hard to bring those sheep back. He knew its futility. Nancy knows why he looks at the watch during the Qurbana. Exactly at 9 O'clock he would finish the Qurbana giving 'osthi', the flesh and blood of Jesus. Thereafter, he runs to Pallimeda. Nancy thought laughing; exactly at nine, the TV serial 'Sreekrishna' starts. He practically runs, to make sure that he does not miss it!

'To watch Sreekrishna serial.' Nancy laughed out loud. Actually, they show advertisements in the first ten minutes. But even those advertisements caught Father's fancy. It is a magical web. Different fashions, images of people with no fashions; everything transported Father to another world. What he could not see in real life, revealed itself through the visual media. When the scenes cross all borders, Father would pray showing the sign of cross. 'Jesus, save me and my little sheep from Satan's temptations.'

Visual media is influencing spirituality in an undesirable manner.

Mary was angry.

'If you are not coming, it is your business. Let Satan catch you. When I saw you lighting candle in front of Jesus, I thought...'

Off she goes taking Nelson with her.

Nancy thought of Rajan. Rather, her sister made her think of him. At five in the evening he waits at the station gate. She can see the tall and straight personality from a distance. When she goes closer to him a smile blooms on his slightly long face.

'You look like Jesus returning from the sermon on the mountain.' She says.

'That means, spiritual light is flowing abundantly from my face!'

He would walk along with Nancy, chatting.

'That is why I call you savior.'

'Not because I really saved you, from under the train?'

'Both are same. Original savior saves my spirit. This duplicate savior saves my life. That's all! And I am harassed by the two saviors!'

'What is there to be harassed?'

'Back at home I face my sister's spiritual harassments. Here my second savior harasses me by following me everywhere.'

'I am not walking along with you to harass you' Rajan said. 'Being a loyal employee of the railway department, I am dutybound to prevent anyone from damaging its property.'

'Who is damaging railway property?'

'You! That day I could prevent you from damaging the railway platform. So, I walk along with you, not following you, and ensure that you board the train. I return to my quarters satisfied that I protected railway property from damage.'

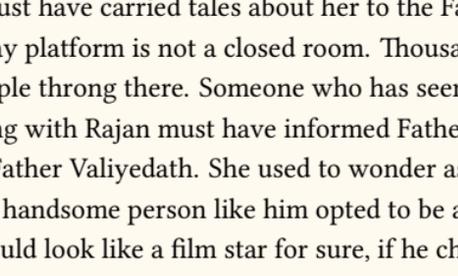
'That's all.'

'Yes.'

With the diary kept open in front of her, she was thinking. I am not going to keep a count of days anymore; what type of person is he? Even days after getting acquainted, he only walks aside without uttering a loving word or even a suggestion to visit a restaurant. It is true that this man acts differently from others. Other boys need only a smile to take it as signal to take things forward. Within two days it leads to a visit to a restaurant or a park. Third day...Oh, no! Nancy is not ready for that, never. She knows where to draw a line with the boys. Isn't there a via media between these two?

'You are a strange person.' She said one day. 'Even after getting acquainted with a beautiful girl you don't feel like taking her to a park?'

'What is there to enjoy in a park?'



'You are not at all romantic. It is true that even I don't have much of an opinion about parks. But restaurants; they attract me very much.'

'But me, not the least!' Rajan said.

'Fear of monetary loss, isn't it?'

'Your intelligence is appreciated!'

As it stands it is better to discontinue writing a diary. At the age of sixty, if by any chance I happen to read this, I may commit suicide seeing its utter hollowness. She closed the diary and lay down to sleep. Chechi is praying. Bending down, she was praying deeply. Once the prayer is over and after showing the sign of cross, she told Nancy.

'Father Valiyedth enquired about you.'

'I am blessed!' Nancy said.

Pretending not to notice the mocking tone in her sister's voice, Mary continued.

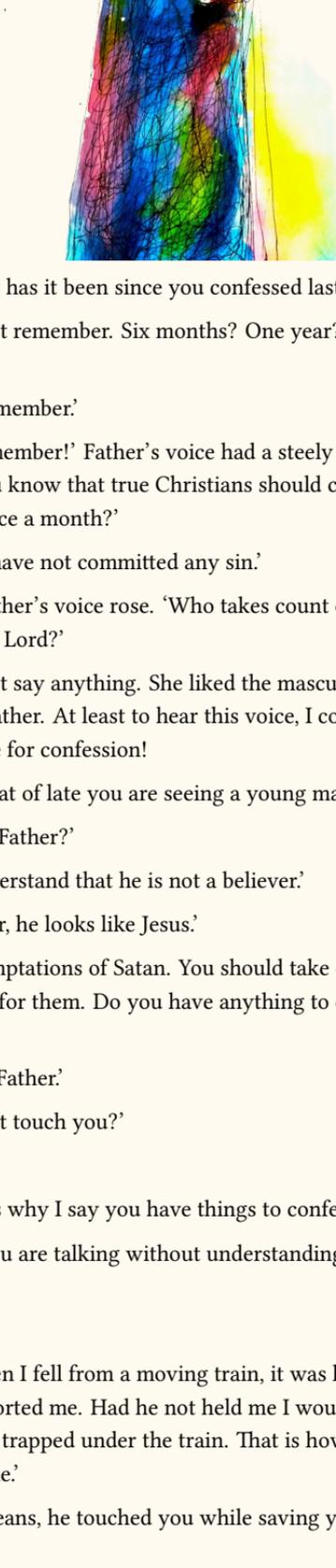
'It is enough if you drop in at Pallimeda on the way to office. Can you make it tomorrow?'

The aching heart of the shepherd troubled by the straying little sheep, spoiled Nancy's sleep. Someone must have carried tales about her to the Father. Railway platform is not a closed room. Thousands of people throng there. Someone who has seen her walking with Rajan must have informed Father. She liked Father Valiyedath. She used to wonder as to why a handsome person like him opted to be a priest. He would look like a film star for sure, if he changed his attire from his cassock to a glamorous suit. Anyway, she decided to go to Pallimeda the very next day morning and meet the Father. Spiritual contentment was filling her mind, and eventually she slipped into a deep sleep.

Day Seven

It was when Father Valiyedath was about to leave, that Nancy entered the church. Father stood hesitating for a moment. He then turned and walked back to the church. By that time Nancy had entered the church through the front door. Nancy felt as if the vacant porch was gobbling her like an ancient dinosaur. Far away, Father Valiyedath is standing at the altar. How long will it take to reach there walking?

Father is pointing to the confession box. Nancy stood there hesitating for a moment and then walked towards the box. She heard Father's movements across the netted confessional screen. Soon the questions flowed.



'How long has it been since you confessed last?'

She did not remember. Six months? One year? Two years?

'I don't remember.'

'Don't remember!' Father's voice had a steely edge. 'Don't you know that true Christians should confess at least once a month?'

'Father, I have not committed any sin.'

'Child,' Father's voice rose. 'Who takes count of sins? You or the Lord?'

She did not say anything. She liked the masculine voice of Father. At least to hear this voice, I could have come for confession!

'I know that of late you are seeing a young man.'

'Is it a sin Father?'

'I also understand that he is not a believer.'

'But Father, he looks like Jesus.'

'That's temptations of Satan. You should take care not to fall for them. Do you have anything to confess?'

'Nothing, Father.'

'Did he not touch you?'

'Once.'

'Ah! that's why I say you have things to confess.'

'Father, you are talking without understanding the situation.'

'Why?'

'Once when I fell from a moving train, it was he who supported me. Had he not held me I would have been trapped under the train. That is how he touched me.'

'Which means, he touched you while saving you.'

'Yes.'

'Oh...'

Nancy did not disclose that he held her close to him in his arms for a while. Even if it is a sin, it is not done by her.

'It is not a good idea to get close with people mentally; especially who don't belong to our faith. When is your papa coming?'

'I don't know, Father. May I leave now? It is time for the train.'

There was no reply. Even after Nancy went out, Father Valiyedath remained inside the confessional box. It was about temptations that he was thinking- Temptations of Satan. Who knows in what all forms it would come? Rather, what is right and what is wrong; and what do we know about it?

When she saw the engine driver that day, stretching his head out of the engine room and smiling, she was feeling rather angry. She turned her head and walked past. Anthakkshari was a flop. Despite thoroughly scanning the entire compartment, she could not find even a single good-looking boy. Maybe it is what the day portends. She wondered what the situation would be in her office.

Instead of walking towards the end of the platform she started climbing the foot-over bridge. She was aware that sitting in the engine room Rajan is looking at her in surprise. Let him, who cares!

It was Malathy who started the issue. She asked, 'Have you not brought sweets after getting the new job?'

Bhaskaran Nair was inside the chamber. He did not come out. The computer was not booted. Without saying anything, Nancy switched on the computer. There was work half-done on Saturday. She searched for it and started typing.

'Why are you not saying anything?' Malathy insisted. And that was quite unusual. Generally, if she doesn't get an answer at the first instance, she would not pursue. But now, she was bent upon getting sweets from Nancy. Nancy had this premonition that Malathy and Bhaskaran Nair must have had a discussion about her new job. This was her tactics to speak and elicit more information about the new job. Nancy never considered Malathy as a person who relished sweets.

'See, sir is calling you' Malathy said. Nancy went inside the chamber.

The atmosphere inside was tense. Like it was going to swell up. It was as if the relationship between her and sir was shattering to pieces. 'Please sit.' Bhaskaran Nair said in a strictly formal tone. Nancy sat.

'Thomas from Maxwell had called.'

He stopped; looked at Nancy's face, as if studying her reaction. She was not saying anything.

'What he wanted to know was two things. One is about your character. Second, the reason behind your resignation to accept a lower paid job.'

He stopped again. When he found there is no response, he continued. 'I replied to the first query. And I said that I don't know the answer to the second one. If you know, I wish to hear it from you.'

Nancy is not saying anything.

'There is one thing that you forgot to think of. Thomas does not know my age. He does not know that I am a sixty-year-old man. And he does not know the relation what I have with your papa. So, he would have been surprised to see a twenty-year-old throwing away the job without any reason and joining a lower paid job. He would have made his own assumptions. He may even be suspecting me.'

Nancy's face turned ashen. She had not thought about that. Her mind was full of conflicts. Even though she was cutting jokes, she was not happy. The feeling that she is a burden to Bhaskaran Nair has been troubling her for some time now. When she was under such a predicament, he had said about her being a burden, though in a jocular way. It was not necessary for her to take it seriously. But that day her mood was like that. Now she regretted. 'I will not come in your way. You are free to go. Only thing is that you are leaving some unwanted pain, before moving out.' He continued, 'It was only when Thomas informed me that I came to know about the lower salary. Let it be; as you wish. Have you written to your papa?'

Nancy is sitting without saying anything and with her head down. Tears welled up. Suddenly she got up and went out of the chamber.

No one understands me. She told herself. No one. Alphabet on the monitor got broken. Rainbow colors appeared on the edges.

'What happened to you?' Rajan asked. As usual he was waiting at the station gate. He did not mind Nancy neglecting him at Angamaly station and again here on this platform. Nancy was silent. Her face was sullen. He asked again.

'Why can't we have a Masala Dosa?'

When he saw that she was still not responding, he held her hand and said, 'Come on.'

She did not withdraw her hand. While walking to the platform she said.

'We will go to some restaurant, outside.'

'I thought of the railway restaurant so as not to delay you.'

'Never mind. I will go by bus. It is just for a day.'

They walked out of the railway station.

'If anyone promises to buy me Masala Dosa, he can even kidnap me; this is my condition!'

'You love Masala Dosa that much?'

'To be frank, I will go with anyone who promises to buy me an ice cream also...'

'Ahaa...!' 'What other eatables are you fond of?' Rajan asked.

'Easier to list out items that I don't like!'

'I guessed so.'

From the kitchen counter of the restaurant, he brought Masala Dosa in two plates. Keeping the plates on the table he asked, 'Shall I bring ice-cream right now or we will have it after finishing Masala Dosa?'

'I will need one more Masala Dosa.' Nancy said.

'You are not joking, aren't you?'

'Did you bring me here to spoil my mood?'

'Let me ask you now. What spoiled your mood today? You did not even look at me in the morning.'

At least while leaving the platform I expected to receive a smile as a reward. That also didn't happen. It is only because of my mild nature that I still stay with you.'

'I am going to fight with everyone.'

'Lord Jesus, what am I hearing?' he imitated Nancy's style.

'Why do you call Jesus Christ? He is not a party to any of these. Moreover, he may not like an insolvent Nair invoking him.'

'Who said I am a Nair?'

'One can make out that from a man's nature. Will any Christian spend money like this? He would try to make a little more.'

'Good advice, so we may skip ice-cream.'

'I repeat; have you brought me here to wound my religious sentiments?'

It was eight o'clock when Nancy reached home. Chechi was anxiously waiting for her.

'Why are you so late? I was scared.'

'I am exhausted Chechi. Two Masala Dosas and one cocktail ice-cream. I don't want supper.'

'Was there any party in the office?'

'No, I went out with someone. With an engine driver.'

'Engine driver?'

'Ye Chechi. The boy is glamorous.'

'Look, don't make me shout at you. I am going to write to Papa tomorrow itself.'

'No, Chechi. I was only joking.'

'What's his name?'

'Rajan'

'Rajan? His full name?'

'I don't know Chechi.'

'What is his religion?'

'Chechi, I don't know. When I asked him, he told me not to ask and not to speak religion.'

'You could have asked his father's name.'

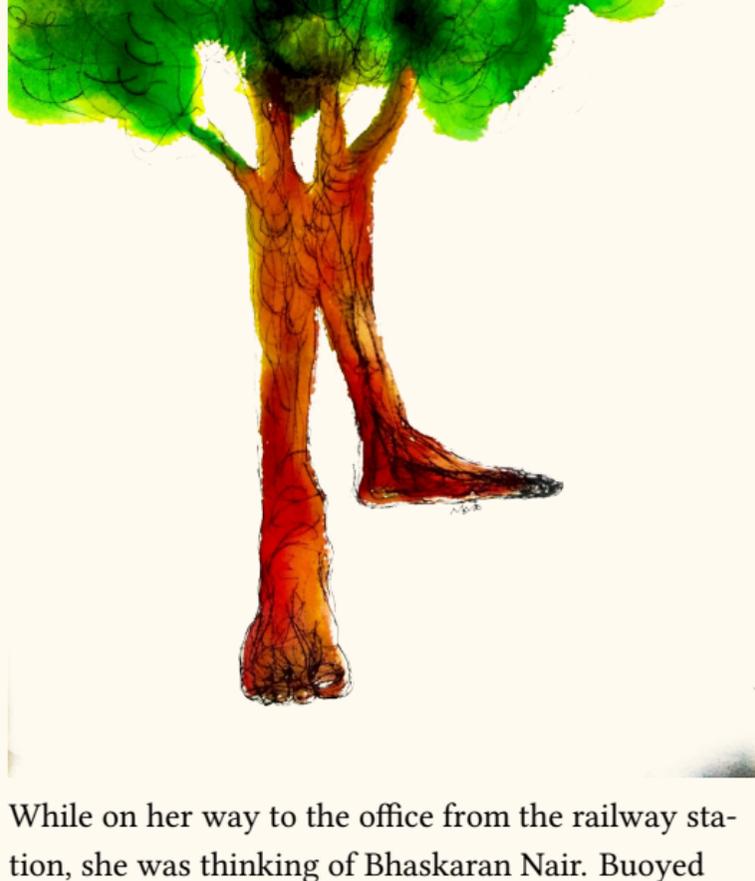
'I asked him. His father's name is Narayanan Nair.'

Mary stood there not knowing whether to laugh or to rebuke.

Nelson, in the meanwhile had taken out the toffee from her bag and started eating it.

Day Eight

A good day. Nancy thought. Chechi had prepared Poori instead of Puttu. A welcome change indeed! She could even kiss Nelson without ruining her lipstick. Parrots chattered outside. Small branches and leaves of the trees were moving in a gentle breeze. The seasonal 'Thiruvathira' wind is blessing her as it retreats, she felt. An atmosphere ideal for writing poems. But instead of writing poems, she headed for the temple. She knew that it required God's blessings too for a day which began well to remain well. She prayed before the deity. After receiving blessings and 'prasadam' from the Poojary whose bright smiling eyes fondled her, she applied sandalwood paste on her forehead and walked to the railway station.



While on her way to the office from the railway station, she was thinking of Bhaskaran Nair. Buoyed by the feeling of day's goodness, she could approach issues in a non-judgmental way. What is the date today? Fifteenth. Suddenly it occurred to her that it was exactly one year since she joined this office, last year on January 15th, Thursday. On January 14th she had visited Bhaskaran Nair along with her father. There they spent a long time chatting. They had lunch in that house. She had just started learning computer then; had completed the first month of a course of three-month duration. She had completed DOS and WordStar and was trying her hand on Dbase. Bhaskaran Nair asked her to join his office right on the next day. It was when she sat in front of Bhaskaran Nair's office PC, that she realized how outdated the computer system in her training institute was. Even after one-year of training in that institute, she would not have the confidence to work in an office. Bhaskaran Nair trained her; with patience; infusing confidence. When she committed mistakes, and even when mistakes were repeated, he corrected her patiently. No pinching of upper arm, no hitting on head. She abhorred the trainer at the Institute. Her upper arm carried the numerous black marks of his pinches. Tears welled up in her eyes each time she looked at those painful pinch-marks in the mirror and ran her palm over them. Here, while learning computer sitting beside Bhaskaran Nair, there was no fear of pinches; just his 'you dim-wit' in an affectionate voice. Gradually, PageMaker, Corel-Draw and Malayalam software ceased to evoke sense of wonder. As she liked drawing pictures, Graphics was easy for her.

To her surprise, he handed over half month salary to her on the first day of the following month. She was still learning the job!

She has caused pain to that very man! She went to the nearby bakery and bought three bars of chocolates and dropped them in her bag.

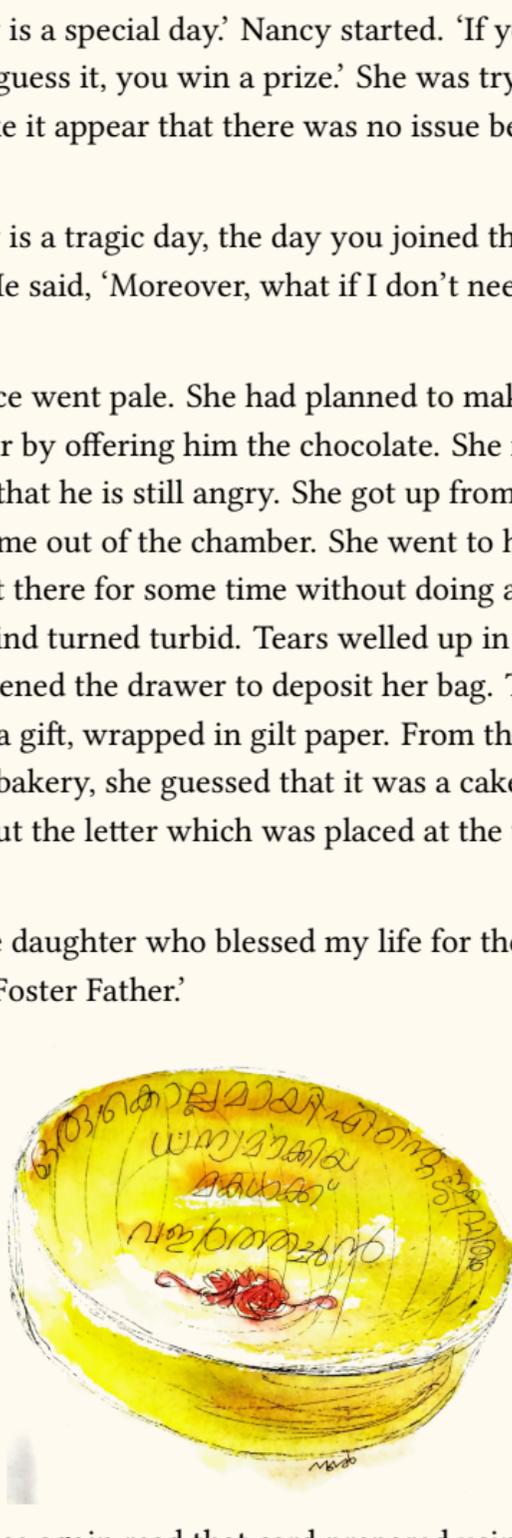
She went straight to Bhaskaran Nair's cabin. He looked at her askance. His face no longer carried the usual smile. Without saying a word, she sat in the chair across his table.

'Today is a special day.' Nancy started. 'If you correctly guess it, you win a prize.' She was trying hard to make it appear that there was no issue between them.

'Today is a tragic day, the day you joined this office'. He said, 'Moreover, what if I don't need your prize?'

Her face went pale. She had planned to make up with sir by offering him the chocolate. She now realized that he is still angry. She got up from the chair and came out of the chamber. She went to her seat and sat there for some time without doing anything. Her mind turned turbid. Tears welled up in her eyes. She opened the drawer to deposit her bag. There she found a gift, wrapped in gilt paper. From the name of the bakery, she guessed that it was a cake. She took out the letter which was placed at the top of the box.

'To the daughter who blessed my life for the last one year—Foster Father.'



She once again read that card prepared using computer graphics with attractive ornate letters. She could not suppress the grief bursting forth in her bosom. Resting her forehead on the table, she sobbed.

Bhaskaran Nair was affectionately stroking her hair. He was saying something to console her. At last he asked, 'Where is my present? Didn't I give you the right answer?'

'I am angry with you, sir.' She said.

Malathy was laughing. Nancy felt better. She opened the bag and took out the three chocolate bars and handed over to Bhaskaran Nair. He in turn gave one each to her and Malathy.

'We will eat this right now, wont we?'

'What have you bought for me sir?'

"Just open and see."

It was a chocolate cream cake. She decided to cut it during lunch break.

He had remembered the birthdays of both of them. He bought cake on that day. But Nancy never thought that he would remember the day she joined the office. This sir is special!

'When are you joining the new company?' asked Bhaskaran Nair.

'Me? New company?' She asked imitating a famous TV advertisement. 'I am not going anywhere leaving you, my sir. I will hang round your neck!'

'I knew I am not that lucky.' said Bhaskaran Nair, 'how many offerings have I made in the temple!'

When this incident was narrated, Rajan said,

'Bhaskaran Nair belongs to a rare species, a species going to be extinct very soon. We have people who don't give any importance to the emotion of love and puts money before love. If someone is found otherwise, he should be protected and, saved from extinction.'

'Why don't we put Sir in some wild-life sanctuary?'

Ninth Day

Who betrayed me for six silver coins to my dad? Is it chechi? Sir? Or Father Valiyedath? Don't know. Things started moving at lightning speed. Sister told her that they would be coming to 'see' her as a prospective bride on Sunday. The would-be groom is from Always. He is running a stationery shop there.

'If it were some bakery or ice-cream parlor, I would have readily agreed.' She said to her sister.

'I want ice-cream!' Nelson demanded.

'Let your aunt marry an ice-cream parlor owner. Then I will bring ice-cream for my darling every day.'

She consoled the boy.

Nancy was in high spirits. It is the first time that someone is coming to 'see' her. Till now, she used to go after boys; but the thought that a man is coming exclusively to see her was thrilling.

She told Rajan, 'Tomorrow a man is coming to 'see' me.'

'Who is that brave man?' He was talking from the engine room.

'A young man of twenty-six. And handsome too.'

'Have you seen him before?'

'No.'

'Must have seen a photo, haven't you?'

'No...'

'Then how do you know that he is handsome and gentle?'

'Why limit imagination till I meet him?'

'What is he?'

'Running a stationery shop in Always.'

'All the best!'

'Say so once the meeting is over.' She walked away.

She suspected a shade of a smile on Bhaskaran Nair's face when she shared the news of the marriage proposal. How to find out whether sir was the villain? She told a lie.

'Dad has written that he received your letter.'

'My letter? How does he receive an unsent letter?'

She was confused. So, it is not Bhaskaran Nair sir who betrayed her. It must be either chechi or Father Valiyedath. Whoever it is, her decision was to kill her or him, immediately on finding out the truth.

'May I leave a bit early today?' Nancy asked.

'Why?'

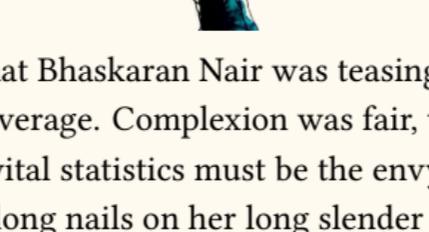
'Have to go to the Convent Junction. Needs to buy some cosmetics. If the boy visiting me is handsome, let him not disapprove of me.'

'You will have to spend a lot.'

'Why?'

'You are trying to create something nonexistent, isn't it?'

'I will not be in your company any longer, sir.'



She knew that Bhaskaran Nair was teasing her. She was above average. Complexion was fair, verging on white. Her vital statistics must be the envy of Miss India. Cute long nails on her long slender fingers. Dreamy, large eyes. She used to say that, if she was fair like her sister, none could have stopped her. She has noted this in mind as an issue to be settled with God, directly.

Trip to the Convent Junction was a disaster. Salesmen with familiar faces had disappeared. All are new faces. She roamed around shops in search of a likeable face, at least one. Where have they all gone?

By the time she reached the station, she was tired.

'What happened to you?' Rajan asked.

'I have decided to commit suicide.'

Rajan gave an appreciative glance as if it was a good idea.

'What do you want from me so that you will spare this station premises?'

'Ice-cream.'

'Only that?' they walked towards the counter in the platform.

While taking ice-cream, Rajan said.

'I will be on leave for two days.'

'Why?'

'My mother is not well. Need to consult doctor. Maybe she will have to spend a couple of days in the hospital.'

'Ice-cream wasted.'

'Why?'

'I will commit suicide at this very moment.'

Before going to bed that night, she asked Mary.

'Who introduced this marriage?'

'Dad wrote to uncle. Uncle brought this proposal. Why?'

'Nothing. Great indeed!'

The page in the diary for the day remained blank. Looks like its fate is to remain like that for the next couple of days.



Day Thirteen

Nancy took hold of her diary. If she doesn't record anything today also, history would blame her tomorrow for that omission. It would be impossible to explain such a big gap. In fact, right from the time she woke up in the morning, she wanted to record in her diary the time spent by her every half an hour. There was enough to write too. Her visit to church along with her sister, blessings from Father Valiyedath, preparing the menu for the guests coming to 'see' her. Uncle and aunt had already invaded the house. The atmosphere turned expectant of something grand happening in the house.



Exactly at eleven, the prospective groom arrived accompanied by a dozen people. It was only then that she realized that an Ambassador car could accommodate so many people. She watched the car rising inch by inch through the window, as the passengers got out one by one. After discharging all its passengers, the car straightened yawning and stood tall. Nancy and Mary were struggling to identify the groom in the crowd.

When aunt called, Mary went. Nancy was left alone. Her search now narrowed to two candidates. Maybe they are brothers. Both are equally good. They were wearing pants and full sleeve striped shirt. Complexion was not so good, closer to tan. Crossing the courtyard, they climbed up the verandah.

Mary accompanied her aunt to the verandah to greet them. The elder of the two was staring at Mary. He would have mistaken her as the prospective bride! Mary had kept her body in shape that concealed her motherhood! The younger one whispered something in his ear. Maybe to have a good look at the bride. It was at that precise moment that Nelson ran up to the verandah and shouted, 'Mom, hold me!' Smile on the groom's face faded and was replaced with a foolish laughter. He stared hard at his younger brother as if saying he would give him a befitting reward once they reach back home!

Nancy who was enjoying all this could not control her laughter. It was only after the guests finished tea that she went to the verandah. She had earlier warned Mary not to send her to meet the guests carrying the tray with tea and snacks like a traditional bride as seen in films and TV serials. Despite insistence by uncle and aunt, Mary didn't force her sister, apprehensive of the consequences; both for the guests and the hosts.

'Now call the girl.' Someone was saying. Nancy later knew that it was the groom's elder sister. Nancy came out and stood on the verandah leaning against a pillar. She looked at the groom carefully. The groom could not stand the scrutiny, felt shy and looked down. Thanks to the good deeds in his past birth, the groom didn't turn to ashes! Then started the cross examination. Advocate for the plaintiff was the elder sister.

'What's your name?'

'Nancy. Didn't uncle tell you?'

Taking care not to appear shaken, she asked in a steady tone, 'Where are you working, Nancy?'

'In Ernakulam.'

'What is the job?'

'Type-setting.'

'Oh... So, it's a typing job! But your people had told us that you are working on computer?' Sister smartly pointed this out to make clear that bride's party cannot not fool her.

'Type-setting is done on a computer.' Nancy said calmly. Fearing that she may burst into laughter, she avoided Mary's eyes. Once the bout of laughter is let loose, it becomes difficult for her to control.

'What salary do you get?'

Before Nancy could reply, the groom said, 'that's okay, sister.'

He had not asked his sister to enquire about bride's salary. He didn't want his sister to know his wife's salary. That could invite problems.

'Can you sing?' sister was continuing.

'ummm... I used to sing with Brother Peter.'

'Who is Peter?' Groom asked anxiously. He imagined Nancy roaming around parks and beaches singing duet with another young man.

'He is the man who sings in our church.' Uncle added, 'an old man.'

Groom felt relieved. He whispered something to his brother-in-law. Brother-in-law got up and walked over to the courtyard along with Nancy's uncle. For no particular reason, bride's sister continued looking at Nancy. Questions crying for answers were seen trapped in her eyes and facial muscles, struggling. Brother-in-law and uncle had almost reached the gate discussing. Nancy returned to her room.

Within half an hour, the guests left. Everyone looked up at uncle askance.

'Groom liked the girl.' He said, 'of course our daughter is without blemish.'

'What did they say about other matters?' Aunt was impatient to know.

'Three lakh and forty sovereigns. I told them that her sister was given two lakh and twenty sovereigns. The house goes to Nancy. So, I offered them one lakh and twenty sovereigns. They said they would think over it.'

'What is there to think about?' aunt asked.

'The shop next to his is on sale. He wants to buy that. The current one is jointly owned by him and his brother. He needs cash for that.'

'He wants our father's hard-earned money to buy that shop, isn't it? Does he not have a father?' Nancy asked.

'You keep quiet.' Mary admonished her.

'Ok... do you like him?' asked aunt.

'Well.' Nancy said, 'what I want to know is what asset has he got, except the cash and gold he expects from our father. If he is planning the game using our money, without any stake, that will not do.'

Closing the diary Nancy smiled. She will have to wait till the first night to know what asset he has! Better not to expect much.

Mary had fallen asleep tired advising her younger sister.

Day Fourteen

The push-pull train stopped at the platform wheezing. She threw a glance into the engine room. The room which remained dull for the past three to four days is now refulgent. Spring once again, she felt. A deluge of flowers. Mild breeze that spreads fragrance. I told you, she thought, I can write poems.

'Hey, are you not boarding the train?' she became conscious of the surroundings only when Rajan asked this using sign language. She realized that it was not spring but hot sun above, not the proper time to write poems. She boarded the train in a hurry. For the first time she won in the Antakshari. Songs of Vayalar and O. N. V. came to the tip of her tongue easily. Those were the songs she grew up hearing. Dad used to take a couple of drinks in the evenings. After drinks, he would start singing film songs in full rhythm. She realized with joy and astonishment that those songs were now making sense in her life.

When the train halted at the south station, she walked along the platform and reached near the engine room.

Rajan is standing stretching out his neck from the engine room.

'How's mother?'

'She is okay.' He said. He sounded like a boy who, in a hurry to go out to play, was affirming that his fever is gone.

'Yesterday they came to 'see' me.'

'How's the groom?'

'Very handsome, like a prince.'

'Hmm... you are trying to make me feel jealous... in reality he must be one with uneven teeth and squint eyes!'

'Let it be.' She made a funny face and walked off.

When told about the groom's visit, Bhaskaran Nair asked, 'What are their demands?'

'Just three lakhs and forty sovereigns of gold. I maintained that I wouldn't go with a guy who demands so little! Am I to belittle myself?'

Bhaskaran Nair and Malathy laughed.

'That's funny. Okay, how is the groom?'

'Average. Had it been his younger brother I could have still considered; he has glamour.'

She was thinking of making Rajan jealous. Not to speak of jealousy, there wasn't even a hint of intolerance on his face. Calm face. Blissful face. She was wondering. Is he the real Jesus who came to her in disguise?

She was relishing the ice-cream. 'Can you afford to waste money like this, buying me, ice-creams and Masala Dosas daily?'

'Nope.'

'Then why waste money like this?'

'I will add up all to the dowry that I am going to demand.'

'There is no custom of taking dowry among you Nairs'

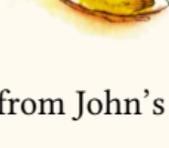
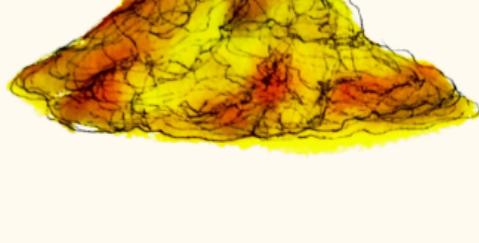
'My father didn't take dowry. But at this rate, I am afraid I will have to start this custom.'

'If that is so, I am not interested. I got close to you thinking that I will be winning a guy who wouldn't demand dowry.'

'I knew your inner thoughts very well. By the way, what about the assets of the guy demanding three lakhs and forty sovereigns?'

'Just the asset that the Almighty graciously gifts to every male child! Don't know how good it is!'

'Dowry is a serious issue. Even if the girl shines like gold, sovereigns of gold are to be given as dowry! These rascals should be beaten with a whip.'



Suddenly sentences from John's gospel rushed to her mind.

'And making a whip of cords, he drove everyone out of the temple...'

Am I imagining that a beard sprouted on Rajan's face? He is swirling the whip which he is holding.

With ultimate ecstasy she fantasized the scene. 'What are you thinking?' Rajan asked.

'Oh! nothing.' She said, 'I was pondering over the good and the evil.'

It was during supper that Mary said. 'Uncle had come in the evening.'

Nancy looked askance at her sister's face.

'He said that they liked you.'

'Big deal!'

'The groom wants to talk to you. He asked whether it will be convenient if he comes to your office tomorrow?'

'Don't send such good-for-nothing fellows to my office. They will spoil my glamour. I have good reputation there.'

'Where else can he meet you?' Knowing her sister's nature, Mary asked controlling herself. She had practised and perfected this art, from her early childhood days.

'He said he can meet you only between two and three thirty in the afternoon.'

'Suits me. I am not carrying my lunch tomorrow. We will meet in some restaurant.'

'In a restaurant?'

'Yes. I can find out how miserly he is. Also, I can do with a good lunch' She stopped a moment and continued, 'Did I say good lunch? Am I expecting too much?'

'I shall inform uncle.'

As she closed the diary Nancy thought. Each day ends the same way. Darkness of the night engulfs slowly nibbling at my consciousness and guzzling it.

Realities give way to fantasies. This is another world. It is my essence. And I live that.

She muttered to herself, 'Jesus, what does it all mean?'

The Sixteenth Day

'Is this not the day of the great lunch!' The engine driver asked her. She had told him about the lunch the previous day. Nancy laughed.

'How should I wish you?' he asked again.

'Let this soul escape'—that should be your wish.'

'From what—the lunch or the person hosting it?'

'From everything. I am fed up.'

'Don't be silly.'

'I am serious. Can you do me a favor?'

'Tell me.'

'Will you come to that restaurant?'

'To the restaurant? Me? Why invite an intruder into your privacy?'

'Can you come? Only for moral support. You need not acknowledge me. Stay somewhere nearby.'

'Two o'clock is my siesta time. It will be a great sacrifice to forego that. Moreover, if I don't have my siesta, I may sleep while running the train. There could be accidents.'

'Then leave it!' She started walking. There was not even a tinge of being offended in her tone. Nevertheless, she wished that Rajan would be there in that restaurant. It is okay.

Noticing that she was working even during lunch time, Bhaskaran Nair asked her, 'Are you not feeling hungry today?'

'Today I am offered a grand lunch.'

'By whom?'

'A stationery businessman from Alwaye.'

'That means your marriage is fixed.'

'This is only the preliminary step. Communicating with each other to see whether we share same wave length or not, thereby making the job easy for God Almighty to connect the two hearts.'

'Wow!' Said Bhaskaran Nair. 'From where did you steal those lines?'

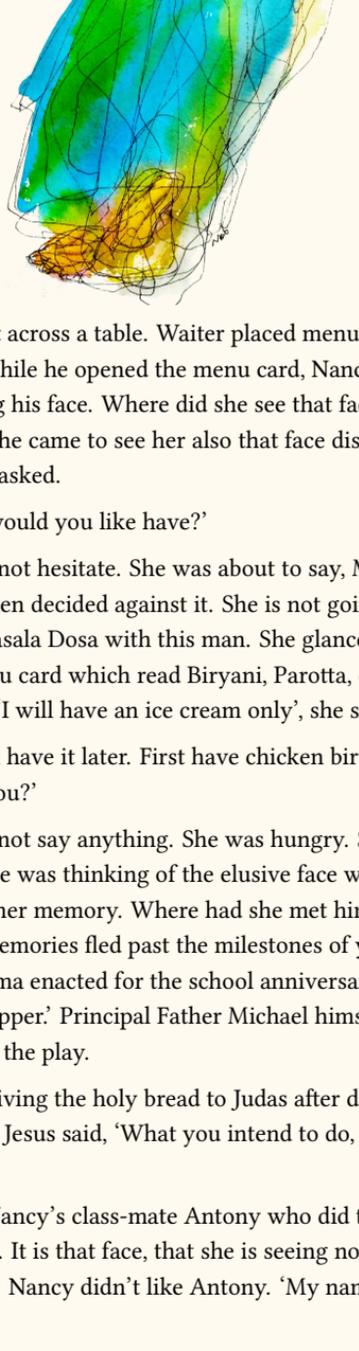
'That is a secret. Postmodern and if I disclose the source, my book will not sell.'

By the time Nancy reached the restaurant at 2, the hero was already waiting at the hotel entrance. She walked in the hot sun anxious that her effort to get a lunch will not be wasted

'I thought that I could come to your office.' He said smiling.

Great expectations—she said to herself.

They opened the glass door and went inside. It took time to get accustomed to the dim light. She was searching for another face. Knew he would not, still...



They sat across a table. Waiter placed menu cards for both. While he opened the menu card, Nancy was studying his face. Where did she see that face? On the day he came to see her also that face disturbed her. He asked.

'What would you like have?'

She did not hesitate. She was about to say, Masala Dosa, then decided against it. She is not going to have Masala Dosa with this man. She glanced through the menu card which read Biryani, Parotta, chicken curry... 'I will have an ice cream only', she said.

'We will have it later. First have chicken biryani, won't you?'

She did not say anything. She was hungry. So, let it be. She was thinking of the elusive face which evaded her memory. Where had she met him? Suddenly memories fled past the milestones of years.

The drama enacted for the school anniversary. 'Last Holy Supper.' Principal Father Michael himself had scripted the play.

While giving the holy bread to Judas after dipping it in wine, Jesus said, 'What you intend to do, do that fast.'

It was Nancy's class-mate Antony who did the role of Judas. It is that face, that she is seeing now right in front! Nancy didn't like Antony. 'My name is Shaji.'

Nancy's eyes were roaming around in search of Jesus. Beyond the betraying face of Judas, finally she found the smiling face behind another table. 'I called you to talk with you before the marriage is fixed.'

Nancy was feeling happy. She had thought that Rajan wouldn't be coming. Now he is there, right behind a nearby table...

The bridegroom did not understand the reason for the sudden brightening of the face of the bride-to-be. Considering it as a favorable expression, he continued.

'Nancy, you too may want to speak.'

'No. I have nothing to talk.' She lied. In fact, she had hundreds of things to say. But she was doubtful of returning in single piece after saying all that she wanted to say!

'Didn't you like me Nancy?'

'Why not.' She said the truth. She liked any boy if he is above average. Only if he is below average, would she exercise her right to choose. The man sitting in front of her had the signs of masculinity. Thick eye brows, thick mustache, shade of beard which had not vanished from the tanned face after the morning shave. The muscular body which was visible through the red and white pin-striped terry cot shirt. She detested only the expression on his face. The face of Judas!

Jesus still smiling, sitting behind Judas is placing his order with the waiter. She had a sudden impulse to change tables.

'Nancy, what job are you doing? I know you work with computers.'

'I do D.T.P.'

Shaji was impressed. There are DTP centers in Alwaye also. He has seen beautiful girls working on computers sitting behind the glass covered air-conditioned DTP centers. His prospective bride is also working in such a center. For an ordinary merchant like him, formal offices and those working there earned respect. The shop was started by his father. It is now run jointly by him and his younger brother. Both had only studied up to pre-degree.

Shaji who was lazy at studies promptly agreed to his father's advice that, pre-degree education is more than enough to run a shop. His younger brother wanted to pursue his studies. But when he realized that the shop would entirely be his elder brother's if he went ahead with his studies, he decided to discontinue.

'Who is running the center?'

'One Sir.'

'Is he young?'

'Umm. He is only sixty-five.'

Shaji laughed. She then noticed the golden neck chain that he was wearing. A cross hung from its end. Looking at the cross, Nancy asked.

'You are a devout, aren't you?'

'Why, are you not?'

'Indeed. I do believe in Jesus.' She was about to add; nevertheless, I don't go to church. But she held back. Jesus was a personal asset as far as she is concerned.

'Don't you participate in congregations?'

'No, I don't believe in that.'

'Why, several miracles happen in the Congregation Centers.'

'Never seen a particular miracle happen. If that miracle takes place, I would participate in the weeklong congregations, every month.'

'Which miracle?'

'Will tell you later.'

Food arrived. The waiter left after courteously placing the plates filled with Biryani, curries, salads and acharas on the table. Nancy realized with surprise and happiness that Rajan had also ordered the same items. She smiled. Rajan was also smiling.

Nancy thought that Shaji would have mistakenly considered her a glutton being in the dark about the actual reason for the mirth on her face. No problem. Yes, I am a foodie. Driving away such 'spiritual' thoughts from her mind she started doing justice to Biryani. She has something now to record in the diary, without regret.

She decided to fill the void, the eternal vacuum between Biryani and ice-cream by chatting. She asked.

'How much dowry has been demanded?'

Shaji was a bit uncomfortable. It was not for discussing such matters that he invited her.

'Let's not get involved in such matters. Let elders decide on it.'

'Is it for elders that money is taken?'

He is not saying anything.

'Heard that the cash is for you to buy a shop.'

'Those are the customs in our community. Why? You didn't like it?'

'Why not. Is it not income for us? I did not like the tiny amount that was demanded. You asked for three lakhs only!'

'That will do for the time being.' He continued, 'when need arises, I can ask for more.'

'My father has huge stock of hoarded cash. If you ask him, he will simply hand it over to you.'

Shaji is remorseful. He felt that it was foolish to demand only three lakhs. It is all right; but will not agree for further reduction.

Sitting at the adjacent table, the Engine driver was enjoying this conversation. The ice cream arrived.

Thoughts about marriage vanished in the glamour of ice-cream. Rajan too had ordered ice-cream. Had he not ordered the ice-cream she would have killed him, she thought! Even if he is at the next table, he should eat the same items she is eating.

While having ice-cream Shaji asked.

'Do you like me?'

'Otherwise, I would not have come.'

'Do you have anything to ask me?'

She thought for a moment. Should she? Will it be useful? As there was no gain by not asking, she decided to ask.

'You said that several miracles happen in the Congregation Center?'

'Yes.'

'Has ever a miracle happened in the congregation, where the participating youngsters decide to get married without accepting dowry? The day that miracle happens, I would start participating in the congregation, at least once every month.'

Shaji is not saying anything. He is really confused. What is it in her mind?

'Why the Lord who does all miracles, does not make this miracle happen?'

She was really furious. She used to hear dowry related tragic stories of her friends almost every day while travelling in the train. Marriages canceled as the dowry demanded could not be arranged. Man, deserting wife and kids as they are not able to meet repeated demands for more dowry. Stories of torture. She firmly believed that miracles should have taken place in these matters. Her experience made her aware that God did not have much influence on His creations.

Shaji had come on his bike. She declined his offer to drop her at her office. She was in an awful mood till she met Rajan in the evening.

'Sermon on the Mount was really grand.' Rajan said.

'Don't make me angry again.'

'Something to cool down?'

'An ice-cream will do.'

As they were having ice cream, Rajan asked.

'At home, what do you use to remove fungus from the old currency notes?'

'Why?'

'We too have stock of fungus infested notes in our house. They need be cleaned.'

'He really believed that dad has large stock of currency notes with him.' She said laughing.

'No! Then?'

'Nooo... ooo'

'I was thinking.'

'What?'

'How many ice creams and Masala Dosas were wasted?'

'Not a big issue!'

Day Seventeen

Last night she did not have the mood even to scribble something in the diary. Yet she had to. Her commitment to true history was sufficient to make her write even in the most adverse of conditions. Only her diary would come to the help of a history student one thousand years thence, to write impartially and without political leaning. If, on the other hand, someone chooses to commit suicide on the railway track or jump in a well, she would not be responsible! She has written this in the first page itself, using a red sketch pen.

Bhaskaran Nair was not there in the office when she returned after the lunch with Shaji. When she narrated the lunch episode, Malathy said.

‘Nancy you are very bold. Had I been half as bold, I would have been saved.’

It is good that the dowry issue was raised, said Malathy. Two months back she too had a proposal. The prospective groom and his family members liked her. It was almost certain that the marriage will be fixed. It was at that time that the dowry issue was raised.

‘We are not demanding any dowry. The boy has some outstanding loan on account of the purchase of his taxi car. That need be paid. One lakh is required for that. The girl whom his elder brother brought home had thirty sovereigns of gold ornaments.’

Father informed them that the ornaments can somehow be arranged, but not the cash. With that the proposal got aborted.

‘In our community also, people demand and take dowry,’ she said.

In the evening when she narrated the lunch time happenings, Mary said, ‘Why did you say all those things? Let the elders handle such matters.’

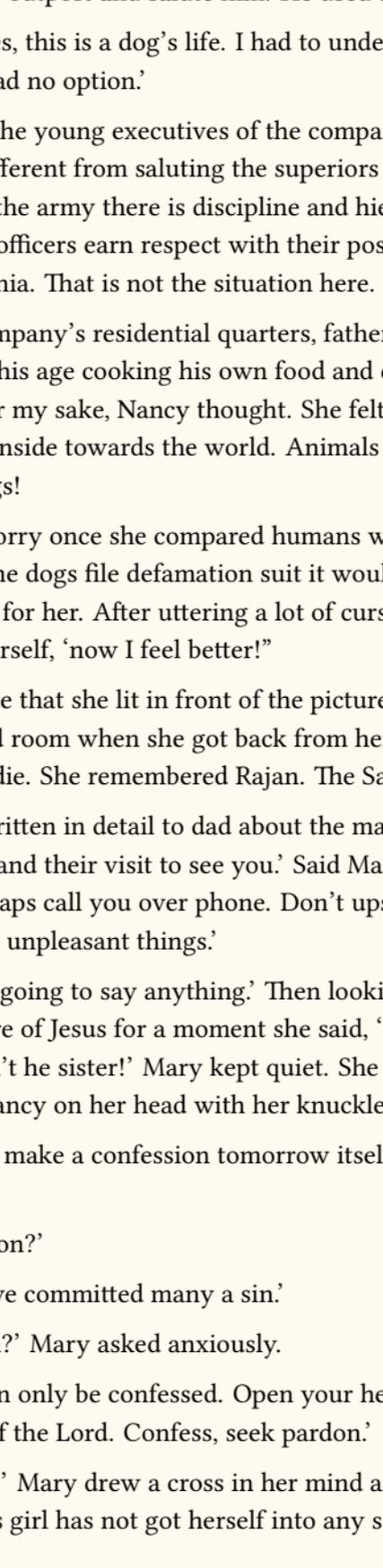
‘It is not enough to leave things to the elders.’

‘Ahem, what did he say?’

‘He will be firm on three lakhs. He said that if need be, he can demand more in future. Dad has a huge stock of cash infested with fungus due to storage; that’s what I told him!’

Mary looked at her sister in exasperation. She did not know whether to laugh or to get angry. All encounters with her younger sister had the same fate.

Dad’s photo is kept on the table. Nancy thought of Dad. He had brought that photo when he came home on leave last time. Through the thin glass of the photo frame, the man in his sixties with thick greying moustache and eyebrows which had developed white strands, looked at his daughters affectionately with his weary eyes.



‘My dear ones, this is dad’s official uniform.’

He was Security officer at a large factory in Kanjur Marg in Mumbai. Twenty-five security guards are working under him. Still when any executive of the company comes in their car, he himself would come out of the outpost and salute him. He used to say,

‘Dear ones, this is a dog’s life. I had to undertake this job as I had no option.’

Saluting the young executives of the company is totally different from saluting the superiors in the army. In the army there is discipline and hierarchy. Superior officers earn respect with their positions and insignia. That is not the situation here.

In the company’s residential quarters, father lives alone at this age cooking his own food and eating alone. For my sake, Nancy thought. She felt anger brewing inside towards the world. Animals who bargain. Dogs!

She felt sorry once she compared humans with the dogs. If the dogs file defamation suit it would pose problems for her. After uttering a lot of curses, she said to herself, ‘now I feel better!’

The candle that she lit in front of the picture of Jesus in the bed room when she got back from her office, is about to die. She remembered Rajan. The Saviour!

‘I have written in detail to dad about the marriage proposal and their visit to see you.’ Said Mary, ‘he may perhaps call you over phone. Don’t upset dad by saying unpleasant things.’

‘I am not going to say anything.’ Then looking at the picture of Jesus for a moment she said, ‘so glamorous, isn’t he sister!’ Mary kept quiet. She felt like hitting Nancy on her head with her knuckles!

‘I wish to make a confession tomorrow itself.’ Nancy said.

‘Confession?’

‘Yes, I have committed many a sin.’

‘What sin?’ Mary asked anxiously.

‘Those can only be confessed. Open your heart only in front of the Lord. Confess, seek pardon.’

‘Oh Lord!’ Mary drew a cross in her mind and said, ‘hope this girl has not got herself into any serious issues.’

Suppressing her temptation to see the Poojary at the temple, Nancy went straight to the church. Father was in the church house. ‘Praise the Lord, Father.’ Nancy said.

‘Always and forever, May the Lord be praised.’ Father said blessing her. When she told that she wished to confess, Father got very alert. The little lamb who lost its way is returning on its own!

‘You go ahead; I will be coming in a moment.’

Nancy waited at the Confession Box. When she saw Father Valiyedath coming carrying the holy book, she entered the confession Box. ‘I believe in the Almighty God...’

There was silence on the other side. Nancy could make out that Father was waiting breathless.

‘Yesterday I lied to a person and misguided him Father.’

Misguided? Father Valiyedath did not find it a serious offence. If one person gets misguided by the lies uttered by another, it only means that he does not deserve to live. Father said,

‘Say it clearly.’

‘I had this marriage proposal. That boy informed me that he wanted to speak to me.’

‘Then?’

‘He demanded three lakhs and forty sovereigns. I said he demanded much less. I also told him that my dad has a huge stock of money and he would give it just by asking.’

‘Child, why did you say so?’

‘Father, may I ask one question?’

Father Valiyedath did not accede immediately. Father knew this girl. He feared that her questions could land him in trouble. Once the thought came back to his mind that he is the shepherd and the one in front of him is the little lamb going astray, he said.

‘Okay, proceed.’

‘Father, where in the holy book is it written that dowry maybe demanded?’

Father thought. No, it is neither there in the Old Testament nor in the New Testament, kindly given to us by the Lord. Father said.

‘Nowhere is it said, child.’

‘In that case, is it not a sin to demand dowry?’

‘For that matter child, it is not written anywhere in the holy book that dowry should not be demanded.’

‘So, Father, you say that it is not a sin?’

‘Child,’ Father asked in a deep resentment, ‘Who is confessing, you or me?’

Father Valiyedath knew pretty well that if he intervenes in matters such as dowry, at the end there would only his own shadow to support him. These little lambs will go their own way in search of greener pastures. When Father Valiyedath imagined himself as the old shepherd with grey hair and beard carrying the shepherd’s stick and walking alone, he thought; no, I should not let it happen.

Father remained in the confession cabin long after Nancy left. He divided the Holy book at random and opened it. That was the book of psalms.

‘Lord! Save me from
The lips that utter lies
And tongue that betrays.’

It would have been easy for David to write those Psalms.

Church yard was empty. Son of God crucified is on the altar. Father tasted defeat. ‘Lord, why should I suffer like this?’

Day Eighteen

Intuition that the day was not going to be propitious flowed through her nerves. She was expecting her dad's phone call. The only person whom Nancy feared was her dad. And that was purely because of his love for her. Any time, she feared love. 'Lord, let not you or any boor tie me down with love'—that was her eternal prayer. She knew that dad is in for great disappointment. She was aware of the tears which that man is going to shed on her account. She always prayed that she maybe absolved of the responsibility for those tears. That was like seeking advance bail.

That's why she felt palpitation when the telephone rang. Her guess was right. Knocking on the glass door, Bhaskaran Nair called her.

'Varghese, your daughter is here, speak with her. It is STD, so don't waste time.'

'Dad' she answered the call.

'Child, the proposal that Antony brought is good.

Didn't you like him?'

'Dad...' she fumbled not knowing what to say. 'They are demanding too much of dowry.'

'I will manage the dowry issue. Antony will negotiate and fix it. My daughter need not enquire such matters. Did you like him?'

'Let me think it over, Dad. It is a matter of living together for the whole of life. Should not regret later.'

'Antony says it is a good proposal. Don't decline it.'

'When are you coming dad?'



'Once your marriage is fixed, immediately.'

'I shall write to you.'

She kept the telephone back on the cradle. When dad's face came to her mind, standing thoughtful after placing the receiver back, she said.

'Poor Dad!'

Rajan also said the same thing, 'Poor man!'

They did not speak for long. She was recounting. When Bhaskaran Nair asked about the proposal she had said nothing. Did she decide either way? She herself was not sure. Shaji's face resembled that of Judas is not a fault according to her. If he had love for her, probably she should have consented. Had he said, 'I love you' and 'to make you my own I am prepared to forego dowry', she would have readily said yes. But she felt this as pure business. Is this how you start a married life?

She looked at the young man sitting in front of her. Who is this man with a face resembling Jesus? What is his relationship with me? Rajan was in deep thought.

Nancy noticed with concern that the ice cream in front of him is melting. She asked.

'What are you thinking?'

He did not say anything.

'If you don't need the ice cream, say so; there are people waiting here.'

Laughingly, he pushed the cup towards her from which he had taken only two spoonsful. Nancy started relishing it as if doing a great sacrifice. She was behind none when it comes to sacrifices. Rajan's laugh was momentary. He was once again engaged in deep thought.

Night.

Keeping the diary open in front, Nancy contemplated for a long time. She found out that if one wants to see goodness in her diary, it is enough to count the number of days with Masala Dosa and Ice cream. She noted with satisfaction that the number of such days is increasing. It was just before coming out of the restaurant that he asked.

'Have you ever thought of a life with me?'

She said immediately, 'Yes.'

'Say more.'

'It is there in Mathews' book. The eternal fire which is kept ready for Satan and his messengers. Which means Hell.'

'I was thinking that you have no brain.'

'I have. That's why I decided to marry a Nair.'

'A Nair? You didn't say a Hindu?'

'No. Only Nair. Because Nairs are simple. They listen to their wives and remain henpecked!'

'How wonderful are the castles in air that this Achaythi (Christian lady) builds!'

Keeping the diary in front, she laughed. It was eleven o'clock in the night. If I delay going to bed further, it will be difficult to get up early tomorrow morning. She closed the diary.

Lying in bed, she remembered her dad. It pained her to see that she did not record in her diary, what dad had told her over phone. Sounds of the night are accusing her. What does this all mean?'

Day Twenty One

Saturday passed off uneventful. It was an old man's face that peered out of the engine driver's cabin. Either it could be that Rajan got old overnight, or this must be another driver. She assumed the second to be correct. Once at Ernakulum South station, she went to the cabin to ascertain. Yes, it was an old man. Scratching the short white beard, he was standing there as if to bless the passengers that he had carried in the train. Nothing to hope for, Nancy thought. Tomorrow is Sunday which means she has to run her train without driver for two days!

The news brought by uncle who came running before going to church, was not at all encouraging. The prospective groom wanted to marry Nancy. But the dowry amount cannot be reduced; and the forty sovereigns that was demanded should also be given. The second one only gave her some hope. That her dad would decline approval to this proposal for the reason that they are not prepared to reduce the dowry amount. On that Sunday night, instead of writing the diary, she wrote a letter to her father. After keeping it in her bag, she slept comfortably.

When she got out of her house the next day morning, she had no plans to visit the temple. But her legs led her to the temple. As he gave the prasadam, the Poojary asked smiling.

'You were not seen for the last few days.'

'Jesus,' Nancy thought, 'Is this guy also in love with me?' Apologizing for calling Jesus inside the temple, she accepted the prasadam from the Poojary.

She had resolved to jump in front of the train if Rajan was not there in the cabin that day. It was not necessary. He is sitting inside the cabin, head protruding out with a beaming face. Nancy turned her head away and boarded the compartment. The actors in the athakshari are sitting ready for the show.

It was when she was about to step on the pedestrian over bridge without going till the end of the train as usual, that she noticed it. Rajan was standing outside the engine room. When she looked at him, he called her, smiling at her. When she went to him, he asked, 'Why this enmity?' 'Why did you take leave on Saturday without sanction?'

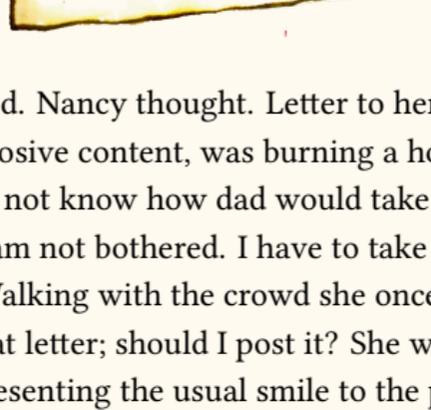
'Whose sanction?'

'Mine'

'Will tell you when we meet in the evening.'

'Suppose we don't meet in the evening?'

'Then it will not be told.'



I am cornered. Nancy thought. Letter to her dad, with its explosive content, was burning a hole in her bag. She did not know how dad would take it. Whatever it be, I am not bothered. I have to take some decisions. Walking with the crowd she once again thought. That letter; should I post it? She walked past after presenting the usual smile to the policeman who stopped the traffic to let her cross the road. When she reached in front of the post office, she took out the letter from the bag. Controlling her urge to read that letter once again, she dropped it in the box. If she read that once again, probably she would not post it.

'At what stage is your marriage proposal?' Bhaskaran Nair asked.

'Sir, how are you able to take such profound matters so lightly?'

'That means you have started taking matters seriously. And I am happy.'

'Sir, you need not be that happy.'

'Why?'

'I am going to run away with a Nair boy.'

'Why run? Can't you walk?'

'Sir, you are taking it as a joke. You will realize it once I am found missing.'

'Alright, who is that unfortunate man?'

'The name of that fortunate man, who practiced penance for seven births for getting me, is Rajan.'

'What is he?'

'He carries me daily from Angamali to Ernakulam.'

'Which means?'

'He is an engine driver.'

Bhaskaran Nair fell silent.

Rajan sitting across the table kept on smiling at her. The restaurant is almost empty. On Mondays, the crowd is generally thin.

'If I arrange in a single line all the Masala Dosas I ate, it will run the distance from earth to moon and back!' Said Nancy.

'If I arrange the currency notes I spent for that in a line it would run round the Milky Way twice!' Rajan said. 'Okay. But you didn't tell me why you kept a long face in the morning.'

'Because I have a beautiful face.' Nancy said. 'It is not that... If you miss a person whom you meet daily won't you feel upset? It will be expressed in many ways. Can you disclose now where you disappeared to on Saturday?'

'I am transferred. Again. Back to Coimbatore.'

Nancy sat as if she could not believe this.

'I had gone to enquire if it was possible to avoid the transfer. They said it was not possible. They insist that I should be there for at least three months. They will consider my request later.'

Nancy was sitting dumbfounded without eating the dosa. Her face was gloomy.

'Are you sad because you will have to say good bye to Dosas and Ice creams?'

Nancy was not smiling. Suddenly he saw that. Tears welling up in her eyes. They are dripping down her chubby face.

Nancy crying! This girl knows how to cry too? Rajan took her hand in his and pressed it gently.

It was the day when writing diary turned out to be a solace for her. The sounds of the night gave her company. Her sister who was sleeping peacefully on the cot did not know anything. She recalled what Bhaskaran Nair had told her. Never love an engine driver; their lives are over the rolling wheels. They will not be able to stay put anywhere. Oh, big deal! She closed the diary. However, she did not record that Rajan kissed her secretly while coming out of the restaurant, on the stairs. Let that remain in my heart—my closest diary.

She did not give a reply to Rajan's query whether she would wait for him. It was not necessary. He was leaving that night. Has to join duty at Coimbatore on Tuesday. He was supposed to join on Monday. But he had sought permission for one day to bid adieu to the beautiful girl who had stolen his heart while travelling from Angamaly to Ernakulam. 'Don't be happy as yet.' Rajan said. 'I have appealed to one more person. If that clicks, I shall board this very same train and be back—to pester you!'

'I am not that fortunate!' Nancy said.

Day Twenty Two



I have to prepare myself to face the days without engine driver, Nancy thought. So, after getting out of home she went to the temple. It was after she finished the pradakshinam that she noticed it. Instead of the young Poojary, Prasadam is being distributed by an old Namboothiri. She had this impulse to take the prasadam and throw it back into the sanctum sanctorum. 'God, you too have abandoned me!' Mourning, she came out of the temple. At this rate there is no use going to the church also. Instead of Father Valiyedath who resembled film star Suresh Gopi there will be an eighty-year-old Father to receive her! How long one can retain one's faith in God when affairs like this take shape?

The train was approaching the station. As she had totally lost faith in the fairness of God, she did not even look at the engine room. There will be some oldie scratching his beard and peering out of the cabin. She did not like that sight. But her eyes disobeyed her internal directive; they ran to the engine room... And there, with his head leaning out and beaming...

What! Is this not my engine driver!

She turned her head seriously and boarded the compartment. Her friends were surprised to see her win continuously in the Anthakshari. 'What happened to you today, dear?' they wondered.

Once again Spring! Nancy mulled over. Once again deluge of flowers! Gentle breeze spreading fragrance... Did I not tell you earlier?—I can write poems.



E. Harikumar



E. Harikumar (1943–2020) was an Indian Malayalam novelist and short story writer and novelist in Malayalam, the language of Kerala in South West India.

Born on 13 July 1943 in Ponani a coastal town between Calicut and Kochi. Harikumar's parents were Edasseri Govindan Nair, a well-known poet and playwright, and E. Janaki Amma, who in her early years had written poems and stories and translated Tagore's Fruit Gathering into Malayalam. Married Lalitha. Son Ajay, married. Wife: Subha.

Harikumar was a member of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi, the foremost literary institution under the Cultural Department of Government of Kerala, for two terms from 1998 till 2006.

Awards

- Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the year 1988 for anthology of short stories titled Dinosarinte Kutty (The Dinosaur's Baby).
- Padmarajan Award in 1997 for the best story of the year 'Pachhapayyine Pidikkan' (To Catch A Grasshopper).
- Nalappadan Award for the book 'Sookshichu Vacha Mayilpeeli' (Peacock Feather Treasured) in 1998.
- Kathapedam Award for the book 'Anithayude Veedu' (Anitha's House) in 2006[citation needed]
- Kerala State Chalachithra Academy Award for best story for the TV film 'Sreeparvathyude Paadam' (Holy Foot of Goddess Sreeparvathi) in 2012.

E. Madhavan

E. Madhavan was born to Malayalam poet Edasseri Govindan Nair and E Janaki Amma in Ponani in Malappuram district, Kerala on 9th November 1950.

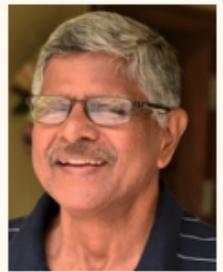
After graduation he went to New Delhi as a job seeker. After undertaking

short assignments as tuition teacher and assistant in a textile research laboratory, he joined the Reserve Bank in September 1973 and served in all the four major cities apart from Thiruvananthapuram and Kochi. Post-retirement he has been acting as Secretary of the Edasseri Smaraka Samithi while pursuing his interest in literary translations, financial literacy etc.

Wife: Susheela.

Daughter: Sreedevi.

Illustration: V. R. Santhosh



Epilog

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