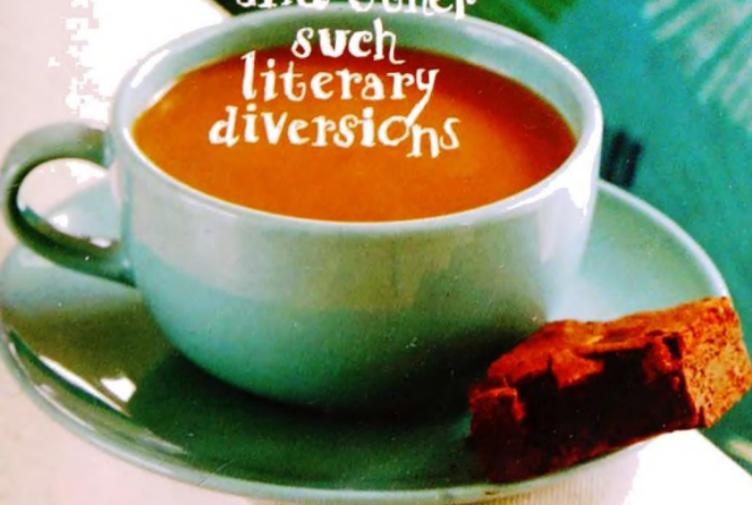


# *Goodnight and God Bless*

On  
life,  
literature  
and a few other  
things with  
footnotes, quotes  
and other  
such  
literary  
diversions



ANITA NAIR

*A sparkling collection*  
of literary essays, each one a bedtime  
ruminations, *Goodnight and God Bless* is  
about books, writers, book events, mice,  
mothers, airport hotels, the wind and  
other such unexpectedly thought-  
provoking subjects, snugly interwoven  
with a warmly personal and anecdotal  
history of the author and her assorted  
family members.

Spanning a literary career of a decade,  
this wise and witty book offers an ironic  
take on nearly everything, drawing from  
the experiences of the author as a woman,  
mother, daughter, wife and writer.  
Peppered with deliciously amusing quotes,  
footnotes and other erudite diversions,  
mostly unnecessary and unabashedly  
trivia, this is the perfect book to keep  
by your bedside, to dip and delve  
into anytime.

**GOODNIGHT AND GOD BLESS**



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MAGICAL INDIAN MYTHS

*Non-Fiction*

WHERE THE RAIN IS BORN (edited)

# *Goodnight and God Bless*

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*On Life, Literature and  
a Few Other Things, with  
Footnotes, Quotes and Other  
Such Literary Diversions*



ANITA NAIR

**VIKING**

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,  
New Delhi 110 017, India

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York,  
New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,  
Ontario, M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of  
Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria  
3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New  
Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Group (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,  
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL,  
England

First published in Viking by Penguin Books India 2008

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 9780670081516

For sale in the Indian Subcontinent and Singapore only

Illustrations by Vinayak Varma

Typeset in Bembo by Eleven Arts, New Delhi

Printed in Gopsons Papers Ltd., Noida

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*For Patrick Wilson\**



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\*Refer to page 60.



*'We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on  
And our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep'*

—*The Tempest*, William Shakespeare



*'The totality of true thoughts is  
a picture of the world'*

—*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein



*'For scientific discovery, give me Scott; for speed and efficiency of travel, give me Amundsen; but when you are in a hopeless situation, when you are seeing no way out, get down on your knees and pray for Shackleton . . .'*

—Sir Raymond Priestley, Antarctic explorer



## *Prelude*

All day I have thought of nothing but this: that supreme moment of satisfaction as I pull back the covers off the bed, plump the pillow ever so gently and then arrange myself into a position of perfect languor.

The bedside lamp casts a pool of warm, butter yellow. The windows are open to the night skies: a sliver of the moon, the firefly-like wing lights of a plane, sometimes the resolute Sirius, or even better, a wandering God. The window frames all this for me as it does the tide of the seasons. The still heat of the summer. The slant of the rain. A shadow of the winter chill.

The breeze rustles the leaves of the silver oak. I sigh and lean further back into the behemoth cushion that covers most of a headboard I had a carpenter make for me. Bunches of grapes, flowers

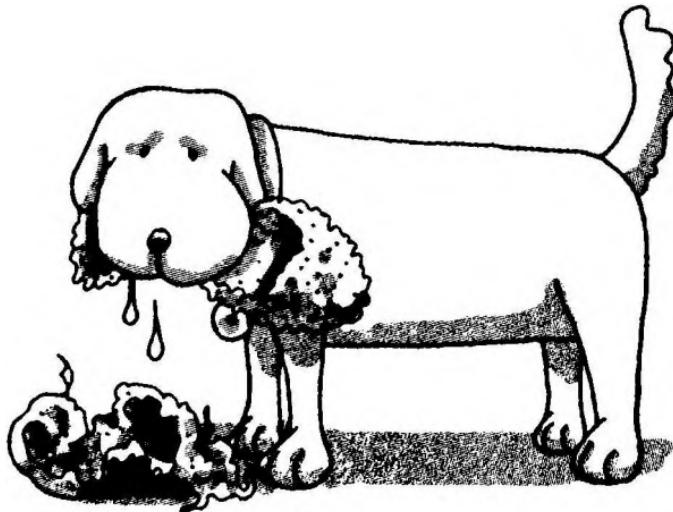
and trailing vines—curlicues of Greek mythical motifs in wood. Did I ever think that it would come to this?<sup>1</sup> That where once Dionysus and excess had layered my life, it is now tempered by a need to pause and reflect. In John Updike's *Rabbit is Rich*, Harry Angstrom muses: 'Middle age is a wonderful country, all the things you thought would never happen are happening . . .'

When I read the first book *Rabbit Run* in the Rabbit saga, Harry Angstrom was just another complex character; an epic hero of the everyday. For a while, I toyed with the possibility that it was a trace of B that I saw in him. But somewhere over the years and with each new book, I began to feel a growing sense of kinship with Harry Angstrom. I began to see myself as him. It's funny how we choose the most unlikely of people to feel an unnamed connection with. Harry Angstrom himself feels a certain sense of identification with the Dalai Lama. And so it is with an almost Harry Angstrom-like eye I survey the world, stake the purview of my life.

On my bedside table are an assortment of books and things. I dip and delve as the whim takes me. A book of poetry; a doorstopper multi-generational saga; a classic and a random pick. A

lip balm, a pen, scraps of paper stapled and a bottle of Eltroxin to stir my sluggish pituitary gland so that it may stir my thoughts.

On B's side of the bed too, the table bears a hodgepodge of this and that. A stack of books, his medicines and Sugar's—our Labrador Retriever who firmly believes that we and our bed exist to make her world a better place. When Sugar came into our lives, a friend remarked, 'She is going to drive you bananas till she is about three. Then she will settle down.'



Sugar is five. She is yet to show any signs of wanting to be Nana from J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. Meanwhile we wait, as do the line of plastic geese

in pink, blue, yellow and green on B's table, each of whom once held sugar-coated fennel in their bellies. Sugar treats which we fed one at a time to Sugar the dog to tempt her away from the bedroom slippers she pounced on every night. As if it were a rat that needed to be tossed and thrown into the air, caught and toyed with until it was chewed beyond repair . . .

By such riches is the density of our lives defined.



Seldom, only very seldom, do B and my books meet or exchange habitats. Most often they stay as literary cliques do: rigid, inviolable, laden with their own brands of prejudice and so full of 'them and us'.

Steam rises from a large cup. Maitreya, who once fitted into the crook of my arm, looms over me. 'Why do you need to drink milk?' he demands.

I shrug. 'My body needs it!'

His is always the voice of reason even though at present in the throes of adolescence, it may shift from tenor to soprano to baritone, all in one sentence. One of these days, I tell him, he

will sound like a combination of Shaggy and Alan Rickman. He curls his mouth. He doesn't mind the reference to Shaggy but for a diehard Harry Potter fan, he does not like the notion of sounding like the movie version of the hated Snape.

The truth is something else. All of us have our own bedtime rituals. And in that final moment before eyes close is that penultimate act which ushers in sleep. A swirl of cognac. A last smoke. Nasal drops. A swash of balm on the forehead. A sleeping pill. A prayer. A radio switched on . . . (Harry Angstrom, in the last years of his life, has his book of history.) And I have my malted milk. Whatever may have been the quality of the day, the delights and duress, the chaos and order, tomorrow augurs well if I have this to sustain my night. A warm, milky drink.

I take a sip. Outside, a bird calls. The strangulated cry of a nightbird. The fluttering of wings. From the other side of the mosquito screen, a lizard peers in. Beady eyes. A darting tongue. What must it see? What must it think?

Dog nails click on the tiles of the passage. A snout pushes open the door. I dip my finger in the milk and let Sugar lick. My mother wouldn't

approve. But my mother isn't here. So I give Sugar yet another lick at my finger. Sugar jumps on to the bed and settles at my foot, her head holding my ankle captive.

I wait for B. I wait as Elizabeth Barrett once did. For the slam of a door. For that tread on the staircase.

Between that first sip and last, I dwell on this and that. Every night there is something to ruminate on. The vagrant mind knows no boundaries. It leaps . . .



## Note

1. As Mrs Patrick Campbell put it so succinctly: the deep, deep peace of the double bed after the hurly-burly of the chaise-lounge.

## *O n e*

**F**rom across the road, the dense heavy scent of the champak<sup>1</sup> wafts in. From downstairs, the cloying sweetness of the pipe tobacco B smokes floats up. The acrid heaviness of the mosquito coil slowly dissipates.

Tonight it is fragrance that winds its way into my thoughts . . .



At first, I didn't know what it was. It was everywhere. A fragrance that curled its way

---

<sup>1</sup>[*Michelia Spp*] Flowering tree that blooms only at night. A myth states that a person who plants a champak will not live to see it flower. In my neighbourhood, the man who had the champak saplings planted along the roads was sacked from his job of estate manager just about the time the trees began to flower . . .

through the mellow heat, the golden light and hung in the air. I breathed it in again and again with an insatiable greed. This was a fragrance that made me ache for a time long ago. For an old school yard and a pala<sup>2</sup> tree said to be the haunt of Gandharvas. I would carry back its tiny cinnamon-gold flowers in my pencil box and sleep with them scattered on my pillow, their fragrance scenting my child-dreams.

That June afternoon, as I drove into the city of Padua, I knew again the fragrance of the pala flower. A fragrance and a memory that I had relegated into some distant corner of my mind emerged. ‘When nothing else subsists from the past,’ Proust wrote, ‘after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered . . . the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls . . . bearing resiliently, on tiny and almost impalpable drops of their essence, the immense edifice of memory.’

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<sup>2</sup>[*Alsteria scholaris*] Palakkad in Kerala is said to have got its name from a forest of pala trees it once was home to. These days pala trees are found only in temple grounds. Most Hindus in Kerala hesitate to have a pala tree at home as it lures both divine and malicious influences, they believe.

It was then I decided to create a remembrance chest of scents. Instead of photographs, I would raise memories with fragrances. And, like Grenouille, the hero of Süskind's novel *Perfume*, I began to devote myself to 'the subtle pursuit of scent'. Like him, I sought virtuoso odours that no one but me would admire or even take note of. Grenouille was 'enchanted by their meaningless perfection', and I knew as he did 'moments of truly innocent happiness' when I drank deep of a scent that unfurled a picture in my head.

Thus first came the Linden with its top note of a green tree, the innocence of a child's heart and the honey-coloured blossoms. And when I chanced upon the Linden linen water in France, once again, I slept on pillowcases scented with the pala-like Linden.

The social behaviour of most animals is controlled by smells. Moths will travel great distances pursuing a pheromone. Dogs and mice depend on odours to locate food, recognize trails and territory, identify kin, and find a receptive mate. And yet, we as civilized beings do not let ourselves be ruled by odours. This despite the human nose's ability to recognize 10,000 separate odours. In contrast, our taste buds know only

four distinct sensations—sweet, salty, sour and bitter. It is the odour that helps complete the full experience of taste.

Strange then that the olfactory sense remains largely uncelebrated except perhaps in literature where everything is grist for the mill.

In Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, contentment is a scent that Charles comes home to. A 'wife with a fresh fragrance that made you wonder where it came from, and whether it wasn't her skin that scented her petticoat'. Later it is a fragrance that is also her undoing and the catalyst of an adulterous affair between Emma and Rodolphe: 'She felt limp, she remembered the Viscount who had waltzed with her . . . his beard had exhaled that same perfume of lemon and vanilla . . . Her old desires became imbued with the sweetness of present sensation . . .'

Kalidasa, Shakespeare, Donne, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Zola, Hugo, Colette right down to Tom Robbins have all romanced the fragrance. And even the most horrendous monster of contemporary fiction, Thomas Harris's Dr Hannibal Lecter cannot remain immune to the power of smell. Lecter, meeting Clarice Starling for the first time, says: 'You use Evian skin cream,

and sometimes you wear *L'Air du Temps*, but not today.'

Once long ago, I used my perfume as a tool to announce my presence. I sought fragrances that were almost elusive. Distinctness, I thought misguidedly, came from a rare top note. Then I stumbled upon the meaning of the word perfume. It comes from Latin where it means 'through smoke'. And that is the essence of all perfume. Like time, it dissipates into nothingness even as you live it. So all that endures is merely the tone and tint of a smell.

The calming childhood association of vanilla and the sweetness of old books, crushed grass and dog fur, the poignancy of mango blossom and teenage fumbling in the sultry afternoon heat, marjoram and wedding garlands, caramel cream and babies . . . serenity that rides on a whiff of pipe tobacco . . .

Somewhere out there, they all exist. Time in a bottle. A djinn capable of laying bare forgotten secrets and hidden desires. And even tomorrows.



## *Twø*

The bedside table groans. The pile of books on it could totter and collapse at any moment. Defying all laws of gravity, they stand, possibly by the sheer weight of their collective intellect, and perhaps the cussedness they represent.

Every once in a while, I look at them and can't suppress a wave of pure delight. This is the joy of a magpie woman who has foraged and found a shiny vein of brilliant writing. Like a child who can't bear to be parted from a much longed for toy (B talks of going to bed with his cricket bat and Maitreya's bedmates have ranged from dinky cars to action figures to an iPod), I want them at my side where I can see and occasionally give them a little pat. This is a woman who has just put to bed her book-buying day.

Some years ago, on a whim, I walked into a small shopping complex on Church Street in Bangalore. I was hoping to find a photocopier shop. Instead, on the ground floor, I discovered a small second-hand bookshop. Blossoms. As I browsed, I felt the bookshop attendant's eyes on me. A long while later, he asked me if I was who I was. When I said yes, his face lit up and he beamed, 'Great! Great! I can't believe it! That you are here.'

I, in turn, felt like a movie star. Writers are not celebrities for their faces to be known. But somewhere in the back of every writer's mind, I am sure, is this great desire to be at least recognized in a bookshop. So to see my mere presence fill someone with so much excitement and joy was reason enough for me to cherish the moment.

The next time I was there, I saw that he had framed my comment in his visitors' book and put it up. Now I felt like a true superstar . . .

A year later, they had moved premises to another building on the same street. But now they occupied three floors. My fan, the lone attendant, had left to join work in a BPO firm and my framed comment was no longer on the walls. For a while, I dithered. A hole in the wall

had blossomed into a superstore . . . would the books too have become commodities? Only the saleable finding a place and the obscure banished?

Happily, the collection had only expanded. There was more of everything and I could see many hours of browsing content in the future. (And as if to placate my miffed ego Mayi Gowda, the new man, greeted me with as much fanfare and remembered to set aside the books they knew I had been looking for.)

Ever since then, once a month I make a pilgrimage to Blossoms. For the day my pick includes yet another Barbara Pym, a Monica Dickens and a Miss Read; the *Confessions of St. Augustine*; Mary Stewart's *The Crystal Cave*; and *The Eighth Continent* by Peter Tyson . . .

God knows when I will get around to reading them. But having them is enough and tonight they will sleep with me.



I usually deal with my literary angst in old old-book shops. There is a calm there that is seldom found in regular bookshops. The past looms allowing no peer pressure, no posters announcing the arrival of yet another major new talent, no

newspaper clippings detailing fabulous advances, no best-seller lists, no need to schmooze . . . just corridors of dusty, musty old books by either obscure or very dead authors. In fact, to quote Fran Lebowitz,<sup>1</sup> ‘I prefer dead writers because you don’t run into them at parties’ . . . or bookshops.

Old old-book shops, not expensive antiquarian types, but the kind where Perry Mason sits cheek by jowl with Mrs Beeton, who snuggles up to Dr Faust, have always had a strange effect on me. For one, a rush that’s akin to free-falling. A feeling of not knowing what next, as one cruises through the hallways of print. The romance of chancing upon a find, the excitement of discovery, the rush of blood to the head, sweet fulfilment . . .

Every time I travel to a new place, the first thing I do is to look for old books. So that whether it is at the corner of Jonker Street in Melaka or on West Hill Road in Kozhikode or a flea market in New Orleans or a barrow of books in Connaught Place or a lone shelf in the back

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<sup>1</sup>American essayist, humorist and in recent times has made frequent appearances as Judge Janice Goldberg on the television drama *Law & Order*. I particularly love her for these takes: *Your life story would not make a good book; Don't even try; My favourite animal is steak.*

room of a café in Kodaikanal, I know a firm sense of belonging when I get there.

As if time can be captured in my palm by the very act of holding a book whose pages emit the sweet and cloying fragrance of age. As if by inhaling this intoxicating fragrance, part memory, part organic, I can feel a tie bonding me to that book. And so for the moment I cease to be author. Teller of stories. Peddler of imagination. I am the supreme creation of the God of books. A reader and a book lover.



A long time ago when Chennai was Madras and Anna Salai, Mount Road, alongside the Central Station was this elegant red building called Moore Market<sup>2</sup> that housed many a bargain. From genuine leather shoes that fell apart by the time you had walked past Ripon building to Rolex watches that shed gold flakes to silk saris that shrunk when you perspired.

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<sup>2</sup>A covered market set up by the British. The building burnt down in the early 80s and for a while several of the bookshops that it contained reincarnated as pavement shops in various parts of the city.

But what Moore Market also held in its vast innards were old books. Little cubbyholes stacked high with books that were laden with dust and anamnesis and towards the front their more robust and popular cousins. In one such cubbyhole, between a shop that dealt with lingerie—blue and pink frilly panties and another that sold cardboard-camouflaged-to-look-like-leather valises, I found what to this day is my prized possession—a first edition of *Sorrell and Son* by Warwick Deeping. Only—then, a first edition meant little except that it was so tattered that I got it for almost nothing.

Every once in a while, my brother Sunil and I would take the suburban train from Avadi to Madras Central; we were in the city to shop for clothes. But I would insist on staying within Moore Market, quite content to settle for cheap accoutrements and use the extra for books. I would browse till a mysterious force would lead me to a find in a pile. Sometimes it was merely an author I had always wanted to read; sometimes it was a book that no one obviously had wanted to but it still was an exemplary piece of writing . . . I never left Moore Market without a book or a sense of triumph.

Old books seek me out; they talk to me. And only once did I fail to listen.

While holidaying in Kerala, Sunil and I were invited to take first pickings from the bookcase of a family emigrating to the USA. Mohan, the acquaintance who took us there, was hoping we would buy enough to satisfy seventy-eight-year-old Chacko and he, in turn, would gift Mohan the dinner service he coveted. Chacko flung open an inner door and my heart free-fell.

‘All these are my son Cherian’s books. He always shut himself up in this room and read. Once he left for Baltimore, we kept the room locked and opened it just once a month to dust it. I would have liked to have taken the books with me but he said no. I don’t read English books or I would have kept a few for myself. I’m sure you will find many interesting books here,’ Chacko gleamed with pride.

Cherian, ardent reader, mechanical engineer and perhaps a solitary soul, was a porn aficionado. He had the most extensive and explicit collection of pornography I had ever seen. Covered in brown paper and indexed quite neatly with titles like Screw, Blow, etc. Sunil and I looked at each other and grinned.

Cherian's books called, beckoned, and gestured quite rudely but I ignored them till I saw a couple of Moravias tucked away in a top shelf. And then, on a whim, because the name of the author Agynar Mykle<sup>3</sup> appealed to me, I picked that book. 'These will do,' I said.

Mohan threw me a dirty look and Chacko didn't even bother to hide his annoyance. 'WHY? Don't you like the books? Maybe they are too serious for you, huh?' He tossed at our retreating backs.



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<sup>3</sup> The wealth of sexual encounters must have prompted Cherian to pick Mykle's *The Song of the Red Ruby*. Read more about the book and author in chapter twenty.

## *Three*

**T**onight I decide to wait in my study for B and Maitreya to come home from a hard rock concert.<sup>1</sup> Below the room is the dining room and I know that Sugar is there with her head propped up on the wooden window ledge. It is her lookout point as the study is mine.

I look around the room and feel that surge of pleasure in me. It is a room I put much thought

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<sup>1</sup>As a teenager when the big bands seldom came to India, I ached to hear at least one big band play live. By the time the big bands began to see India as a prime destination, I discovered that I preferred to stay at home. The thought of being stuck with thousands of screaming, perspiring, excited people being too daunting a prospect. Also given my chronic near-sightedness, the figures on the stage could as well be my milkman, postman and grocer strutting with a microphone!

into and one I lavish a great deal of attention upon. It is also the repository of my every whim, architectural and literary. It has a corner window sliced into the wall around which a mason left his stamp with a frieze of plaster leaves and flowers. Outside, in a window box, foxtail asparagus flourishes.

On the east wall is a large but shallow bay window echoing the one below in the dining room. The room has a skylight, wooden floors and the walls are painted a deep pink reminiscent of the walls in the Uffizi Gallery. There is a tiny shelf in a corner with little thingummies collected from all over the world; there is a ceramic and gold heart from Este in Italy hanging from a wall light and on another wall I have hung a pair of tiny brocade shoes, the kind worn by Chinese women with bound feet . . . the rest of the walls bear a wealth of paintings and sketches given to me by friends; and prints of works by favourite artists.

An antique round table from my grandparents' home, a low table and a deep couch, a typist chair I first hired eleven years ago and paid five times over its value in rent until the furniture hirers advised me to buy it if I was sc attached to it . . .

this is my empire, my sanctuary and physical home to my inner life . . . for on three walls are bookshelves from ceiling to floor. My angels in the corner.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>2</sup>Apart from angels who hover, there are angels who crouch in my corner cupboard: my complete collection of peaty, smokey, single malts I have acquired a great taste for over the years; bottles of potent Grappa; and quiet, calming and full-bodied brandies. Some nights I invite B to my study and we sit side by side on the couch swirling these liquid pleasures in appropriate glasses and contemplating on the passage of our lives. B jokes that it reminds him too much of 'Welcome to my parlour, said the spider to the fly!' However, the fact remains that the angels crouched in the corner appear to only those who are there by invitation.

In his Nobel lecture Orhan Pamuk says, ‘The starting point of true literature is the man who shuts himself up in his room with his books . . . But once we shut ourselves away, we soon discover that we are not as alone as we thought. We are in the company of the words of those who came before us, of other people’s stories, other people’s books, other people’s words . . .’

It is inevitable that every writer constructs in his or her mind an inner room. In this room are the words of writers before us. Abstract and the very real. Descriptions and dialogue. A scene. A character. Eventually we settle on a few who then go on to become the angels in the corner. Companions who sit with us in our lonely hours. Cicerones who lead the way. Friends who never tell me ‘why bother?’ Critics who do not mince words if I fill pages with indifferent prose.

I carved my literary wisdom from several stalwarts who may never have been recognized as such. It does not matter to me that to list them as literary influences would be tantamount to literary hara-kiri.<sup>3</sup> I do know for certain that

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<sup>3</sup>literary hara-kiri—When I had admitted to Harold Robbins as a literary influence in a regular column I write, a friend in whom I had confided in as I wrote the piece

without their presence, I would never be the writer I am.

The angels in my corner don't ask much of me. But they do demand honesty for that is what hallmarks each one of them. Unless a book rings with truth, you needn't even bother, they tell me each time I sit before an empty page nibbling at the end of my pen, tasting ink and fear in my mouth.



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advised that I offset it by referring to an obscure East European writer, perhaps, as yet another serious literary influence. Keep the literary snobs happy, he remarked.

## *F e u r*

While rummaging in a box filled with odds and ends, I find a scrap of paper: ‘If ye have as much faith in me as a mustard seed, ye will move mountains.’

I do not remember how it came into my possession. Did it drop into my lap from between the pages of a borrowed book? A bit of paper I claimed for my own: Finders keepers, losers weepers. Did a Bible-thumping boyfriend in high school slip it into my diary along with entire sections of the Song of Songs?

My first true love, aged six, was given to bringing me tokens of his love. A pebble shaped like a crescent moon. A peacock feather. And once just before a math test, he drew out from his bag a greenish-grey disc crumbling at the edges. He

split it into two and inserted one into the pages of my book and the other into his. ‘It’s elephant shit!’ he whispered. ‘It doesn’t matter if you haven’t studied a word. This is magic. You and I are going to get 100/100!’

I didn’t doubt him for a moment. We had known each other for three years which constituted half our lives and had sworn eternal love to each other. He was my first true love. But I had to know. ‘Where did you get it?’

‘I followed the elephant!’

An elephant had been brought to the little suburb of Avadi we lived in, as part of the temple festivities. Someone had whispered in his ear the arithmetic-solving properties of elephant dung. So my first true love shadowed the elephant till it shat.

My first true love with a darling chin and eyes rimmed with so much kohl that it would have given Cleopatra a bellyache did for me what no one else has ever managed to match. Elephant shit it may have been but he brought me an article of faith.

I caress the brown paper on which the legend is printed in silver. My finger pauses at the word ‘faith’. I like the word faith. It has none of the

intensity of ‘fealty’ or the liturgical expanse of ‘ubberina fides’. Instead, like that childhood love, it resonates a purity of intent and the conviction of forever.

So tonight I let Faith in. Portly Faith who won’t let anything budge her. Resolute Faith. Helpmeet to my ruminations of the night.



More than anything else, what I admire about V.S. Naipaul is his complete and unshakeable faith in himself as a writer. Instead of juggling a job with literary ambitions, Naipaul worked at being a writer and no more. However, not every writer is fuelled by such certitude and usually ends up doing whatever it is that will pay the bills while stoking the muse. If you were to scrutinize carefully, you’ll discover that quite a few academics and journalists are actually writers prowling around in disguise.

Then there are the writers who are not qualified for either profession and have no option but to take what comes their way. Hence author blurbs that mention previous careers that are more adventurous than the books themselves. At the local library, I have discovered books

by authors who were once janitors or bus drivers, fruit pickers or rock stars and once even a gravedigger!

While all professions might make a significant contribution to a writer's literary career in terms of insights into human behaviour, nothing prepares a person for this whole business of being a writer as advertising.

I know. I was there . . .

Others, more eminent writers than I, have been there too. First in line would be Fay Weldon. Author of *The Fat Woman's Joke*; *The President's Child*; *Watching Me, Watching You* and *The Life and Times of the She-Devil*.<sup>1</sup> In an interview, Fay Weldon said, 'Advertising was the only thing I could do in order to earn a decent enough living . . .'

Carlos Luiz Zafon, Don DeLillo and Joseph Heller too worked in advertising. Then there is Salman Rushdie. From 1971 to 1981, Rushdie worked intermittently as a freelance advertising copywriter for Ogilvy and Mather and Charles

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<sup>1</sup> *The Life and Times of the She-Devil*—For those of you who'd rather see the movie than read the book, it was made into a very successful film starring Roseanne Barr and Meryl Streep.

Barker. God knows what kind of a copywriter he was, but read this verse from one of his books (and even if I am quoting him out of context), and you will know that this is a man still haunted by the spectre of advertising.

What kind of idea  
Does 'Submission' seem today?  
One full of fear.  
An idea that runs away.

Peter Mayle doesn't write literary fiction but his *A Year in Provence* sold over 500,000 copies. Some years ago, I met a sculptor, an Englishman who had the same first name and à la Mayle, lived in Provence. In the course of our conversation I asked him if the region and its people were anything like what Mayle had made it out to be. Peter the sculptor snorted, 'If you believed all that he wrote, you'd think all Frenchmen are moronic serfs tugging at their forelocks every time they see an Englishman, wanting to give away their vineyards and homes and their mushrooms for nothing!'

I grinned and suppressed the thought that what Mayle had done was write some incredible

and very convincing long-body copy and called it a book; and over 500,000 readers had accepted it as one. After all, Peter Mayle worked for thirteen years in advertising.



Twenty years ago, fresh out of college, I tried my hand at several professions. First came the week-long stint at a tabloid. I left when the assistant editor told me, ‘We don’t read books here. If we have nothing to do, we write letters for the *Letters to the Editor* section.’

Next I tried selling real estate for three months. Then came another stint as general dogsbody in an exhibition design firm. I wrote copy for exhibition panels; I proof-checked; I typed letters and the only time I went to meet a client about text for a newsletter, he threw me out. To this day, I haven’t figured out why. All I told the good doctor at the eye hospital was that the next time he called me for a meeting, he should meet me at the appointed time and not keep me waiting for two hours!

Since this was pre-medical/legal transcriptionist, technical writer and content editor days, and the few newspapers and publishing houses in Chennai

had already said ‘no’, there was nothing left for me to do except knock at the door of an ad agency.

I don’t think creative directors are religious souls except when it comes to the worship of their own mammoth egos. Nor do they believe that a deity might just come in disguise—in order to test the waters, to gauge the quality of generosity in an ad agency.

As I write this, I think of the countless phone calls I made. The numerous visits to various ad agencies. I waited for a creative director who would fling open the door of his cabin and say: ‘I don’t want to know why you’re here. Just come in, and sit down. Here, this is my favourite chair. Is it sufficiently close to the AC? Take off your shoes, please—no, let me help you; my secretary will wash your feet. We were just about to have a biryani; won’t you join us? How about a glass of tender coconut water? Eat, drink your fill; make a few long-distance calls. Then tell me, when you’re ready, who your parents are and where you come from and the reason that brings you here.’

Needless to say, it didn’t happen that way but I did manage to find my place in the copy department of a medium-sized agency. And even

won a few advertising awards. This, despite a senior copywriter who in my fledgling days told me that I should try doing something else. That I have little imagination.

But I never did anything else but be an advertising writer. Then one day I knew I could no longer go on doing something that I seemed to have a natural flair for but little love. And so I quit.

On my last day in advertising, I exhaled. The relief was immense and on numerous counts: I probably would never have to attend a meeting where clients, even if their chances of being knighted was one in a million, have to be addressed as 'Sir'. Never again would I have to hear about paradigm shifts; I still don't know what a paradigm is or why for some strange reason it is always shifting. Nor would I need to sit in on a brainstorm session where every Tom, Dick and Hari there would think it their business to advise me on the suitability of a word or a comma . . .

And yet advertising is a great apprenticeship for a writer.

First, I got used to rejection. Out of every ten brilliant campaigns, one sees the light of day. So what are a few rejection slips? Secondly,

I learnt to edit as I write and curb my temper when someone mauled my precious lines. Just about everyone in an ad agency from the tea boy to the CEO, and outside it, from the client's grandmother to his daughter's dance teacher have a point of view<sup>2</sup> about the campaign and specifically the copy. So one accepts editing more easily than perhaps a writer who has been a dog trainer. And finally, as an advertising writer has concocted enough rhetorical overstatements for middling products he or she will seldom be a victim of any hype . . .

Despite everything, I had fun and advertising paid my keep without my ever having to

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<sup>2</sup> It isn't as if the world of books and publishing isn't above such extraneous and unwarranted interference.

Doubleday entered into a contract with Theodore Dreiser to publish his book *Sister Carrie*. 'But then something happened. The story (as told by Dreiser and H.L. Mencken) is that Mr. Doubleday was in Europe when the contract was signed. When he returned he found his wife quite upset over the novel; he himself may have felt that it was an "immoral" book. In any case, the company informed Dreiser that the book would not be published.' [From the Introduction to *Sister Carrie* by Clarence A. Andrews, Ph.D., Department of English, University of Iowa]

compromise on what I really wanted to write. In fact, if I had my way, I would, in the manner of national service in some countries, order a mandatory couple of years in advertising before a writer sets about becoming one. There would be fewer bad books and even fewer prima-donnish writers.



## *Five*

Tonight I bring into bed a book Tanya gave me long ago. *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels. It is a book I have already read twice before but feel a sudden urge to read again. However, I shut the book and let it sleep. It is a still, cold January night. I huddle under the covers. Tonight I shy from all the books waiting to be read and would rather get lost in a little village by the sea where Tanya now lives.



Tanya Mendonca lives in Goa. But for some years when she lived in Bangalore, we were in the same neighbourhood. And I ran in and out of her home all the time. There was so much to talk

about: books, art, music, love, recipes, pets, gossip, travels . . . until I met Tanya, I didn't have a real woman friend. Suddenly I saw another angle to life. Coiled deep within the ties of husband, child, home, an advertising career, a secret writing life . . . Tanya's aura emanated freedom. Woman of independent means. Lady of leisure.

With eyes wide open, I observed the minutiae that constituted her everyday. And I couldn't stop looking. Everything was unlike what I had known before . . . Her kitchen was unlike my mother's or mine. Even her spices smelt different. Her housewifely skills that showed themselves in little touches. The feather duster that she flicked her books with . . . her basket of books by the door . . . and long before every suburban housewife thought it chic to float grimacing gerbera heads in bronze urulis, Tanya floated her early morning plunder off someone's hedge in shallow glass dishes . . .

Tanya managed, for a long time, an English Language School for French business people in Paris. Antonio is a painter of dramatic abstracts, a genius in the kitchen and a man of many talents. They had chosen to make Bangalore their home and Tanya ran a small lending library for a while.

It required much force of character to cling resolutely to her long list of literary fiction while the world clamoured for easy gratification and pulp fiction. But Tanya who smoked beedis and carried an enormous basket instead of a clutch purse wasn't going to buckle the popular way. She continued to buy titles that she enjoyed reading and if the world didn't, then that was the world's loss.

It was the library that brought about our meeting. I was preparing a lecture on women writers and was unsure where to begin. Tanya invited me to her home to give me a book from her personal collection. One whiff of that home—part beedi smoke, part the sweet smell of books, part much travelled lady, part freedom from convention and I was smitten.

And it was the peripheral world of books that cemented our relationship. It was Tanya with whom I could share the joy of discovering a new writer or rereading an old favourite; it was Tanya in whom I could confide the sting of a vicious review, the uncertainty a few careless words could create . . . Casting aside the face of indifference, I would ask: Does one retaliate or pretend to be removed from it all?

'Have a drink sweetie, put it out of your mind and get on with your book,' Tanya would advise.

It was Tanya's home I went to from a sit-down banquet one night, with stories of an Adonis I had been seated next to. He flirted with me and when I turned my head to speak to the person on the other side, he flirted with a man on his other side. If neither of us were available, he would have flirted with the table leg and the cutlery, I told Tanya.

And Tanya peered at me intently with that expression I knew so well (a glassy look enters her eye when she is struck by a sudden thought, her head leans forward and her jaw slackens so that her mouth falls open for a moment). Then she uttered in that low rasping-husky voice of hers, 'But Anita, that is just like Bruce Chatwin!'

I had read most of Chatwin's books but had never wanted to read up on the writer himself. With Tanya's pronouncement, suddenly I yearned to know everything about Chatwin. The man who could charm man, woman, fish knife and table leg.



In childhood, I had a friend named Natasha. Her father Mr Oza was tall and thin and had his nose buried in books. He was wacky and fun; but he also represented the cerebral world of books and lofty thought. To me, he was the golden mean as compared to the men in my family.

On one end of the scale were two of my uncles.<sup>1</sup> Artists and flamboyant men who converted a barn into a studio and splashed paint on canvas, twisted metal into sculptures, and talked of other artist cronies. Around them, life pulsated. The marijuana they smoked, the mango shakes they whipped up, the impromptu photo sessions they set up, to me they represented freedom of expression and bohemia and I ached to be one of them. So I lolled in that barn on the floor with their beer bottles that reposed alongside tubes of paint, wax blocks and batik

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<sup>1</sup>Students of the Madras College of Fine Arts, one of them, P. K. Gangadharan, was one of the founder members of the artist village Cholamandal near Chennai. He initiated me into a very important business practice (never do a piece of work for nothing, it devalues your work and your contribution); customer rights (if something is not up to the standards, protest, it is your right to do so) . . . and the art of eating with chopsticks.

needles . . . at the other end of the spectrum was my father, an orderly man given to neither excess of temperament nor habit.

At twelve, I stood 5 foot 6 inches tall, was thin and wore thick soda-bottle glasses. The moment I felt conspicuous I retreated into a book with the alacrity of a tortoise sensing danger. I thought it easier to deal with being ignored rather than being teased.



Mr Oza made me feel that it was perfectly all right to be so bookishly inclined. In him, I found a harbour where studiousness was encouraged rather than picked upon. And that was my

introduction to the world of letters. He gave his daughter and me lessons in Indian history but made us read up on the American Declaration of Independence though it was not part of the school syllabus. Sanskrit lessons were preceded by an early morning bicycle ride to watch birds. He let us loose in the British Council and American Consulate libraries in the city and steered us towards books we ought to read. And some days I copied out diligently for him in a long ledger his notes on the correspondence between Romain Rolland and Gandhi. Around him, I felt like a truly superior being—an intellectual.

If Mr Oza prompted an expansion of thought, Tanya Mendonca opened the horizon for me.



Late into the night, we would sit around her dining table and tear apart all those things I had craved to tear apart but never found anyone to do so with. In my world then, mostly what was discussed was who was sleeping with whom in which ad agency, real estate, Arundhati Roy's advance, and office politics.

It was a relief to sit at Tanya's table. Writers. Writing. Books. Critics. We were vestal virgins

worshipping at the altar of art and I was never more happier. If I felt like an intellectual around Mr Oza, in Tanya's presence I knew myself to be a writer.

It helped that B and Antonio took to each other like long-lost twins. They found much to talk about and spent several evenings pottering in the kitchen while Tanya and I dug deep into existential dilemmas of the twenty-first century woman.

And then there was Tanya's Paris. In the Tanya years, I had seen very little of the world and Tanya's travel tales made me even more conscious of the world waiting out there. Later Stefan and Alvaro, Parisians and friends, would show me a Paris I might have never seen otherwise—the oldest tree, the oldest house, the art and trivia, where to get the best ice cream, the finest macaroons . . . and yet it fell short by some strange expectation Tanya had conjured in me. This wasn't Tanya's Paris.

But more than anything else though, Tanya offered me that brilliant gift of friendship—the unconditional acceptance of what I had done or wanted to do. And sometimes even a mere validation of a deed or thought.

Remorse or good sense would prevail later and I would do the right thing but at that juncture in time Tanya saw my point of view and that was enough . . . ‘I completely understand! I completely do, sweetie, this thing you feel!’ was the talisman that preserved my sanity for a while . . .



One year when Tanya went away on holiday, she gave me the keys to her apartment. I worked in an advertising agency in the mornings and late in the afternoon, I would go to her apartment to think. I was working on my novel *The Better Man* then and felt the need to get away from the confines of home and family.

Mostly though I napped in what must be the world’s most comfortable couch with her love-you-leave-you-love-you cat Romeo, and occasionally took a book down from her laden bookshelves and read. And fantasized about living alone in an apartment such as hers with a more loyal feline companion I would call either Maurice or Humphrey. A sedate sort of a cat who would sit on my lap while I read. In that home photographs and poems would climb walls, hand-

painted enamelware would grace the table and French songs about love being like an ice cube would play all day while ice would clink in squat glasses of drinks . . .

I never read as much as I did in those years when Tanya and Antonio were our neighbours. Or talked as much or laughed as much . . . Or pondered as much.

When I think of those years with Tanya, I see in my mind a painting titled *Poetry* by William Affleck.<sup>2</sup> Of a woman sitting on a bench in a tucked-away corner of the garden reading a book. Behind her is a sun-washed old brick wall on which creepers in bloom trail . . . The cat isn't in the picture but you know it is there somewhere as the drone of bees and the twitter of birds. And perhaps a plate of fruit waiting to be eaten . . .

It is to me a study of eked-out time. A life in the shade.



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<sup>2</sup>British artist William Affleck (1869–1915) studied art in London and exhibited his landscapes and genre scenes throughout England.

## *S ix*

*T*is tantamount to folly to trace one's steps back in time. Nothing is ever what it was. Memory and time have a way of imbuing the remembrance of things past<sup>1</sup> with an edge that reality can seldom cope with. But what is worse

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<sup>1</sup>*Remembrance of things past*—a phrase all of us like to toss around knowing that the learned listener would immediately connect it with, if not an intimate understanding, at least a casual acquaintance of Proust. Therefore, learned reader, imagine my surprise when I discovered the Shakespearean sonnet: *When to the sessions of sweet silent thought, I summon up remembrance of things past.*

And later . . . ‘when Voltaire translated Shakespeare’s sonnets, he translated that phrase into French as “à la recherche du temps perdu”? That’s where Proust got it.’ (*The Year of Reading Proust*, Phyllis Rose, p. 95)

is trying to read a book that one read at that precocious age of fifteen.

In an attempt to grab all of life in one sitting, I had then set myself the literary equivalent of Heracles's Twelve Labours. I lined on the bookshelf Styron, Nabokov, Lawrence, Bellow, Fowles and a few others. I went to Fowles more easily than to the others as I had already read *The Collector* with a mounting sense of excitement. But with *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, I hit a wall . . . at the end of the book I stumbled under the weight of 'Oh hell, what's the fuss all about?'

I much preferred Colleen McCullough's *Thorn Birds* or if I was seeking a book set in nineteenth-century England, the more easy prose of Jane Austen or Charlotte Bronte.



In my late twenties, I went back to Bellow, Styron and Nabokov and discovered that they stood up to being read again with far more élan and distinction. However I couldn't quite summon the energies to attempt *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. By then, I had already seen the film. Pinter's screenplay and the intensity of Jeremy Irons's and

Meryl Streep's Charles and Sarah respectively, further enhanced the sense of eeriness . . . It was as if I knew the book would demand more than I was willing to give.

And yet as I began reading *The French Lieutenant's Woman* this week, by the third page I was asking myself: How did I miss it all? This happy matrimony of style and plot, simplicity and wit . . . and such chutzpah.

Fowles exercises absolute control over the book, allowing nothing lax or self-indulgent. As in Pahmuk, in every word, period mark and pause, there is the presence of Fowles. This godlike stance of the novelist livens up the storytelling even more. For his observations are dry, pithy and guaranteed to elicit, as American sitcoms promise, a guffaw a line. Of Charles, he writes: 'He had, in short, all the Byronic ennui with neither of the Byronic outlets: genius and adultery.'

Irony, and subtle irony at that, is wasted on a fifteen-year-old. But finally I was beginning to see what the fuss was all about . . .



## *Seven*

**H**e is the kind of person people always feel compelled to describe as a jolly man.

A man who would be a near-perfect Santa. Ho ho ho seemed to emanate from him.

‘Make me your CFO,’ I hear him say. ‘Chief Fun Officer! Ho, Ho, Ho!’

Laughter rings in the air. The party shows no signs of wearing itself out. I glance at a watch on someone’s wrist. Quarter past eleven. I long for escape and my bed. But I need to be here and let life draw me into its spirals. Waiters waltzing with cheese balls on trays. The clinking of ice and stray snatches of conversation. Life. Life. Life. Even if only of a particular sort.

In a hiatus between antiseptic bonhomie and bawdy jokes, he turns to me, ‘So what do you do?’

'Not much,' I say. Could a literary life be referred to with the breathless iambic pentameter of, say, harnessing wind power, transplanting hearts or saving the whales? Or did it necessitate the sombre and monotonous dirge of software, priority banking, or turbine building,

'Easy life!'<sup>1</sup> Aren't you lucky huh? Ho, Ho, Ho!' he chortles.

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<sup>1</sup>Perhaps the best evocation of an easy life is this excerpt from a letter Herman Melville wrote to Evert Duyckinck in December, 1850: 'Do you want to know how I pass my time?—I rise at eight—thereabouts—& go to my barn—say good-morning to the horse, & give him his breakfast. (it goes to my heart to give him a cold one, but it can't be helped) Then, pay a visit to my cow—cut up a pumpkin or two for her, & stand by to see her eat it—for it's a pleasant sight to see a cow move her jaws—she does it so mildly and with such a sanctity.—My own breakfast over, I go to my work-room & light my fire—then spread my M.S.S. [*Moby Dick*] on the table—take one business squint at it, & fall to with a will. At 2½ p.m. I hear a preconcerted knock at my door, which (by request) continues till I rise & go to the door, which serves to wean me effectively from my writing, however interested I may be. My friends the horse & cow now demand their dinner—& I go & give it to them. My own dinner over, I rig my sleigh & with my mother or sisters start off for the village—

'Yes, I am,' I agree.

As occupations go, writing is one profession most writers bumble into. Except for Jeffrey Archer who, I have read, methodically set about becoming one, I don't know of any who woke up one morning and decided, 'Okay! I think I'll be a writer!'

There is either a cause or a catalyst. My moment of truth occurred in October 1990, appropriately enough in a bookshop called Shakespeare & Co. in Manhattan. There I was, too broke to do anything but browse, when I chanced upon a row of shelves with a runner that read: *Arranged by the author in order of preference.*



That was it. That was all I wanted. Neither fame nor money, awards or movie rights. All I wanted was a shelf full of books in a bookshop and a runner that said: *Arranged by the author in order of preference.*

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& if it be a Literary World day, great is the satisfaction thereof. My evenings I spend in a sort of mesmeric state in my room—not being able to read—only now & then skimming over some large-printed book.'

## *Eight*

I kick my shoes off and throw my bag on the sofa. Then I collapse on the bed. It has been a long evening not helped by the fact that the cab driver I had was new to Bangalore. As he meandered and lost his way for the fourth time, I decided to take charge. And with the familiarity of an old resident, I helped him find the venue. Weaving our route through one-way roads and underpasses, free left turns and no U-turns . . . and once again I asked myself: Why do I feel obliged to attend every book launch in town?



I don't know how it has come to be, but every time a book event takes place in Bangalore, like Kilroy, I am there. Perhaps it all began with this decision I made a while ago to attend any book

event I was invited to. And if I had been invited by the author, I would go even if there was a cyclone outside blowing the rooftops away.

When my first book, a collection of short stories, was released, in that first flush of author-power and the belief that here was the beginning of the end of my advertising career, I disdained my advertising acquaintances and invited all kinds of strange people. I had also asked my family to stay away because I wished my public humiliation (the fear that no one will turn up begins to haunt you the day you set up a reading) to remain private. Now of course on hindsight, I wish I hadn't been so priggishly smug or stupid. What I should have done was invite just about anyone I knew. From family and friends to the chauffeur to the gardener to the next-door neighbour whether they actually read a book or not.

Eventually when people turned up, the bulk of them were faces I hadn't ever seen before. And most of them hadn't been invited. They were the people whom I have learnt to respectfully refer to as the 'unknown readers'. And the bulwark of a literary career.

But in that first half-hour between the time I got to the venue (a smallish-sized bookshop luckily for me) and waiting for the room to fill

up, I understood where that clichéd image of soon-to-be fathers pacing outside the labour room originated from. It must have been a writer who thought of that first . . .

‘What if no one turned up? What if no one turned up?’ was the chorus that sang in my head. Occasionally I would peer outside and when someone sauntered in, I would wonder if they were here to hear me read or to merely browse. (And you know your name means nothing to them when they pick up your book and scan its entire 200 pages and then put it down and pick up a John Grisham.)

So when the first group of people straggled in, I was ready to throw my arms around them and weep in sheer relief. Thank God, I wasn’t going to read to the bookshop owner, attendants and the bookshelves . . . I think it was at that point I made a promise to myself that if there ever was a book event I was invited to, I would go. I would be there to show solidarity and to swell the numbers because I know how much of a heartache it causes when you invite people for a reading and only a handful, or worse, no one, turns up.



Some years ago there was a period of three weeks when I ran a severe risk of being called a book launch groupie because I was at four book launches and in true groupie style, I did two cities, four different venues . . . Two were, of course, what were christened by the media as the greatest literary events of the year. That superlatives had got mixed with hyperbole hadn't escaped my notice but circumstances deemed that I be there. So even if I wasn't required to swell the numbers, I ended up first at David Davidar's book launch for *The House of Blue Mangoes* in Bangalore.

The thing about book launches and particularly hi-profile ones such as David Davidar's is that they attract a lot of pseudo-intellectuals who demonstrate the holes in their intellect with what they think are clever questions. At Davidar's launch in Bangalore, the most original (and honest) question I heard was 'How old are you?'

Sometimes a person will stand up and in a most convoluted fashion mouth a question which is actually a comment. The poor author who is still trying to figure the first part of the question/comment has no recourse but to gulp like a petrified goldfish, smile wisely and say, 'I agree!'

I discover that it helps to have another person seated with you during these anxious moments.

You can look at that person's face; exchange a smile that says 'Seriously what am I doing with such philistines?' and in the most blasé manner wholeheartedly deflect attention with a 'That's a very interesting question!'

The second book launch was a coffee table book of Indian interiors. I had a most selfish reason to attend this. My house, my living room actually, was featured in the book and I was dying to see how it looked, lit up and stretched by wide-angle lens ... This was a very sophisticated book launch with neither angst nor unknown readers. Besides, there was nothing literary about it. Champagne flowed. Canapés circulated. Cheeks air-kissed. Conversation flourished ...

Four evenings later I was in New Delhi and this was also the 'greatest literary event of the year'—Khushwant Singh's<sup>1</sup> autobiography. I

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<sup>1</sup>Subsequently, I was to meet Khushwant Singh a few times and each time I came away marvelling at the man and the chutzpah he exemplified. I only wish I could emulate him. From the sign outside his door—Do Not Ring the Bell Unless You are Expected—to how he clears his home of friends, acquaintances and hangers-on at about quarter to eight in the evening to his drollness ... When I met him last, we talked a bit about avocados and he seemed to be as passionate about them as I am. Later I was to write him

needed to show neither solidarity nor swell the numbers but I was staying with someone who was going. The ballroom was filled to the rim with literary types, pseudo-literary types, journalists, husbands/wives of literary types and pseudo-literary types, publishers, publishers' assistants, husbands/wives of publishers and publishers' assistants, socialites and gate crashers . . . There was more malt whisky in that room than in all of Scotland I think. (By the way, that helps immensely at a book launch. To bring out the booze. It ensures a heavy attendance and even if they haven't read a book in the last decade, people like to hold a drink in their hand while they discourse on Indian writing in English.)

At first I didn't know a face apart from Khushwant Singh's which I recognized from pictures. And then someone I just met and who had much to do shoved a drink into my hand, introduced me to a tall distinguished-looking gent and said, 'He is a Nair too! I'm sure you'll have much in common.'

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a letter telling him how I have been waiting for my avocado trees to blossom and fruit so I could send him some. Only Khushwant would reply: 'Tell your trees to hurry up. I am 93.'

The gent smiled into his drink and asked,  
‘Are you a real Nair?’

I looked into my drink and said, ‘Yes!’

Silence reigned. Then I asked, ‘What about you?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

We, I think, had exhausted everything we had in common.



Fortified with alcohol, and a recklessness born out of being in a strange city, I abandoned Nair and sauntered<sup>2</sup> around. By the time we left, I

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<sup>2</sup> Thoreau says it is a great art to saunter or something to that effect. Sauntering in the rarefied atmosphere of a book event is best accomplished with a glass of something in one hand . . . a certain natural swagger is achieved in the gait.

had been introduced by an ebullient and slightly silly in-his-cups writer as his ex-wife to another writer who later asked me in a horrified whisper, ‘That wasn’t true, right?’

And I had been asked by a literary columnist who had met me last when I was reeling from a damning first review of *Ladies Coupe*,<sup>3</sup> ‘Now that it is still doing so marvellously well, do you feel vindicated?’

In contrast, the fourth book launch back again in Bangalore was quiet to begin with. A non-fiction book on courtship and marriage, it had a panel discussion on the relevance of marriage in this age. Marriages were ripped and torn, sewn and mended while the author, Vijay Nagaswami, moderated. Just as it was beginning

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<sup>3</sup>Key phrases of this review were used in my novel *Mistress* where a dance critic annihilates the character Koman’s first important Kathakali performance. The reviewer had in particular targeted the egg episode in *Ladies Coupe* (pp. 87–90). Later I felt even more vindicated when I stumbled upon a phrase in an essay about the American writer Sherwood Anderson—a ‘born story teller; the man who can make even the egg triumphant’.

to resemble a Jerry Springer show, he intervened and ended the event with a little reading.

I also went for another book event about that time. And this was to commemorate thirty years of the Premier Bookshop in Bangalore. And that is a feat that is to be not so easily dismissed. In contrast to most bookshops with brightly lit shelving and hassocks for browser comfort and inventory lists on computers, the Premier Bookshop is a dark and deep cavern where books stand in tall piles. Mr Shanbagh seems to know exactly which pile contains what and rather like a restaurant steward changing the tablecloth without moving the cutlery, he has a knack of pulling out a book from the bottom of a pile without bringing the whole stack down.

Just about everyone in Bangalore whose reading habit stretches beyond Sheldon and Danielle Steel would at one time or the other have found their way there. Long-standing customers Ramachandra Guha and his wife Sujata Kesavan hosted a lunch for a few of Premier's long-time customers and a few well-wishers (and a few strays). There were speeches,

accolades, jokes . . . but no press, no fanfare . . . just a quiet afternoon celebrating as much as venerating a bookseller and his bookshop.

Later, in the newspapers, I read a few elaborate articles about the lunch and Mr Shanbagh. One by a person I overheard asking, ‘So what is this bookstore like?’



(Patrick Wilson, to whom this book is dedicated, was one of those ‘unknown readers’ referred to earlier. Literary mascot, lunch companion, SMS partner and giggle buddy that he is now, Patrick won a permanent place in my heart by buying three copies of the few copies sold at my first book release event.)

## *Nine*

*'Orton and Halliwell died in the early hours of 9 August 1967. The right side of Orton's head had been staved in with a hammer which lay on Orton's counterpane. His cranium carried the mark of nine hammer blows which, to the coroner, suggested a frenzy.'*

*Halliwell lay nude in the middle of the bedroom. The top of his chest and head were splattered with blood. Near him on the floor was a glass and a can of grapefruit juice with which he'd swallowed twenty-two Nembutals. On the desk, police found a note:*

*If you read his diary all will be explained.*

*K.H.*

*P.S. Especially :he latter part.'*

I shut the book and lay it down softly. Then I exhale. A quiet letting down of defences. It is as if I fear that to make even the slightest of noise would awaken the winged monster within the pages.

I do not know how I feel about the *Joe Orton<sup>1</sup> Diaries*. This was an Echidne<sup>2</sup> of a book. As alluring as a lovely woman and as frightening as a speckled serpent—the two fused into one.

A book that devoured me as I read it and then spat forth a dreadful brood of thoughts about cohabiting with a creative person: The triple-headed hound of hell that revealed murkiness beneath the commonplace. The many-headed Hydra of deceit to stoke the muse. The monstrous fire-breathing goat that chews on all things sacred

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<sup>1</sup>Joe Orton—British playwright (1933–67). Author of plays such as *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw*. Kenneth Halliwell was his companion for sixteen years.

<sup>2</sup>Echidne—A child of Phorcys, a wise old man of the sea. Half of her was lovely woman and other half a speckled serpent. She ate men and raised a brood of monsters—Cerebrus, the hound of hell, Hydra a many-headed water serpent, Chimaera the fire-breathing goat and Orthus. (Robert Graves, *The Complete Greek Myths*).

and turns them into material to be used in the creative process. The twin-headed Orthus that lay with me and impregnated me with the stoniness of the Sphinx and the ferocity of the Nemean Lion when at work . . .

A book that came with a personal rider: What must it be like for B to live with me?

I dart a glance at his face. In the soft light of the table lamp, his profile is in shadow. B often complains of my mood swings; of my abrupt and total withdrawal from the world and of shutting him out. I have often joked of what I call my Byronic temperament<sup>3</sup>: a tendency to weight fluctuations and mood swings. Some days I am all sunshine and laughter and other days, my irritability and melancholy wear even me out . . . More than anyone else, it is B who must bear the brunt of this. Now I wonder at the toll it must take on him.

In Updike's *Rabbit Redux*, there is a moment when it comes to Harry Angstrom: 'Growth is

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<sup>3</sup>Recklessness was also part of the Byronic temperament. However, I have no intention of divulging details of my recklessness at this point. Interested parties will need to wait until 2050.

betrayal. There is no other route. There is no arriving somewhere without leaving somewhere.'

Was that what caused Kenneth Halliwell to finally flip? Not the flaunting of success in his face or the parading of lovers or all that seemed to come to Orton so easily, but the thought that he, Halliwell, had been left behind. The knowledge that the ultimate betrayal was that of Orton outgrowing him. That he was tolerated and endured rather than loved and needed.

The *Joe Orton Diaries*, a book I had begun hoping to discover interesting insights into the London of the 1960s, leaves me with a sense of unease.

Tonight I can't tell my pillow from a stone.<sup>4</sup>



I wish I could say that the Orton diaries cured me of the perverse pleasure I derive from reading

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<sup>4</sup>I can't tell my pillow from a stone—Line from *Black Muddy River* by Grateful Dead. Was Halliwell in the end grateful to have been done with it all? And Orton? Did he know it was only a matter of time before something exploded?—these are questions that will haunt me for as long as I live.

journals. And yet, the truth, as I understand it, is there is a bit of a voyeur in each one of us who profess a liking for fiction. Much as we might claim loftier reasons such as a love for the language or a deep interest in human behavioural patterns, what really gets to us is the peephole that fiction offers by way of glimpses into other people's lives.

Perhaps this is the reason why among the various genres of writing available for a reader, I enjoy tremendously the journal. Unlike a memoir or an autobiography that is generally marked with restraint and selective memories, a journal seldom holds back. Often the writer of a memoir or an autobiography overlooks the details and tends to concentrate on the greater meanings of existence, while a journal provides peek-a-boo images of a person and the warp and weft of his or her everyday life.

I have no qualms about admitting that I am curious. I like to know about other people—what they wear, what they eat, whom they love, whom they hate, what they read, who their friends are, whether they floss, what secret quirks they have. It helps flesh a shadowy shape I have in my mind about a person . . . which is why

taking a cue from Harry Angstrom, I usually examine bathroom cabinets. The wealth of information they can provide is amazing.

In one home, I discovered a secret sybarite. In another, I encountered hoarders. People who will not be seen with one hair out of place have toothpaste tubes mangled out of shape, shampoo bottles standing on their heads and toothbrushes that resemble a flower in full bloom with its bristles all splayed out.

My parents' bathroom cabinet reveals all the aches and pains they don't tell me about; I see the little girl in my mother in her fondness for stick-on bindis in all shapes, sizes and colours in spite of the fact that she is allergic to them and my father's optimism—he uses a hair oil that is supposed to make hair grow thick and luxuriantly, never mind that he's been bald for almost forty years.

Curiosity is also the reason why I am an inveterate eavesdropper. I will shamelessly and with great interest eavesdrop in buses, trains, airplanes; in restaurants and at parties; on the street and in shopping malls; at phone booths and in banks . . . never mind that I don't know the characters that unfold in the narrated melodrama

nor the fact that often all I get to hear are mere snatches of conversation.

One of my all-time favourites is this tid-bit of a conversation between a father and his little boy who couldn't have been more than six years old. I was waiting in a subway station in Harlem for a train and the father and son stood a little distance away. The son prattled oblivious to everyone around him until the father could bear it no longer and he bent his head and said, 'You are talking gibberish! Do you know what gibberish means? It means you don't know what you are saying!'



## *Ten*

I am exhausted. A strange bed. A hotel room in Milan. Outside, the February skies are an indeterminate colour. Snowflakes fall on to streets already heaped with snow. It is early evening but my body clock is still set to Indian time. All I want to do is sleep. But I do not have the energy to unpack or rummage for a book. The hotel has a pillow menu and much to offer. Everything but what I want—a book to make me feel less lonesome. The thought of being caught for even a stray moment without a book to bury my nose in terrifies me . . .



The phone beeps. A message from home. Two actually:

*'Oh dear, at airport. The flight is 30 minutes delayed—the place is in chaos, well, it would be as new airport ten years late.—It is like Majestic here and I am sure I just saw my dhobi. Probably going to check on his house in Goa.'*

*'The end is nigh . . . Finished . . . Getting early am flight . . . Probably with SOMEONE'S dhobi as on Deccan . . . Am hiding in my hotel as the client has big ring function going on downstairs. Very large ladies in very large diamonds were tumbling out of mercs earlier . . . Now I shall go off to the very good gym to shake a few calories off my child-bearing hips . . . then go down to the pub and see if I can find a nice Tamil boy who wants to discuss the meaning of life, love and pain and whole damn thing . . . Love . . . Belinda Bagmaker of Bangalore.'*

When I stop giggling, I am ravenous. The skies may be the colour of dirty underwear and my books may be at the bottom of the suitcase but across the road is a trattoria, a bottle of Barolo and Belindaesque commentaries from halfway across the globe . . . Match that, Khayyam, I think.

I am happy. Ridiculously happy.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>I first stumbled upon the concept of being ridiculously happy in a Kathakali libretto *Bali Vadham* written by Kottarakkara Thamburan where Ravana knows himself to be happy and dissects the reasons for his happiness:

~ ‘I feel the greatest joy. Why is that?’

‘Now I understand. Once I offered penances to Brahma the creator and acquired all the boons I could. And so I knew the greatest content. Then what did I do? Yes. In all ten directions I was triumphant and thus acquired my throne and emperorship. I won over Kubera and seized the Pushpaka Vimanam. Since I uprooted the Kailasa mountain and threw it, Shiva was delighted by how it made Parvati cling to him and offered me his hair ornament.

This way my fame spread to all three worlds. Because of that I know supreme joy.’

Henry Miller writes: ‘It’s good to be plain happy; it’s a little better to know that you are happy; but to understand that you are happy and to know why and how, in what way, because of what concatenation of events or circumstances, and still be happy, be happy in the being and the knowing, well that is beyond happiness, that is bliss, and if you have any sense you ought to kill yourself on the spot and be done with it.’ (*The Colossus of Maroussi*)

Two pieces of literature that in no way have been influenced by each other and yet bear within the same cadences, the same rhythm. Such random yet almost divinely ordained coincidences also make me ridiculously happy.

## *Eleven*

I have been away from home for a few weeks now and on my first night back, I let my head settle in that familiar hollow in the pillow, let my body contour itself to the mattress. Then I reach for a book. I know I ought to persevere with Proust. I know that I should attempt Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* one more time. I know that *Mrs Dalloway* waits as do *War and Peace* and *The Magic Mountain*. But my eyes evade their imploring spines and instead settle on Marian Keyes's.

For the night, I put aside the doyens of angst and the word acrobats, writers who plumb the depths of the human soul or soar in celestial heights. Instead I seek solace and peace in a doorstopper. A fat saga where almost everything

happens the way we expect it to; where black and white overshadows the grey and where good gets its reward and evil its punishment and even if the girl doesn't get the man of her choice, she finds someone who is just as good enough . . . Besides they all have wonderful dialogue, unforgettable characters and plenty of minutiae about food, clothes and everyday life. More than anything else, why I delight in these books is because they celebrate the ordinary and these days we have very little time or media space for that . . .

I remember the horror I saw on a publisher's face when I said I found Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*<sup>1</sup> rather like an Indian version of Catherine Cookson's family sagas.

'What about *An Equal Music*?' he asked.

'That's literary fiction,' I said. 'I don't know why you sound so horrified though. I adore her books so you needn't read anything derogatory into it,' I added.

Each one of Catherine Cookson's books

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<sup>1</sup>The *Kirkus Reviews* referred to it as a cream-puff-wrapped-in-a-cinder-block. I presume what they meant is that it isn't literary enough.

dwell on life as it is and there is no attempt to rise beyond that. She is much maligned by literary types and yet, I have found her books eminently readable. Perhaps it stems from the fact that the author knew the world she was talking about and she wrote about it from within rather than as an observer. In the end, isn't that what all fiction, literary or otherwise, ought to do? Celebrate rather than denigrate life.



For the week, my favourite genre is chick lit. It is a truth universally acknowledged that a woman in possession of chick lit is very seldom a chick herself . . .

However little known the feelings or views of the chicks themselves with regard to how they are depicted, this truth is so true in the minds of the women of a certain age, that all chick lit is considered their rightful property . . .

Jane Austen says as much or something to that effect. And even if she didn't, my friends of a certain age completely agree . . .

There was a time when I cocked a snook at anything that remotely resembled women's writing. This was during my chick days when

women's writing seemed a synonym for banal. The very act of opening a book written by women for women seemed an act of drudgery. I would toss my hair, grimace and move on to weighty tomes, hefty with gravitas and much existential angst.

Not any more. Now on my bedside table where once Camus and Kazantzakis reigned, pretty pink volumes with grab-you-by-the-gut titles in loopy writing reside.

However, I am not entirely out of the closet yet. At times, I feel as though I have gone back to my early teens when I hid my Harold Robbins and Sidney Sheldons amidst the more innocuous Mills and Boon. For when I have guests who may wander into my bedroom, I place a Vintage collection of Latin American short stories or a Jeanette Winterson or a Colin Thubron on top of the pile . . .

How do I explain to them the essential feel-good feeling of having a volume or two of chick lit by your bedside? That a daily fix works just as well as Deanxit minus the pharmaceutical complications . . .

I can empathize with the heroine of Allison Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It* as she

stealthily squashes store-bought mince pie to make it look home-made. I used to go one step further and bake my son a cake religiously every week to compensate for my constant absences. Until the day he told me that he was perhaps the only kid in his class whose mother actually baked a cake herself . . .

I can see the distinct advantages of being a Maeve Binchy heroine who polishes her silver when troubles come calling and her life falls around her ears . . . I think the Buddhists refer to it as going with the flow. My own version is to wipe the leaves of the house plants.

I feel myself cringe when a heroine of one of those countless books makes a career faux paus. Never fraternize with the boss. Youthful playfulness is often seen to be as hitting at someone. Particularly if the someone is high up in the power ladder.

I know the relief that she feels when away from home in a strange city after a night of ‘strangers in the night’ induced drunken togetherness, she wakes up in her own bed with a chaste unslept side . . .

But best of all, I can feel all my competitive sap rise and then surprisingly plateau as the

heroine (always the heroine) rushes from one zone after the other in a life full of zones. Mother. Wife. Sister. Daughter. Boss. High-Net Employee. Domestic Goddess. Siren. Bitch . . . The frantic pace of being a chick in a chick-lit book makes me glad that I am not a chick any more.

I might have lost battles with cellulite, gravity and a teenage child. But to compensate there is a certain restfulness that comes from leaning against pillows and sipping my malted milk even as I read about mousy heroines with bountiful breasts or angel-faced flat-chested ones, million dollar deals, chance encounters and personal velocity that never pauses for a moment. Whew!



## *Twelve*

The phone rings as I settle in for the night. It is Sunil. There are brothers and brothers. The Cain and Abel kind. Or, the Ram and Lakshman variety. One to whom a sibling represents a threat. And to the other whom a sibling is a father figure.

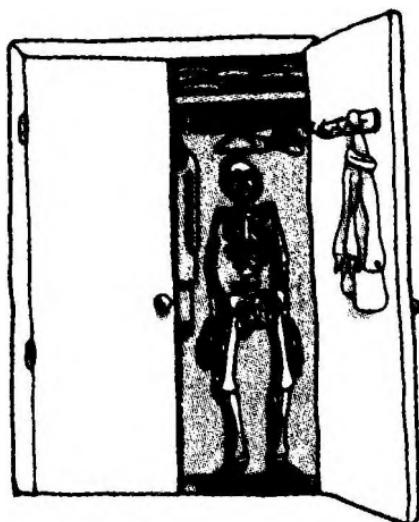
Sunil and I are exceptionally close. We perhaps see each other as an extension of one's own self. To love and cherish, protect and even pander.

There is nothing we do not know of each other's lives or thoughts. Our memories and dreams criss-cross and most nights our conversation has a stream of thought progression from the night before.

When he was six and I was two, he hid me away in a safe place where no kidnappers would

ever find me. Neither could my parents. It was hours later that I was discovered: blue, breathless and disappointed that our hiding place had been found.

When I was twelve, my brother introduced me to a cadaver, took me at midnight to the mortuary attached to his medical college, and taking my literal desire to its acme brought home a skeleton<sup>1</sup> to hide in our closet. As a student at the Madras Medical College he thought it perfectly natural that I go with him to the dissection class to watch students saw through limbs that resembled wood rather than human



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<sup>1</sup>‘If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance’—George Bernard Shaw

flesh. Sometimes I think I owe it to him—my sense of the macabre. As a night lamp, he gave me a skull with two blue lamps fitted inside and we thought it was a joke to keep it aglow through the night.

Tonight he tells me about a sheaf of medical bills on his table. Medical reimbursement for an employee's mother that he has to clear. A pile of bills for Rukmini Amma and right at the end, an ambulance bill that reads: Name of the patient: Dead Body!!! 'Have you heard anything more macabre?' he asks.

My imagination fails me. Again.



Some years ago Sunil lived on top of a hill. All around him were terraced tea gardens and in the distance, spectacular mountains with their peaks shrouded in mist. Greens blended into blue and blue merged into grey and the vistas all around were quite awesome. He was a doctor in a tea estate in Wayanad and everyone who visited him thought that it was all quite wasted on him. 'You should be living there,' I was told. 'All that natural beauty will stir your imagination.'

A doctor, unlike a writer, they assume, has little

need for an imagination.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the implication is that to have an imagination might not make him such a good doctor; he would see an ordinary bruise and envision gangrene, amputation and the like . . .

And yet, the truth is Sunil's imagination is perhaps more multi-dimensional than mine. Since his wife was away that summer, Sunil had to depend on the culinary adventures of his not-so-inventive cook. Every night, he would sit at his dining table in solitary splendour. In front of him would be a meal as basic as chapattis and dal. But Sunil has a cookbook, *Provencal Cooking*, propped up before him and as he eats, he reads. One night, he imagines himself to be in Lambesc

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<sup>2</sup>While we may like to harbour under the delusion that doctors are at their best healing, medical men have a history of versatility that extends beyond the ends of the stethoscope. Especially in the realm of literature and language. A.J. Cronin, James Herriot, Oliver Sacks and that stand-by-me of every student of literature, Roget. Known more for his definitive *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* (1852) than his bedside manner, Roget described his compilation as a 'dictionary in reverse'; if one has the general idea, the book will provide the precise word to convey it.

in the South of France *dithering enjoyably between lamb stuffed with herbs or veal with truffles*. Another night, he is in Goult sampling the *delights of a salad made with warm mussels and bacon and chicken tickled with ginger* . . . When he finishes with that, he has Tuscan cooking, Catalan cooking to draw courage and appetite from.

I envy him this; I would never be able to think of chapattis and dal as anything but chapattis and dal . . . And yet I'm the writer in the family. The one with an imagination.

Another time, a friend of mine and I were buying eggs. The eggs sat in a pink cardboard carton with an almost satiny sheen to it. I told her that the eggs look like bridesmaids in pink. She laughed, 'Now that's a writer's imagination!'

I tried explaining that it was just a turn of phrase but she dismissed it, 'Don't be so modest!'



Much has been said and written about the writer's imagination. From the Bard who talks of it as the trick to giving to 'airy nothings a local habitation and a name' to Keats who claims 'what the imagination seizes as beauty must be the truth—whether it existed before or not'.

The thing is, what is commonly perceived to be ‘a writer’s imagination’—an ability to visualize purple clouds, amethysts growing on creepers, mermaids plucking at harp strings, etc.—has little bearing on what really is a writer’s imagination. So much so anyone with a slightly adventurous process of thought and a facility with the language is encouraged to think of himself or herself as a writer. The worst scenario is, of course, where the person assumes that these are adequate enough skills to set about writing a book.

An interesting turn of phrase might occasionally lend itself to what literary critics call lyrical prose but books seldom endure because of the scope of the metaphors scattered through their pages. What does is the meat; the fibre of its chew, the flavour of its juices . . . and perhaps it is here that the writer’s imagination comes to the fore.

More than anything else, a writer has to be able to transmigrate into the lives of the characters so that their joys, their anguish, their dreams and damnation become the writer’s. That requires an imagination as well as an understanding of the warp and weft of the character’s life and setting. It demands an ability to see, hear, feel, breathe,

and think as the other person does and not merely coin pretty phrases.

There is perhaps nothing more enduring than an honest book; a book that is true to its characters even if it is a little lacking in the metaphor area. Which is why if I were asked to choose between Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with its splendid lyricism and an almost magic mushroom induced brand of realism and *Love in the Time of Cholera* which is more plain and yet loaded with gravitas in every word and thought, I would choose the latter. 'Read the last twenty-two pages from the time Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza board the riverboat *New Fidelity* till the last word of the book and you will see for yourself the triumph of a writer's imagination,' I tell students of literature.

One of the best examples of what meat married to metaphor can achieve is in R.C. Hutchinson's novels. I don't know if R.C. Hutchinson is Polish or a woman or was dragged into a war camp in Siberia and yet he writes about it in *Recollections of a Journey* with an insight and a compassion that is outstanding. So it is in his book *A Child Possessed*, a story about a lorry driver and his

seriously afflicted fifteen-year-old daughter. There are fine passages of lyrical writing; there is hope and tragedy and there is a nobility that resonates long after the book has been read.



## *Thirteen*

I don't know if I am in love with Dr Hannibal Lecter<sup>1</sup> or merely mesmerized by his capacity for evil. I can't seem to stop thinking about him. I urge friends to read Thomas Harris. At dinner parties, I feel compelled to narrate the dinner party sequence from *Hannibal*. It is not that I am oblivious to the distaste or horror that appears on the faces of the other guests. It is just that very rarely has a series of books with the same character moved me so.

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<sup>1</sup>Dr Lecter—I do not know how much of the fascination owes itself to the fact that Anthony Hopkins played a brilliant Hannibal Lecter and that Thomas Harris, the author of the trilogy, in his acknowledgements in *Hannibal* writes: ‘The wickedness herein I took from my own stock.’

*Hannibal Rising* sits on my bedside table. I am reluctant to start. Somewhere lurks a great fear: What if this doesn't measure up?



When it comes to choosing reading material from a library, most people have a system they have worked out for themselves. There are the diligent and studious ones who start with an author (preferably in alphabetical order) and then read everything he or she has written. Some others have a reading list compiled from recommendations by friends, magazine reviews and best-seller lists. The more adventurous kind chooses a book because of its blurb. And some others simply go by what is referred to as the season's 'must read' books. Which means if you hobnob in a particular circuit, you better be able to speak eloquently if not intelligently on that book for at least a couple of minutes. Your silence will be forgiven though if you are seen reading that book or, at the least, be found with that book under your elbow.

I have my own system; I avoid all well-known names and shun them almost totally if they have won a big literary prize. In that category would

fall names that literary deacons swear by and students of literature talk about in awed tones—from Joyce to Murdoch to Robertson Davies to A.S. Byatt. It isn't that I am prejudiced. I feel precisely like Adrian Mole in Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13½*: 'I am reading *The Black Prince* by Iris Murdoch. I can understand only one word in ten. It is now my ambition to actually enjoy one of her books. Then I will know I am above the common herd.'

Instead I do what everyone advises you not to stoop down to—judge a book by its cover and its title. Perhaps I have simply been fortunate. But I have, by following this illogical and shallow system, stumbled upon gems like Tibor Fischer and Alan Holinghurst; Rose Tremain and Victoria Glendinning, long before they became fashionable. And unlike the big-prize names, I have never been disappointed by either the style or plot. (Eventually most of these writers have gone on to win prizes or have motion pictures made of their books but that is merely an aside.)

For a long time now, I have wanted to read Julian Barnes. But have resisted ever since I couldn't get myself to finish his *Cross Channel* and then as if to confirm my theory, he went

ahead and was shortlisted for the Booker. A couple of weeks ago, a friend who has been enhancing my literary life and bookshelves gave me a copy of Barnes's latest novel *Love, etc.* While I have great faith in my friend's choice of reading material, I was a little apprehensive. What if I found the book unreadable? With so many books to be read, would this be a pointless investment of time and energy?

So I put the book aside telling myself that I would read it later. In fact, I didn't even bother to glance through its pages. I told myself that I would read a slim Barnes before I began the new one. Then in one of those happy coincidences that reaffirm my faith in destiny, I borrowed *Talking it Over* from the local library. The cover was whimsical—three human figures with a potato, a squash and a pumpkin for heads—and I liked the style at first glance. Three characters, each taking their turn to speak straight to the camera.

Later at home, I opened *Love, etc.* and discovered that it was the sequel to *Talking it Over*. To think, all these years, I disdained Barnes and then I chose to read a story that even the author had found worthy of a sequel.

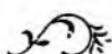
I like sequels. I like them better than a book that tells you all about a character/s in one shot. With sequels, you see an evolution; you can trace a growth of that character and in some ways, sequels match your own germination as a person.

Perhaps my fondness for sequels dates back to my school years reading Enid Blyton. It began with Noddy, moved to the St. Clare series and the Famous Five and Adventure series et al. Then there was Richmal Compton's William who provided a backdrop to growing up. A wholesome consistency that helped combat to some extent the turmoil of being a teenager. There were also the Katy books by Susan Coolidge, the Anne of Green Gables books by L.M. Montgomery and the ever-popular Little Women books by Louisa May Alcott. Katy, Anne and Jo (and her sisters) were dated by at least a hundred years but somehow none of that mattered. As they grew from girls to women, their development matched mine and in some way, they were the sisters I didn't have.

Sometimes though, sequels have a way of not matching the power or the poise of the first book. In contemporary Malayalam, in its colloquial idiom, there is a phrase: 'puttu adikkeye'. An

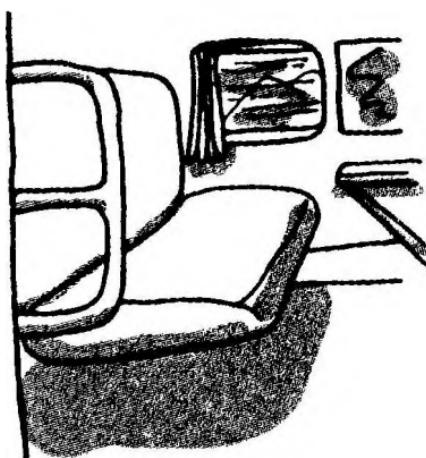
almost literal translation would mean eating a steamed rice flour and coconut dish. What it really means is making a quick buck at someone else's expense. Quite often, sequels are 'puttu adikkeye' efforts. A mere means of profiting from the interest generated by the first book. While there are innumerable books in this category, two that top my hate-list are *Toujors Provence* by Peter Mayle and *Edge of Reason* by Helen Fielding. Both Mayle's and Fielding's first books—*A Year in Provence* and *Bridget Jones*—were charming. God knows if it was the publishers' pressure or the authors' own need to cash in on their popularity, the sequels were dismal and disappointing. Best left unwritten and unread.

Coming back to Barnes and his sequel to *Talking it Over*, written after ten years, all I can say is I hope he'll resume the threads of this story in another decade. To quote from the book, 'So as for me, I will wait.'



## *Fourteen*

For once I had a lower bunk in the train. In the opposite bunk, a man was stretched out. An elderly foreigner. He watches as I make my bed from the bedding provided. Laying the bottom sheet and tucking it into the seat sleeve. Then the top sheet and finally the blanket. I pull a corner of the sheet down for me to crawl into without pulling the sheets asunder.



The man says, ‘So that’s what you do with it! You seem to have done this many times before?’

I smile and say, ‘I am on this train at least once in six weeks!’

I get into bed and wait for sleep. The rocking motion always makes me want to thrust my thumb into my mouth and revert back to infancy.



Eighteen years ago, I climbed on to the top berth of a ladies compartment in a train from Bangalore to Madras<sup>1</sup> and discovered an unexpected world.

Once the door was closed and the blue night lamp switched on, the middle-aged

<sup>1</sup>In the fifties, Madras was a place you ran away to when things didn’t work out for you in your village. Like the skyline of Manhattan, Tamil and Malayalam cinema thrived on this sweep shot of Central Station, Ripon Building and Mount Road to connote Madras—land of opportunities.

Madras now perhaps exists only in garment terminology—Madras checks and in a colloquialism for conjunctivitis—the Madras eye ... Madras is Chennai now. And in that single gesture of a name change, I lost a city I loved. And my childhood ...

women began a conversation that riveted me to my sleeping berth. It was a no-holds-barred conversation on mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, husbands, servants.

It was a combination of the confined space and assurance of anonymity, as they were strangers to each other, that turned the coupé into a confessional box.

Their candour, their subversiveness, their subtle strength and courage inspired *Ladies Coupé*.



It is morning. The man and I talk again. ‘You sure do love your plants,’ he says looking at the plants I have in a basket.

I tell him of my cottage in Kerala. In the land around it, I have been planting randomly all the plants I like and can cadge from friends and family. It is a formidable task. The soil is poor and dry but what withers my effort more is how often I am told about the futility of what I am trying to achieve. I try explaining to him all the unwanted advice that would come my way from a stranger on the road to the caretaker of the cottage to the next-door neighbour at my

foolishness for trying to put plants into the ground in March. But I am determined to go ahead and do it, I tell him. He laughs.

He is Australian and almost seventy. I tell him that I think he's brave to make this trip on his own.

'I may never do this again,' he says.

'My dad's just a little older than you; but he wants me to accompany him and my mom back to Bangalore. He says he is scared of travelling alone.' I explain the reason why I am on the train. I look away trying to hide my perturbation at my father's admission. Fathers admitting to failing courage were a definite no-no. Fathers wanting to lean on adult daughters were not in my scheme of things either.

'He said that, did he?' Douglas Geeson says quietly and something in his inflection, in his tone, makes me realize what an unfeeling clod I am. A grown-up child unwilling to relinquish childhood; in my father's invincibility lies my own eternal childhood.

The man didn't know a thing about my father but he understood precisely what my father must be going through. That was the moment I knew that much as I may profess my ability to slip into

the skin of my characters, of a deep-rooted empathy, I had absolutely no real understanding of what it is to age. Of feeling that utter helplessness. Of the fears that come to haunt. And of recognizing that the selfishness we attribute to the elderly is merely a constant self-preservative vigilance of having to watch for one's self . . .



## *Fifteen*

Every night as a child I waited for my father to come say goodnight to me. I would hear him as he moved around the house switching off lights, shooting the bolts. It was as if he had to make sure for himself that he had barricaded his family against burglars, rapists, murderers, winged dragons, and every venomous creature that inhabited planet earth.

These days by about half past nine, my father excuses himself and goes to bed. Later, in a reversal of roles, I would enter my parents' room to wish him goodnight and he would be in bed with a transistor radio at his side and his sheet pulled to his chin.

My father, however, likes to keep his feet uncovered. 'I feel suffocated,' he explained once.

And my mother had laughed, ‘He has his nostrils on his soles.’

I think of how my father liked to take me for long scooter rides. Most Sundays, we would ride a long way and return in time for breakfast. We seldom spoke; the breeze would have snatched our words away anyway. My father seemed to need those little excursions more than I did. Stifled by the routine of the everyday, he seemed to need to breathe . . .

My father seldom goes out now. He contains himself to spending the day poring over the newspaper. It is the obituary page he spends a great deal of time on. Every single obituary notice is raked over. Friends, family, acquaintances, one by one, they seem to drop off his horizon.

I pause to touch his sole. His nails have grown horny and thick with age. The skin around the heel has hardened and I see age there in every crack and line. I feel a huge lump grow in my throat and expand into my chest.

This is my father, I think. The man I loved first. In his arms I thought I was safe. Now all I want to do is keep him with me safe and forever . . .



Many years ago, I chanced upon a book. More than anything else, it was the title that intrigued me: *And, When Did You Last See Your Father?*

I skimmed and scanned the opening paragraphs . . . I paused at the line: ‘My father does not like waiting in queues. He is used to patients waiting in queues to see him but he is not used to waiting in queues himself.’

I smiled to myself. It was enough to make me want to read the rest of the book though at that time I didn’t know who Blake Morrison was, or why I ought to read his memoir about his father.

What drew me to Morrison’s book was the openness with which he talked about his relationship with his father. There was no effort to judge or even justify his views. Truly significant in our times for where would we be without parents as scapegoats to explain why we turned out to be the way we turned out to be . . .

There are countless quotes about parents and children. My favourite one is from the otherwise mild-mannered Philip Larkin: ‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad.’

In contrast, the devilishly witty Oscar Wilde offers a sympathetic and deep understanding

when he says: 'Children begin by loving their parents; after a time they judge them; rarely, if ever, do they forgive them . . .'

When it comes to our parents, especially fathers, I think even the most free-spirited amongst us turn into arch conservatives. (There is a given here that we are talking about normal middle-class families and not instances where fathers are exceptional beings or horrid monsters . . .)

We view them with uncompromising eyes that would make even the most perfect of gods flinch. We expect them to never descend from that inviolable place we set them up in first. Fragility, vulnerability, mortal flaws are what other fathers may be guilty of. Not one's own!

Fathers emanate a fragrance that is their own. B refers to a cherished memory of his father peeling him oranges. The combination of citrus and tobacco that clung to his father's fingers combined to make it a singular memory, so poignant with 'as long as I am around, I will make the sun shine on your world and the birds sing for you . . .'

Morrison is a writer whose work I continue to love. But amongst all his books, it was this first one I read that was to exert a tremendous

influence on me. For one, it went on to make me want to explore a father-son relationship when I began my first novel. More importantly, it made me want to know my father better.

Not as Zeus, ‘wise in counsel, father of gods and men, under whose thunder the broad earth quivers’ or as a vengeful Old Testament father figure but as the boy he was and the young man he became and now in his mid-seventies, the man he is.

I want to understand how he became the perfect husband he was and is and how he knew how to be the exemplary father . . . did it come to him naturally or did he have to work hard on role-playing? How did he know that he ought to pick his wife, my mother, a tin of special biscuits while we, the children, got chocolate bars every New Year’s day? Where did that sensitivity to delineate come from?

What went on in his mind as he did my science projects for me? Was it his chance to be a boy again? Or, was it merely helping his child who stared at odds and ends and bawled, ‘. . . but what can I make with this?’

Or, what made him like Old Father William in his youth stand on his head every now and

then? The very thought of my father standing on his head<sup>1</sup> bewilders me. He is not normally given to such excessive calling-attention-to-himself gestures . . .

Where did that resolve come from that allowed him to quit smoking after being a chronic smoker for sixty-two years? This was a man who couldn't put a nail in the wall without lighting up a cigarette. This was a man who needed a ritualistic smoke like people cleared their throats before saying something important. So much so when he gave up smoking one morning, I missed it more than he did . . . That empty space where a cigarette had been—what did he do with it?

When he wanted to make a point, he did so with an élan I wish I could duplicate. During the days when the satraps at the Centre decided to impose Hindi as an official language in the central government, an official circular stating the same reached my father. He sent it back with

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<sup>1</sup> When my mother describes my father and his proclivity for headstands in his youth, she laughs. Her voice resonates my bewilderment and something more . . . I dwell on that extra note and finally know what it is—pride. And, I think I would like B to be able to stand on his head too.

a cryptic note in Malayalam saying: ‘I do not understand the above-mentioned’!

I do not think he had any particular objection to Hindi as a language. He did speak, read and write perfect Hindi. I think what he found intolerable was being told one language was better than the other.

At a carnival, when my father was manning a food stall, a young wag came up to him and asked, ‘Is this a D-O-S-A? Or a D-O-S-A-I?’

My father narrowed his eyes and asked quietly, ‘Which one would you like?’



These days, when I can, like someone panning for gold, I get him to sift through his memories and each time he produces a new one to add to my list of knowing my father.

It helps that he is a tremendous raconteur and that his stories resonate with a rare energy so when he narrates a working-life tale of a factory-floor worker falling into a vat of sulphuric acid, you can feel the skin-peeling-off screams and the man disappearing into nothingness . . .

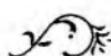
Tonight I think of a favourite riddle of his. Of three friends, who paid a monthly rent of

ten rupees each until the time the landlord reduced the rent to twenty-five rupees. The servant pocketed two rupees and returned a rupee each to the friends. The riddle, or rather the puzzle, begins when you realize that each man paid nine rupees so that totals to 27. The servant pocketed two. That makes it a total of 29. And my father would ask with a laugh, 'Do tell, so where is that missing rupee?'

Sometimes I think, try as much as I might, like the missing rupee there will be many things I will never know about my father.

The father in hiding, in essence. But then, that is the 'X' factor that makes him so remarkable ...

In the words of Bogart, a great favourite with my father who, in his early adulthood, watched every single movie that was screened, 'Here's looking at you . . . Dad.'



## *Sixteen*

It is a quarter past two in the morning and I am wide awake. The hardest thing was trying to stay awake. I tried to convince myself: My poor body was still ticking to Indian time and it protested at being forced to look and seem intelligent when it rightfully ought to have been asleep. I wonder if I should call my family now. I can imagine the smile on my father's face if I were to tell him that yesterday I lunched with an ex-president of Colombia. It is perhaps childish to derive such pleasure. Rather like 'Look Ma, no hands'. Nevertheless, one does not make light of such encounters especially as the luncheon was centred around the ajiaco<sup>1</sup> with several writers placed around it.

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<sup>1</sup>A meaty stew made of corn, potatoes, chicken and served with white rice, cubes of avocado, capers and chilli

I found the word aleph in a short story by Borges. He describes it there as ‘one of the points in space that contains all points . . . Where without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world seen from every angle co-exist.’ From where the ex-president sits, this must seem to him like the aleph, I imagine . . . Suddenly I felt my eyes droop.



Ever since I landed at Bogotá, I have fought numerous battles with my body clock. At the opening of the Writers’ Congress at the Bogotá Book Fair, I bit down yawn after yawn that made me almost swallow my tongue. I tried to gather myself together and concentrate on the topic: Literature and the city. Or, was it Sex and the City. No, that’s the name of a TV series. I pinched myself.

And yet, if the utterances were not as weighty or ponderous, or if the translation of what the other writers read wasn’t so halting or faltering, I would stand a better chance, I thought.

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mixed with coriander and onion. Once a staple but now merely talked about with fond nostalgia, the ajiaco these days is only seen at public banquets and an occasional old-fashioned Sunday lunch.

Writers very seldom make good public speakers. They tend to twist their thoughts into incoherent knots that leave the listeners floundering as much as the writer himself or herself.

I have never met as many writers as I did in Bogotá. And, until I read them, I will never be able to follow the trails of their imagination. So for now I have to be content with first impressions. In many ways, they are like the country itself. A bouquet garni of land and mindscapes. From quiet, shy, blending-into-the-wall kind to the gregarious and flamboyant types to the mellow, content-in-their-skins ones to youthfully aggressive alpha males . . .

I flicked through my pointers made on the hotel pad. What I was waiting for was to see how the gallery of Colombian writers came to terms with the holy cow of Colombian literature—Garcia Márquez.

One of the greatest attractions of Bangalore for me is its near-absence of a literary elite. Bangalore has its writers: from playwrights to historians to critics to novelists to poets to essayists. Nevertheless, each one is an island and one is in no danger of them merging to form factions or

power groups. And thus of one ever having to be part of a coterie or a clique.

Day after day, I would hear the question pose itself again and again in various shades. ‘García Márquez and magic realism. What did they think? Was that the path to follow?’

The writers, I discovered, reacted in varying degrees of diplomacy. From the extremely cautious to the ambivalent to the almost rebellious ‘that was then, this is now’.

At one point, I thought of stepping in and helping a hapless writer out. I had my standard response ready: In 1955, Angel Flores applied the term magic realism to Spanish-American writing describing it as nineteenth-century realism dotted with fantastical moments beyond spontaneous human combustion; a ‘Dickens with weirdness’ if you please. Later the definition extended to include folkloric elements.

Except that I was sure that the response would be who the fuck is Dickens? Besides how do you translate ‘weirdness’ into Spanish without making it sound like an enviable state of mind to be trapped in?

So I retreated behind silence and let them cope.

How do they do it? I wondered. Stomach this question without letting rancour show. For instance, how does someone like Spinoza, referred to as the maestro, live with the behemoth shadow of a writer who doesn't even live in Colombia any more . . . What does he think when he is introduced as the second best writer of Colombia? And it is meant as a hallmark of greatness.

We sat next to each other at the book fair in our publishers' stall signing books and I watched his face as his readers came to him and engaged him in long conversations. Spinoza looked like he was ready to go home and curl into a ball of thorns, repulsing all social activity for a while . . .

I used to think that it was challenging to be a writer in India. But it must be bloody awful to be one in Colombia where the public, reading or otherwise, don't seem to want to see beyond Garcia Márquez.

As writers, all of us harbour this delusion that we have created this unique masterpiece which the whole world ought to be giving its right arm and leg to read and critics ought to be queuing up to review and bookstores ought to buy by truckloads. And to top it all, you have

to contend with the ajiaco-like legendary status of García Márquez.

This liturgy of the ajiaco, if only it would ever pause for a moment, there would be so much more scope to delight in the high notes of other Colombian fare. With every mouthful, I know it: the explosion of a samosa-like crusty empanada in the mouth. Or the quiet content that the maize biscuit, the arepa, evokes. The seriously exotic tamarindo juice or the excess of cuajada con melao, cottage cheese with sugarcane syrup. Or merely the wholesome eggish fleshiness of the plain avocado.

Something tells me that the Colombian writers I want to read would be the same. Catching me by surprise again and again.



## *Seventeen*

Tonight I have abandoned my malted milk for a silver-foil-wrapped ball of tamarind. The tamarindo as T, my editor in Colombia called it, came from La Guajira, a province in Colombia. ‘Since you like tamarindo as much, I thought I would share it with you,’ she said giving me a little paper sack at the airport.

I take little nibbles<sup>1</sup> of the ball and when my tongue encounters a seed, I set it aside in a little

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<sup>1</sup>I am a secret nibbler. Of foods that are salty and tart. So as I trailed Rabbit Angstrom from book to book, his fondness for nibbling made me flush. ‘Nuggets, they are like small lightweight nuggets with a fur of salt. He especially loves the way, when he holds one in his mouth a few seconds and then gently works it between his crowned molars, it breaks into two halves, the surface of the fissure smooth to the tongue as glass, as baby skin . . . He settles back with

jar. I think I will try and plant it, and if I succeed in raising it into a tree, I will call it T, I think.



Every night after the exertions of the day, T and I would sit in the coffee shop of the hotel and chat. ‘There must be something you want to do here,’ T said one night. We were sipping macchiatos in the hotel which was in a classy part of Bogotá.

The streets were wide and the brand names that speckled shop-fronts truly international. Flowers bloomed and the air was cool and moist with a thin drizzle. Almost within touching distance were the bluish peaks of the Andes. Where was the heat and dust? The crying babies and stoic-faced native women in ponchos? Wasn’t this meant to be a third world country?

So far what I had seen of Bogotá had me think that much of its reputation was grossly exaggerated. Bogotá resembled just another European city.

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a small handful of cashews; dry roasted, they have a little acid sting to them, the tang of poison that he likes.’ (*Rabbit at Rest*)

How well I recognize that feeling. Like they say in the movies, I know, I was there.

I smiled. I wondered what she would say if I said: 'Well, this is Colombia so how about a line of coke?'

Earlier I had complained to her about the intense baggage checks at the El Dorado airport. 'So do you buy your drugs with your weekly groceries or what?'

T had giggled. 'I think just about 15 per cent of the population have seen hard drugs in their lives but we have this reputation that makes us all out to be drug lords or ladies!'

'There is something,' I begin and pause, wondering what she would make of my deep dark desire . . .

T's eyes widen in expectation.

'What I'd really like is a glass of tamarind juice,' I say.

I hear a guffaw.

Ever since I was a little girl, I have had a great fondness for tamarind. I like the tree. The teardrop leaves and almost black branches. I like the notion that ghosts and ghouls liked to inhabit its branches and that a thin branch stripped of its leaves made a splendid whip to flail someone's skin off their back. I liked the adage that likened a good prospective groom or bride to a well-

laden tamarind branch. Perhaps what I liked was how the physical and metaphysical merged to create a universe and a versatile one at that. But mostly what I loved about the tamarind was the fruit itself.

I liked them green when the tartness made your teeth ache . . . I liked them semi-ripe when each mouthful was a conundrum of: Was that sweet or was that sour? I liked them ripe when the flesh sticks to your fingers as you peel the dry skin off in bits and each mouthful is a taste of heaven. Besides you get to spit the seed out and see its shiny sides flash as it arcs into the ground . . . When my cousins raided the store cupboard in my grandmother's home for biscuits or jackfruit chips, I was quite content to dip my hand into the deep earthenware jar in which tamarind was stored. The glistening, black, sun-dried tamarind speckled with rock salt crystals to this day evokes memories of still summer afternoons when the heat paused even the crows' caw. Of childhood days when you thought the world stood on its axis and would never move. And you ached to be a grown-up . . .

I am neither little nor a girl any more but my love for the tamarind hasn't changed. I still

carry a handful of tamarind sweets with me and nibble at them stealthily. Basically, tamarind is to me what chocolate represents to a greater part of this world.

Nevertheless, kitchen wisdom dictates that such eccentricities notwithstanding, tamarind needs to be cooked, and cooked well, unless you were looking for a laxative . . .

Naturally when I first read about a character in a Latin American novel beginning his day with tamarind juice, I did wonder if it was what he used to move his bowels. Later I realized that it was merely another kind of juice. Like perhaps plum or pomegranate. A little exotic but quite innocuous. That was when I promised myself that if I ever did get to South America, the first thing I would do was indulge myself in tamarindo juice . . . and hopefully thus taste ambrosia.

The problem with demystifying myths is that you shut a door on a fantasy. Or, what could be an imagined reality. In Bogotá, I discover the truth of this.

The tamarindo juice arrived in a tall glass with chipped ice. It resembled brown slush. But it tasted as I had expected it to. Sweetened

pulverized tamarind on ice. I decide I prefer my tamarind as I knew it rather than in a glass.

I take another sip and ask that other question that has been haunting me ever since I read Garcia Márquez's *News of a Kidnapping*.

T shudders.

'Why? Isn't it true?' I ask.

'It is horribly true,' she says.

'These kidnappings . . . Does it really happen on a regular basis? Or, is it just exaggerated reports?' I persist.

T looks away as she says, 'I think there isn't a single family in Colombia that hasn't been touched by the specter of kidnapping.'

'C'mon . . .' I say.

She tells me of her kidnapped father. Of an astronomical ransom asked. Of not having that kind of money.

'And . . .?'

'We didn't even get his body back.' T continues to look away.

For the first time, I understand T's almost paranoid insistence on having a bodyguard with us every time we venture into downtown Bogota or the poorer parts of the city. And why I keep

the window glass up as we drive through narrow streets. And why I remove every single piece of my jewellery before we wander through the streets at night.

There is perhaps nothing more chilling than knowing that what seemed only an imagined reality is the grim truth of the everyday for an entire nation.



## *EIGHTEEN*

All through the night I am awake. I sit through a long-haul flight unable to sleep. I am being kept awake by a reading light across the aisle. I sneak a few glances to see if it is a laptop that holds the person so engrossed. It is a book. And I know that most probably it will be a thriller. I have, for a long time, shunned thrillers. I know how it can be . . . The dryness in the mouth, the hammering heart . . . it is an awful place to be in. On the one hand you don't want the book to finish and on the other, you have to keep turning the page to know what happens next . . . and worse, resist as hard as one does, the urge to turn to the last page and know how it is all resolved is unbearable . . .



I was all of eleven and the book was James Hadley Chase's *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*. Even before I was a teenager, I had graduated from children's fiction to more lurid reading. The passage of reading so transpired because I read what my older brother Sunil did. When he was buying and borrowing the Famous Five and Hardy Boys books, I was allowed to read them when he was done. When he moved on to more adult reading, I did as well but without letting go of my Enid Blytons.

This perhaps must have been the reason why neither he nor my parents imposed any kind of restraint on what I read. The seamy side of life—rapists and murderers, ransom money with large dollops of sex—they must have thought was balanced by happy wholesome stories of children and dogs setting forth on bicycle trips with packed lunches of bread and butter and hard-boiled eggs with a screw of salt and bottles of gingerbeer, all under blue skies with fluffy white clouds . . .

So with the rapacious appetite of another creature steeped in books and pages—the silver fish—I devoured James Hadley Chase and Erle Stanley Gardner; Harold Robbins and Irving Wallace . . .

By my mid-teens, I was satiated and had completely moved away from literary entertainment of any sort.

Deep in the throes of teenage passion, the tall dark handsome older stranger of the M&Bs palled in comparison to the person next door who was interesting and read books. So, with the entry of B into my life, I said goodbye to the romance novel.

Then came the mystery and detective novels. One of the fundamentals of a good thriller is that the reader must have equal opportunity with the hero of the thriller for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described. The culprit must be determined by logical deductions—not by accident or coincidence or unmotivated confession. And that, for me, was the very root of the problem.

Very often halfway through the book, I knew exactly how it was going to be resolved and thereafter pursuing with the story seemed pointless. And so I veered towards social fiction and stayed there. Primarily because human nature, no matter how often one was exposed to it in the real or the fictitious world, continued to amaze me. Moreover, intellectual conflict that was

the basis of the literary novel was not bogged down by logistics of reason as the thriller is . . .

So it seems ironic to me that these days what gives me the greatest pleasure in my reading hours is the literary sleuthing I embark upon and where it leads me to . . .



This time it started with Nicholson Baker's *U and I*, a novel about the almost semiotic connection the author feels with John Updike. It left me wanting to read something new of Updike's. So I took down a volume of short stories, *Licks of Love*, I had bought a while ago but hadn't read. Right at the end was a novella, *Rabbit Remembered*—the finale to the Rabbit series.

It had been several years since I last read Updike's Rabbit Angstrom novels, and so I began the Rabbit series in chronological order, in order to read the novella at the end. The Rabbit series as always worked marvellously; however, the novella was a cop-out. Around that time, the person who gave me the Baker book made a chance remark about the Updike–Tom Wolfe war.

Suddenly glutted by Updikean suburbia and

disappointed by that novella, I was curious to know what Tom Wolfe had to say about Updike.

In my library, I had a collection of Tom Wolfe's essays titled *Hooking Up*. It included his *My Three Stooges*, an incisive rebuttal to Updike, Irving and Mailer trashing his *A Man in Full*. I hadn't read it before and Wolfe vindicated himself nicely enough in that essay. He annihilated without compunction Updike, Irving and Mailer but in the process he also led me to Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* which I might have otherwise never read . . .

What Mailer does over almost 1020 pages is make the reader realize that in many ways Gilmore<sup>1</sup> didn't have a choice but to live out his

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<sup>1</sup>Gary Gilmore—In 1976 Gilmore was sentenced to death for murder in the state of Utah. On successive nights, he killed two men for very little gain. But what made Gilmore's story special was that unlike others before him given the death penalty, Gilmore decided not to appeal . . . He wanted to be executed. *The Executioner's Song* by Norman Mailer is a true-life anthropological account of Gilmore's choices, the other people in his life, the media circus that followed his execution sentence and of Gilmore himself. As Gilmore wrote, 'I am not a prominent person. I've just gained some unwanted notoriety.'

criminal destiny. How the book would end is something I knew even before I began reading.

Nevertheless, I read that humongous book with a dry mouth and hammering heart . . . it was *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* all over again. An awful place to be in. On the one hand I didn't want the book to finish and on the other, I had to keep at the page-turning to know what happened next in the last months of Gary Gilmore's life . . . As I waited for that person in the flight to put down the book, I knew the buzz of literary entertainment again.



In the early hours, the person puts the book down to go to the bathroom.<sup>2</sup> I rise to peek.

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<sup>2</sup> Very often, bathrooms in restaurants and hotels fill me with utter horror. ‘The toilets are down a little white-walled corridor. Mr Phillips has a faint dread about whether or not he will be able to tell the Gents and the Ladies apart, but in the event it is straightforward: the Gents is demarcated by a cartoon dandy holding a monocle to his eye with his left hand and brandishing a cocked duelling pistol in his right.’

Like the hero of John Lanchester's novel *Mr Phillips*, I run into the same trouble zone especially in countries

It is a strange feeling to see my book lying there. I think of all the bile I had spewed on the author for keeping the reader so engrossed. Now I feel a grin slash my face. Apart from wanting to tell the person ‘never leave a book the way you did with pages splayed from the spine’, I would like to ask a hundred questions. Like new lovers do, I am eager to know: Where? How? Did you like it?

I know I won’t ask any of those questions though. But I will sit in my seat and watch the sun colour the horizon. I will take little surreptitious glances at this unknown reader. And I will hug the thought: I hadn’t written a thriller but someone actually read my book through the night!



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where I don’t speak the language and where there are no monocled gentlemen or gowned ladies on doors to indicate if one was going to walk into a line of men fumbling with their flies in front of urinals or women washing their hands and powdering their noses . . .

## *Nineteen*

I read the text message from a friend, Carmen, in Sussex. She has the next few days packed. Children and grandchildren. An elderly parent. Her teaching assignments, the choir she sings in and the rose garden she is planting. Somewhere amidst all this, Carmen is working on a book too. Does Carmen ever, I wonder, have a moment to pause and ask herself: Who is this me?

There are days when I wish I had a half-hour<sup>1</sup> to sit in my moderate-sized method in madness kind of garden. It occurs to me every now and then that several beings spend a great deal of time

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<sup>1</sup>half-hour—Women ‘never have an half-hour in all their lives (excepting before or after anybody is up in the house) that they can call their own, without fear of offending someone’—Cassandra, *Florence Nightingale*, 1852.

in my garden. Several beings except I, that is. In this garden lives an assortment of creatures. Salamanders and chameleons. Several kinds of birds—crow pheasants, mynahs, parakeets, kites, crows, pigeons, finches . . . even briefly a water-hen. In the ponds are fishes, frogs, pond skaters and several water insects and Ambuja, the freshwater turtle. It is a menagerie<sup>2</sup> of animals most of whom have chosen to make it their home.

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<sup>2</sup>The household help find my menagerie very amusing. They see it as a harmless eccentricity that they don't mind me indulging in. What would they say, I wonder, if like Byron, I had chosen to expand it to include larger animals?

'Lord B's establishment consists, besides servants, of ten horses, eight enormous dogs, three monkeys, five cats, an eagle, a crow, and a falcon; and all these, except the horses, walk about the house, which every now and then resounds with their unarbitrated quarrels, as if they were the masters of it . . . After I have sealed my letter, I find that my enumeration of the animals in this Circaeian palace was defective, and that in a material point. I have just met on the grand stair-case five peacocks, two guinea hens, and an Egyptian crane. I wonder who all these animals were, before they were changed into these shapes.' (The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, writing to the novelist Thomas Love Peacock from Ravenna where he is staying with Lord Byron)

However, neither Sugar nor B will let me have a cat so I have to be content with the cat who has chosen as his home my garden. There are enough squirrels and birds to keep him fed and content. There are enough trees for him to practise his climbing on and enough mounds and hidden places for him to indulge in ambush tactics. He likes to sleep on a stone ledge beneath a pomegranate tree. His is the life one dreams about.

One other person inhabits my garden. Adjacent to the stone pergola wreathed in jasmine and from which a copper bell hangs, is a tiny bamboo grove. This is where Yamini lives. Carved in stone, a voluptuous woman in a pose of total languor and holding aloft a plump lotus bud. She is the woman of the garden and the woman I ache to be.

Yamini is the epitome of stillness. Hers is the perfect calm which will never be shattered by self-doubt. She will never ask herself: How significant is it, what we leave behind us?

From my study, I can see Yamini and it is her I look at as I ask myself for the millionth time: Is a creative vein a blessing or a curse in a woman?



Almost two hundred years ago, Jane Austen, her mother and sisters Cassandra and Martha had come to live in a cottage provided for them by Jane's brother Edward in Chawton in Hampshire . . . Now called Jane Austen's House, the cottage is a fascinating museum with daguerreotypes, topaz crosses, manuscripts, tea caddies, and furniture. However, such places seldom stop at the literary or personal memorabilia. And so visitors are subject to both the morbid and the disturbingly intimate. From a lock of the novelist's hair to the washstand used by the novelist.

What would have Jane Austen made of this? I wonder. Would she have laughed perhaps at the American tourist who stood mesmerized by the sight of her chamber pot? Or, raised an eyebrow at the young couple so moved by the presence of the lace collar sewn by her that they had to embrace each other right there and then?

Behind the main house are the bake house, the washhouse, the carriage house, displaying the bacon roller and the brick oven, the round clothes tub and a low-wheeled donkey trap—various items used by the Austen household.

For me, these outhouses carry as much atmosphere as the insides of the cottage where

the novels were actually written. If I could imagine Jane Austen spooning out tea as part of her duties, tea, sugar and wine stores being under her charge, I could then see her weave that into the writing of her novels. The writer acquires substance here in the backrooms of her life. Fowl had to be roasted, clothes washed and ironed and visits made. Without the everyday, there is no novel nor characters who eat and talk, love and cry, despair and dream, hope and live . . .

Later I go to sit in the garden. I think of that spindly chair and the little table placed by the window to perhaps recreate the spot where the novelist wrote some of her best-known novels. If aspiring poets kneel at the Poets Corner in Westminster Abbey, then it is here that all aspiring novelists must come to pay homage. During her lifetime the literary establishment may have maintained a resolute silence when it came to praising her work. But Austen had, importantly, as anyone in the publishing world will tell you, the patronage of the ‘unknown readers’.

About seven years ago, to mark the publication of my novel *Ladies Coupé*, there was a small book event in Delhi. Given that I knew exactly 1.5

persons in Delhi, my editor, then at Penguin India, hastened to pad up the guest list by calling several fellow authors. One author, declining, said, ‘Anyway, my colleague will be attending. He thinks she is an Austen, Allende and Atwood combo!'

Later my editor said in a bemused fashion, ‘I am not sure if that Austen reference was entirely complimentary!'

Though new to the world of letters then, I already knew that the literary world very often dismissed women writers as inconsequential if their works appealed more to women than men. And ordinary women unfettered by academic presumptions or baggage were bottom of the heap, so to speak.

In Park Honan's *Jane Austen: Her Life*, he writes of how Jane Austen was to experience this time and again. With the publication of *Sense and Sensibility*, her book received just two reviews both loaded with ‘masculine kindness, boredom and routine condescending praise’. When *Pride and Prejudice* appeared, the first three reviews were replete with pleased yawns of approval. Jane Austen, whose identity was still unknown to the literary establishment, had to endure the mixed

pleasure of seeing her novel become fashionable, and live with the indignity of being told of a celebrated man of letters who is reported to have said, ‘I should like to know who the author is, for it is much too clever to have been written by a woman.’

And yet, I can’t stop thinking of the creaking door. A swing door that led to the downstairs room that Jane Austen wrote in was purposely left open so as to warn the writer if anyone was coming and she could then hide her manuscript. As much as the need for anonymity, my own reading was that Austen didn’t think it seemly to be caught writing. Like perhaps a child sucking on a stolen gob-stop, did Jane Austen ever think, ‘I know this isn’t exactly nice, this thing I do, and yet it is exactly what I want to do.’

Jane Austen, unlike many other women writers, was shielded from the actual process of running a home. She was perhaps fortunate in her sisters because, in that cottage, where others were absorbed in their chores, she was allotted only light housekeeping duties and did not have to apologize or feel guilt for being absorbed in her literary world. She and her work were valued in that household and they let her be with a

respectful tolerance of her chief preoccupation—her writing.



I think then of the battles a woman writer has to contend with these days. For there is a daily conflict of interests.<sup>3</sup> How does one harmonize a literary life with a family life? Both require involvement. Both demand dedication. Both need the luxury of time. If she chooses to be a good housewife, the writer in her suffers. And if she chooses to put her writing above all else, she is seen by family and society as a cold, wilful and selfish woman. She can expect little support and hardly any encouragement. And yet she continues to write because as all writers or creative people will tell you, the need to create is paramount.



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<sup>3</sup>daily conflict of interests—Jane Austen must have experienced this in her own way. What else could have made her say: ‘A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of.’

## *Twenty*

Y et again tonight the Inbox had spewed a voluminous and venomous mail. I have by now learnt to ignore the mails that offer to increase the length of my penis or provide me Cialis to make my partner hard or help me with my erozones.

Many people write to me. Most of them are letters from readers who enjoy what I write. Or would like to debate on what I have written. Sometimes they don't agree with my point of view and tell me off: 'Get a real job, you bitch' and suchlike.

One man though shows his dislike by sending me pornography. Since I am a woman, he presumes that I would be offended two

times over. So, am I supposed to feel insulted? Or, should I be angry? Or, am I supposed to stop writing?



It is funny how the world perceives smut. In 1960, the British publishers of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Penguin, were prosecuted by the Home Office for obscenity. The prosecuting counsel introduced the notorious question to the jury: 'Is it a book you would wish your wife or your servants to read?'

I have before me a copy of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that bears within its pages the publishers' dedication: 'This edition is therefore dedicated to the twelve jurors, three women and nine men, who returned a verdict of "Not Guilty" and thus made D.H. Lawrence's last novel available for the first time to the public in United Kingdom.' The rest, of course, is history, in that millions of readers all over the world agreed with Lawrence's vision for the book: 'I put forth this novel as an honest healthy book, necessary for us today.' This from a man

whose publishing history had been chequered with censorship.<sup>1</sup>

I have always wondered who these people are who sit in judgement of art and literature. Who are these men and women who think they can decide what is worthy of public consumption and what isn't? What gives them the right to govern an individual's right to choose whether a book or a painting or a film is obscene or not and hence can be read or viewed?



One would think that by the mid-twentieth century the rules that governed censorship and particularly charges of obscenity would have changed. After all, by that time, the world did

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<sup>1</sup> He had already had censorship troubles. In 1915 his book *The Rainbow* had been seized by the police and declared to be obscene. His 1916 novel *Women in Love* could not find a publisher in America or Britain (and did not until 1920 and 1921 respectively. In 1921, W. Charles Pilley reviewed it under the headline 'A Book the Police Should Burn'). So, in 1928 Lawrence arranged for a private publication of his novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in Italy. It was not to be commercially published in the USA or Britain for 30 years.

know that the moon was merely a satellite and not a heavenly orb that ruled destinies. We did know that smallpox was caused by a virus and not by the wrath of a goddess. So what was a little smut? Particularly when if you didn't want to read it, all you had to do was flip the page! But oh no . . . the censors wouldn't have that. What if the reader couldn't be trusted to flip the page . . . what if millions of innocents would be corrupted by a few words and turn into despicable human beings with a passion for lewd material. What ifs! What ifs!

Nabokov's *Lolita* was first published in Paris in 1955 by the Olympia Press, a young company that specialized in erotica written in English. Nabokov had settled for the Parisian press only after countless rejections.

The problem, then, as Nabokov wrote, was not with his treatment of the theme, but with the theme itself. It was, he wrote, 'one of three which are utterly taboo as far as most American publishers are concerned, the other two being a successful interracial marriage and an atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106'.

Agynar Mykle, the Norwegian writer, was hauled into court for his *Sangen om Den Røde Rubin* (*The Song of the Red Ruby*), published in 1956. Mykle's realistic sexual scenes led to prosecution for obscenity in 1957. The book was read aloud in court, judged obscene, but the decision was reversed on appeal. Though it was one of the last obscenity trials in Norway, the work, now an international best-seller,<sup>2</sup> was banned in many countries.

James Joyce, Henry Miller, Jean Genet, even Theodore Dreiser were all forced at some point or other to review their work because of the gods of censorship represented by either the cowardly literary establishment, the frowning bristling reading public or some silly moralizing git who decides to appoint himself the custodian of probity in the world and goes to court with obscenity charges.

Is sexual explicitness the true reason for these

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<sup>2</sup>International presence needn't always mean burgeoning bank accounts. Although *Sangen om Den Røde Rubin* made Agynar Mykle famous and the book was translated into many languages, he was forced to borrow money from his editor, Harald Grieg at Norsk Gyldendal Forlag, without being able to pay it back.

books coming under such moral scrutiny? Or, is it that most of these books are characterized by a common element—protagonists who do not feel any remorse for what they think and do?

In 1979 Mridula Garg was charged under the India Penal Code with writing pornographic literature, and a warrant was issued for her arrest based on two pages from one novel *Chitta Cobra*. Primarily a love story, the novel dealt with a married woman's intense but adulterous relationship. The woman considered it a sublime relationship, free from guilt and perhaps it must have been this more than anything else that caused the literary magazine *Sarika* to conduct a campaign against Mridula Garg, branding her a woman who wrote 'shock value fiction' and causing her subsequent books to be denied their due literary merit.



The funny thing about censorship, as is the case with all forbidden fruit, is that the object of censorship becomes that much more desirable. When *The Satanic Verses* was banned in India, everyone who read Rushdie managed to do so one way or the other. And many others who didn't know Rushdie from Roth arranged to get

a contraband copy. It was a great conversation opener at cocktail parties, never mind that, like the Ayatollah, they hadn't read it either.

But what really worries me is the moral police who glower as they mouth: Don't you think you might be corroding our traditional values?

To this day, I haven't been able to fathom how a piece of art or literature is judged to be obscene. I see that what is coy and sentimental is allowed to pass. I can see that furtive suggestions are given rampant freedom. I can see that a hint of a sexual encounter inserted merely to titillate is perfectly acceptable as long as it is couched in respectability.

To me, what is obscene is a bunch of human beings dictating to the world what is obscene . . . and that sender of pornography who thinks sex is dirty and hence it would taint me by association.



## *Twenty-one*

I have just come home from a book club discussion of *Ladies Coupé*. The book club had invited me to talk to them and read to them parts of the novel. Then the book was laid open for discussion. As has become customary with this book, the sex in the book came up for discussion and ended in a debate. The room was divided into two distinct groups. One who said that the heroine picking up a young man for a one-night stand was vulgar and the other group who vociferously praised the importance of that tryst . . . and no one there was remotely interested in what I thought or what was right for the story itself. I suppose such is the power of the sexual energy. Like politics, it gets to us one way or the other.



Ten years ago when my first book, a collection of short stories, was published, a very nice but rather prissy young man and I were at lunch. That morning the pink sheets of a financial newspaper which the young man devoured word, stock and sensex had, in its leisure pages, been generous in its praise of the book. He stared at me across his shredded lettuce and said, 'I am very relieved, you know.' And then he paused and added, 'I wasn't sure how the media would react to the sex parts.'

I stopped twisting pasta around my fork and looked up. 'Why, what's wrong with my sex parts?' I asked, unable to resist the innuendo.

'Nothing's wrong,' he said and then stared at me aghast. How could I make such risqué jokes? his eyes asked.

He looked at his lettuce and said, 'You know what I am talking of, don't you?' And he shrugged. A gesture that described just about everything he thought was not very appropriate about my writing about sex . . .

I realized then that writing about what I consider is just another appetite would come up for scrutiny again and again. I had done the

literary equivalent of putting my foot in my mouth . . .



Later that evening at Tanya's home, she introduced me to a visiting artist who wanted to know what kind of a writer I was. I was fazed by the question. I was too new in my literary life then to have a well-formulated and rehearsed reply. Tanya smiled at my confusion and said, 'She's a very subversive writer.'

In the years to follow I was to hear subversive as a descriptor applied to my writing. I presume subversion was a reference to my writing about sex. In fact, read subversion as writing about any deviation, even ones as innocuous as scrimping (which is sucking on your partner's toes) or splashing (which is rubbing sloppy foods over naked bodies). Read subversion as underneath the sheets with nothing on . . .

Why is it, I wonder, that I never have to encounter any of those knowing looks about the food I describe in my writing. (Which more or less equals my 'sex parts'.)

In my ten-year career as a writer, and a writer

of 'sex parts', I have discovered that writing about sex elicits certain definite responses. First there is the flushing reader who mumbles an 'Ahmmm ... do you write the you know ... the sex ... you know ... for effect or do you think it's necessary for the story?'

'What do you think?' I ask back. 'Don't you think it is fun?' That knocks them sideways. If I was expected to be discomfited, defensive even, here I am, happy with my 'sex parts' and grinning silly. Pure enjoyment, ladies and gentlemen . . .

Then there are the rather censorious types who toss me the 'what does your mother think about your writing about sex?'

Frankly, my mother is more embarrassed by the grey in my hair than by the sexual passages in my books. Sex is natural; what isn't are the streaks of grey in her daughter's locks while hers remain defiantly black . . .

After years of being considered the boring blue-stocking, I am suddenly the smutty siren who just might have done it all . . . Which is why I now do run into an occasional curious and priapic being who comes on strong with a 'So have you experienced all that you write about? The sex, you know . . .'

My first instinct is to giggle but then I deflect the pass with an ‘Oh no, I just got it out of the pornography I like to read.’

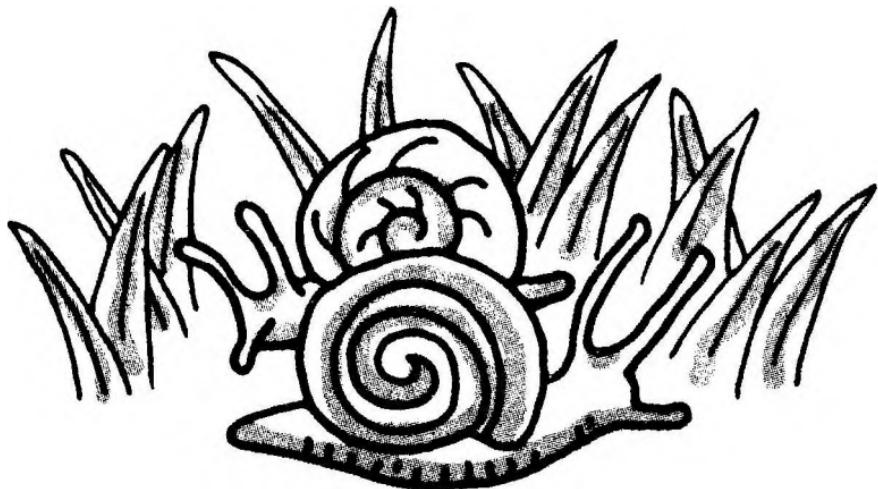
And finally my favourite is the one where the telephone rings and a voice says: ‘Our magazine has a special issue on sex coming up . . .’

If I had written about hunger would I have been asked to comment on a famine?



## *Twenty - two*

The garden snail, *Helix aspersa*, has a courting ritual that lasts anywhere from fifteen minutes to six hours. They circle each other, touch their tentacles, bite lips and genitals . . . given that snails are hermaphrodites until the love dart fires, the snails themselves don't know if he is being a she or a she is being a he. Eventually the he and she in a snail mate with the she and he in the other.



In our times as gender roles get more and more diffused, our courtship rituals get just as bizarre.

On Sundays, B and I have an elaborate courtship ritual that would make even a garden snail insecure.

By most Sunday nights we know that we perhaps have worshipped too ardently at the temple of excess. But we seem to need this demonic appeasement of self every once a week to help us through the rigours of a working week.

First, there is the drink that is poured. Then we switch on the music. Many vegetables are cut and meats sliced; seafood cleaned, eggs shelled, there is much clattering of pots; and dishes mount up in the sink. Slowly as the sauces simmer, and the glasses empty, our conversation reaches rapturous proportions—a house in Goa, dog breeding, Edward Hopper, vacations, Ted Hughes, antiques, slow food . . . Rather like the miscellaneous bookshelf in the study, our interests are diverse. But nothing fosters our togetherness as much as food.



Among the many epithets that have been used to describe me by my family and friends, editors and enemies, the one that I have never taken any

umbrage to is ‘foodie’. This in spite of the natural conjecture attached to the term. An imagery that I have often thought would do a Toby jug proud—multiple chins, love handles around the waist, a waddle-like walk, breathlessness, grasping hands and the gleam of greed when rich and fatty foods are encountered . . .

In an earlier avatar as food critic for a city magazine, I would often chance upon a perplexed look in restaurant managers’ eyes and hear the barely veiled suspicion in their voices at the end of a meal: ‘How can you say you love food when you eat so little?’

And I would mouth my well-rehearsed reply: ‘You are confusing gluttony with gastronomy. A true gastronome while appreciating the most refined products of the culinary art enjoys them in moderation . . .’

The thing about the art of good eating<sup>1</sup> is that it comes with a hierarchy starting at the bottom with the goinfre (greedy guts), progressing to the

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<sup>1</sup>Hana in Trevanian’s *Shibumi* says, ‘Eating for me is what you may call a managed vice . . .’

Like many of Trevanian’s observations, I discover they are consonant (a word the author seems to rather

goule (glutton), then the gourmand, the friand (epicure), the gourmet and finally the gastronome.

B is the true gourmet in the family. Most Saturday mornings he is at Russell Market with an eager acolyte in tow where he will choose potatoes as if he were picking pearls and peruse fish with the rapt attention an archaeologist would reserve for a hitherto undiscovered cave painting. Names of herbs trip from his mouth as if they were Rilke's poetry and given a chance he will discourse on the difference between oven and charcoal grilling. When fellow advertising contemporaries talk about taking a sabbatical and writing a book or making a film or photographing a nomadic tribe somewhere in the Gobi desert, he dreams of building a clay oven and baking his own bread.

Much as I love food, I do not ever see myself going into raptures over the specifics of cheese making or the shape of aubergines. In fact, I

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enjoy speckling his prose with. Be it in the context of the gameform of *Shibumi* or karmic debts) with mine. Especially these: 'Where is the fibre in a people whose best selling poet is Rod Mckuen?' and 'It was ironic to realize that the destruction of the world would not be the work of Machiavelli, but of Sancho Panza.'

would describe myself as a mere gourmand. Someone who enjoys good chow. Cooked, or written about.



Food when written about skilfully can add zest and flavour to even a dull book. And I'm not referring to cookbooks. Cookbooks like instruction manuals have a purpose. To view them as anything else is delusional. Some cookbooks are elegantly written and divulge trivia that has no real use and yet makes the book delightful. That still doesn't qualify them as literature. Then there are cookbooks that are cleverly disguised to read as something else à la Madhur Jaffrey's but ultimately they show up for what they are—in bookshops under the heading Cookery.

Food figures in some books that straddle two sections—travel and cuisine. The reader accrues the twin benefits of armchair travel (no queues for visas, no long waits at the airport, no indifferent flight attendants) and the pleasure of almost sampling foreign foods without ever having to worry about throwing up.

In recent times, fiction writers have taken a cue from the heady success of *Like Water for*

*Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel and have sought to replicate the same formula. Marrying recipes to characters, dishes to plots. So much so at times you don't know if you are reading about a carrot or a man, a family or a stew.

But the 'food writing' that gives me the greatest enjoyment is fiction that without any effort and quite seamlessly introduces food into the narrative. To borrow my friend Vishwas's phrase, books that are built in with 'meataphor'. A prime example is *The World According to Garp* by John Irving.

Somewhere in the middle of the book, in the chapter 'The Eternal Husband', there is an almost perfect and simple recipe for a spaghetti sauce. A description spread across several pages that blends in Garp's ritual of cooking dinner for the family with intrusions, introspections and parts of the recipe floating in.

Many years ago while stuck in a friend's apartment in London, I offered to cook dinner with whatever was available. It was a wet grey February evening and his supplies bordered on nil. What I did have was a copy of *The World According to Garp* and since my friend liked books as much as I did, he was tickled by the

thought of a dish out of a book that had almost a cult stature across the world. The sauce turned out quite nicely.

Recipes from within a novel needn't always end happily. Sometimes even as you read it, you know the dish is going to be a nauseating mess. In Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*, the process of cooking Beggar's chicken is deftly and elaborately woven in; except that the Chinese family in the book use a turkey and the results are both funny and revolting. And as if to make up for it, the next page introduces a simple recipe using vegetables and rice.

Food has been used as a metaphor to tremendous effect in the book *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* by the Brazilian writer Jorge Amado. You couldn't cook a meal from the descriptions of Dona Flor's cooking lessons but the next time someone asks, you would at least know enough to talk about Bahian cuisine.

In Molly Keane's hands, food becomes a weapon. The Irish writer used food to poke fun at the Irish gentry of her times (read that as post-Second World War) and their obsession when everything else is failing to make-believe nothing

has by describing their elaborate and usually make-do meals.



Writings from across the world show this propensity for braiding in food as a literary device. When an Indian meets another, be it in Tamil or Hindi, one of the first few questions of well-being we ask one another is: Have you eaten?

Strange then that food seldom plays a pivotal role in our writing. In the Indian fiction that I have read, in Malayalam and in translations from other Indian languages, food doesn't seem to occupy so important a place. An exception is M.T. Vasudevan Nair's short story *Karkidakam* where a meal, or the wait for it, becomes the focal point of the narrative.

Perhaps the fact that I have seldom encountered food as a metaphor in Indian writing has to do with the limitations of the material that I have had access to. And yet I can't help thinking how much more fulfilling it would have been to read a fleshed-out portrayal of the complexities of Moplah cuisine—whether a biriyani, a pathiri

or a muttamala—in a book like *Eye of God* by N.P. Mohammed.

The paucity of descriptions of food in a novel doesn't take away anything from the plot or narrative. But including it, I think adds an extra element of everydayness, which at times cerebral books lack. I am of the school that says feed the soul as much as the senses.

In my novel *The Better Man*, I brought in the making of a chicken curry<sup>2</sup> as taught to me

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<sup>2</sup>Krishnan Nair's recipe. (Read more about Krishnan Nair in Chapter 27)

Ingredients: One cup fresh coconut flakes, 2 inch piece ginger cut into slivers, 3 green chillies slit lengthwise, 2 tb.spoon coriander seeds, 1 tb.spoon chilli powder, a pinch turmeric, 10 peppercorns, 1 kg chicken skinned, cleaned and chopped into small pieces. Salt to taste.

For seasoning:  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch piece ginger, 2 green chillies and a handful of curry leaves; 1tbsp coconut oil.

Method: Fry the coconut well with the coriander seeds, chilli powder and peppercorns. Grind to a paste using as little water as possible. Meanwhile marinate the chicken with the green chilli, salt and turmeric.

Put the pan on the fire. Add a tablespoon of coconut oil. Add the chicken and fry till brown. Cover and simmer till chicken is half cooked. Now add the ground masala and cook well till meat and gravy amalgamate. Sauté the seasoning and add to the curry.

Best eaten with appams or puttus.

by our old family retainer. It was both a metaphor and a literary tool necessary to describe a character's state of mind. Readers loved it; in contrast, an Indian critic from an academic publication cocked an eyebrow—too lengthy an aside, she wrote. How does one explain to a critic that asides are what add spice to a book?

One doesn't.

And writers going through even a minor crisis of confidence will desist from doing so the next time. Maybe that explains the Indian reticence to describe food. Why attempt something that critics will damn as too pedestrian and lowbrow?

Sometime ago, Franklin, a very dear friend who has a quirky sense of humour, gave me a microwave cookbook. In it he inscribed: 'Every grain of rice has this dream to be microwaved.'

I think of the range of our cuisine and I think of how every Indian dish probably has this dream too. Of finding its place. In Indian writing, if nowhere else.



## *Twenty-three*

**M**y friend Gita Krishnankutty came calling. We were seeing each other after a span of some months and once again I thought as I always do when I meet Gita: How does she do it? The youthful exuberance, the sparkle of eternal interest and the wisdom of age—Gita melds them together in her unique way that makes her who she is.

I do not know what is the presiding emotion I feel when I think of her. The warmth of affection or the surmounting awe she evokes . . .

At a little over seventy, she has just moved into a new home; a move effected by herself, from choosing light fittings to bathroom tiles. She talks of the numerous projects she is working on and all that she will do in the course of the next few days.

Tonight I am reading her translation of the Malayalam novel *Govardhan's Travels* by Anand. As I read, a peculiar thing happens. I know the words are in English but in me, it resonates in Malayalam. It has a strange yet familiar feeling . . . And I'm already thinking again, how does she do it?



Antonio Carluccio, the Italian chef, told me how much he enjoyed reading my novel *Mistress* in Italian. I smiled my thanks. And then he added, 'Your book . . . it is beautifully written.'

I smiled except I could feel the tinge of uncertainty shake the edges of that compliment. Who was he complimenting? I wondered.

I, the author or Francesca Diano, the translator who in many ways had become the book's surrogate author . . .

I have always wondered what it must mean to be a translator, particularly of fiction. Does one translate exactly what has been written? Or, does one allow one's sensibilities to creep in. And if so, where does one draw the line of restraint?

Until recent times, till I taught myself to read Malayalam, most of the Malayalam literature

I had read was translated by Gita Krishnankutty.<sup>1</sup> Whether it was the novels of M.T. Vasudevan Nair or the novel *Mayyazhi* by Mukundan or the writings of Lalithambika Antharjanam, I read blithely, not for one moment aware of what painstaking effort goes into translating a work from the original language into another. And now that I do read Malayalam, I am even more conscious of what superhuman drive Gita must have exercised to not let her own voice overwhelm the author's. To bring forth the beauty of a book without succumbing to the need to edit. To let the grammar of the region prevail without making it seem like an idiomatic translation . . . In contrast, the author has it easy. Write as your heart leads you and damn everything else . . .

And yet, the translators, except perhaps Richard Burton who garnered much attention for his unexpurgated translation of the Arabian Nights, remain mostly unsung heroes and

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<sup>1</sup>Recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award in 1999 and the Crossword prize for the best work in the Indian Language Fiction Translation category for the translation of M. Mukundan's *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi*.

heroines; and their contributions are seldom acknowledged beyond a cursory mention on the title page of the book.



It is ironic but most of the books that we consider to be the finest examples of contemporary writing are translations. Whether it is Márquez or Kundera or Grass or Pahmuk, what we have had access to are the translations of their works.

In some ways all Indian English writing can be considered to be translations. A small percentage of the country live in urban India where English is the coinage of communication. Elsewhere it is the language of the place that prevails . . .

As an Indian writing about India (and particularly rural and small-town India) in English, I have had to grapple with style and voice before I could find what would be my very own. On the one hand, there was the question of accents. Most of us who grew up in India speak with an accent. The only difference is that it could either be the average convent-girl English accent or it could be clad in the vagaries of the region we hail from.

The other aspect was that in the milieu I was describing, English is seldom spoken. So where is the question of an accent—Malayali, Tamilian or otherwise. But that does not mean that the average Indian, particularly in Kerala, is illiterate or unaware of the world. He has probably read Omar Khayyam and Marx, Russell and Tolstoy in translation so that degree of education is perceived in the way he uses his words.

An Indian writer writing in English about India has it a little more difficult than her peers elsewhere, say in the Caribbean where there is a patois. Or in any of the English-speaking countries where the language is both medium and expression. For us, at best, English is a tool to use to shape our thoughts. A medium of communication that will muscle the abstract into the real and once I arrived at this thought, I found my voice.

I no longer had to worry about whether I would be too lowbrow for reviewers or too highbrow for readers. What was important was the story and the characters.

It wasn't easy but what helped me more than anything else was an introduction to Jorge

Amado's<sup>2</sup> books. Unlike perhaps a Llosa or Borges or even Márquez, I found Amado's stories of life in the Brazilian north-east more accessible.

His style was easy and unstrained. And yet, there was an extreme sensuality, a lyricism, and an almost raw passionate intensity that made it distinct and hard to slot.

And yet none of these would have been ours. Neither the sensuality of Bahia's tropical evenings nor the ribaldry of its waterfront nor the lissomness of its women—the not-so-young Dona Flor, or the nubile waif Gabriella or the stoical Tereza Batista if it hadn't been for Amado. And his translator.

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<sup>2</sup>Amado grew up on a cacao plantation, Auricídia, and studied law at Federal University in Rio de Janeiro. He published his first novel at the age of twenty. Three of his early works deal with cacao plantations, emphasizing the exploitation and the misery of the migrant blacks, mulattos, and poor whites who pick the beans and generally expressing communist solutions to social problems. The best of these, *Terras do sem fim* (*The Violent Land*) was about the struggle of rival planters, and had the primitive grandeur of a folk saga. When some critics denigrated Amado for stereotyping Brazilian society, Amado responded to his detractors by saying, 'I write books that people like to read.'

## *Twenty-four*

Several times this night I wake up hearing the wind. My neighbour's trees seem to loom ominously into the side of my house. It threatens to either kill us all in sleep, or at the least nudge the tiles of the sun shades above the window . . . Through sleep, my ears perk up like a dog's each time the wind starts . . . the chimes begin their manic dance and the leaves hiss and crackle. I peer out of the window at my neighbour's trees with a malevolence I can't believe.

I don't think it is just me or the place that I live in. But for some days now we have had a wind amidst us. A strong gusty wind that whips trees, makes windows lurch on their latches, doors slam, and tiles rattle . . .

If we lived by the sea, this is the kind of wind

we would be warned about. Fishermen would be forbidden to put to sea and all coastal dwellers would be advised to move away from the sea. However, we don't and so I go through my everyday trying to affect a certain wind-walking gait like they do in Chicago. Shoulders rounded, body angled, knees slightly bent and head drooping. I look like I have a serious lack of bodily coordination or have had one G&T too many . . .

We live perched on a plateau and technically in the rain shadow region so we shouldn't have such winds. Perhaps that is what the Met Department would have us think. One year, a statement by the Met Department said this was an aberration. An aberration that seems to repeat itself year after year? I have counted five years already.



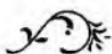
Suddenly the wind<sup>1</sup> has taken precedence over everything. I am not interested in what is

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<sup>1</sup>The French have their mistral. A wind that blows down from the Alps and rakes up all kinds of situations that fiction loves to celebrate. The mistral is said to even

happening around me. Book launches or art shows or even just a friend's party. All I care about is the speed of the wind. I search the newspapers every day to see some report of the wind . . .

It is a human quirk that the moment we can classify something, then we think we have it under control. We call culpable behaviour from drivers road rage and that instantly makes it acceptable. We let total strangers call us on our phones and solicit our time and money for a pension scheme or a club membership we don't need. But as that is 'telemarketing', we merely slam down the phone and go on with our lives. If only someone would give this wind a name and a reason . . . Then I could, like Mitterand, affect *mépriser l'événement et avoir la passion de l'indifférence*.<sup>2</sup>




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induce a peculiar madness. The constant hum, the whine, the relentless worrying about what part of your house is going to fly off or what part of a tree is going to land on your head or car roof can turn even the most sane among us into paranoid beings . . . Trust me, I know . . .

<sup>2</sup> *mépriser l'événement et avoir la passion de l'indifférence*—It is necessary to scorn the event and to have the passion of indifference.

## *Twenty-five*

*L*'indifference would have come in handy this past week I think as Sugar sighed and settled at my feet. I know the import of that sigh. 'Thank God, her aunt has left!'

It is the first night after a long weekend that Sugar has been allowed to do as she pleases. Her freedom run alternates with aggrieved looks she throws my way: How could you do this to me? Go ahead, invite a few more people and lock me up as if I was a dangerous beast . . .

An aunt who has several dogs came visiting. She, we presumed, would be a true-blue dog lover. Instead she shrieked each time she saw Sugar. Her dogs have a pen and an attendant and she, we are told, has nothing ever to do with them. And so, like the first Mrs Rochester in *Jane Eyre*,

Sugar was confined to a room upstairs while I played Grace Poole, the grim-faced jailer attendant.

As for B, he is a man seething with righteous indignation. This is a man who will not let anyone but himself walk Sugar. This is a man who thinks no stud is good enough for Sugar. And for a long time corresponded with a breeder in Texas about the possibility of frozen sperm and suchlike. Until I put my foot down and said, 'Get a grip on yourself!'

When Sugar sighed again, B and I decided to make yet another house rule. No more house guests who are allergic to pets or are scared of dogs.

B says that we may also need to add other stipulations to that. No more house guests who don't want to wake up to kites screeching on our roof, mynahs cackling on the trees, squirrels quarrelling on the windowsill or bats gliding through the rooms. Nor are house guests petrified of frogs, salamanders, lizards, chameleons or snakes welcome. All of which I wholeheartedly agree to. It is only when it comes to rodents that I am unsure of where I stand.



First there is the fact that Apollo, he who presided over music, poetry, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, medicine and science, had a mouse as his emblem.

Secondly, some of my earliest memories of my grandmother's house revolve around rats. There is the ubiquitous stream of memory: of reaching Shoranur by a train fuelled by steam. Of soot-streaked faces and hands; of light catching the glass of a train window; of an early morning blur of suitcases, porters and the family car that resolved itself into faces of uncles and a grandmother, five cousins, half a dozen hens, two dogs and a mountain of fluffy white iddlies and a little lake of chutney . . . but it was rats that gave an edge to these childhood reminiscences.

It made its appearance in the grim bedtime story that was brought out when we dawdled at bedtime and tried to wriggle out of brushing our teeth. 'Remember what happened to Uncle Mani when he was a boy!' my mother would say.

Uncle Mani, when he was a boy, woke up hungry one night. So he crept into the storeroom and rummaged for something to eat. He ate several ripe bananas and a few pieces of halwa from a tin. Instead of going back to bed, lulled



by a full stomach, he fell asleep there. A little while later, he felt something move on his lip. He peered from between his eyelids and spotted a mouse sitting on his chin. A mouse that was about to lick his sugar-crusted lips—Uncle Mani leapt in the air and fled as if he had a thousand mice chasing after him to lick his lips . . .

In a family where agriculture was the mainstay, it was natural that there were rats and mice. Apart from grain in the grain room, there were bags of rice piled in the storeroom, bunches of bananas and pumpkins dangling from the ceiling and wooden cupboards laden with all kinds of eats. We children found it worth a forage, so why blame a rat whose nature it is to strive and seek and to not yield till it has foraged and found.

My grandmother and uncles didn't, of course, let nature prevail. Instead every few days there would be a rat hunt. All it needed was a few days of a hint. Of a whisker, or a tail, a scurrying of feet and sometimes simply a movement that suggested gnawing jaws at work . . . and it would be time for Brownie, the half Retriever half rest-of-the-world dog to be ushered in.

The youngest of my uncles and Brownie would go into the designated area of the passageway where it was suspected rat forces were at large. Doors and windows would be slammed shut and we would wait outside pressing our ears to the door. Inside there would be much mayhem and finally when man and dog emerged, uncle's face would be wreathed in a grin and Brownie's face with a rat . . . sometimes there would be a couple of dead ones lying on their sides . . .



Adults go through life thinking that children have to be protected from the macabre. The truth is that children have a great fondness for the grotesque. The more bizarre the situation, the more monstrous the scope of imagination, the greater they love it. That perhaps explains why Roald

Dahl continues to be such a favourite even today. A couple of dead rats didn't appeal to our imagination. What did was the mouse and sack technique . . . While Brownie was a champion ratter and had a fondness for mammoth bandicoots, he ignored mice and shrews. Whether they were much too little for his ego or chops, we never did know. For them there was the mousetrap. Not the spring kind that either impaled the mouse or concussed the creature but a cage that trapped the mouse. Which was where the sack technique came into effect.

The mouse would be released into the sack and then my uncle, the youngest one again, would gather the ends of the sack, heave it over his shoulder and lead the way to the backyard. Rather like the Pied Piper—'Into the street the piper stepped, smiling first a little smile'—he'd walk, whistling a tune. Giggling, we would follow, my brother, cousins and I. And then when he was by the granite slab that was the washing stone, he would pause and ask a rhetorical question, 'Don't you think this sack is much too dusty?'

We would giggle some more. 'I better get rid of some dust,' he would announce and raise

the sack and bang it on the wash stone. A couple of more times and as if to add veracity to his words, a small cloud of dust would emerge. When there was no more dust, we knew the mouse inside was dead, splattered, pulverized . . . and we would giggle some more . . . some years later my uncle lost his sense of smell and he blamed it on his youthful predilection for destroying rats, mice and shrews. ‘It’s the curse of those creatures that twitched their noses all the time!’ he mourned, twitching his nose.



Some years ago, when Maitreya and I returned home from our travels to a house that had been shut up for more than two months, I thought I heard a scurrying every now and then. Cockroaches, I thought. Then one evening as I stood near the bookshelf, something ran alongside it. Damn cockroaches, I sighed, making a note to call the pest control people.

Next day, there it was. Again near the bookshelf and this time I saw it was a little mouse. I don’t know who was more scared, the mouse or I. The mouse skidded in panic and I screamed. When

I had calmed down, I thought of how the mouse had slithered across the floor like a cartoon mouse and giggled.

That night I chanced upon a Robert Burns's poem 'To a Mouse': *Wee, sleeket, cowrin, tim'rous beastie . . .*

I decided to let it be.

When B came home a month later, we had a new member in the family. 'Dickens the mouse,' Maitreya announced. 'He loves the bookshelf so we decided to call him Dickens.'

B didn't approve but he was much too ill to protest. Then my mother-in-law came visiting and when Maitreya confessed to his grandmother his plans of taking Dickens to our new home my mother-in-law's jaw dropped. I could read the look in her eyes: The mother is weird, the son even weirder . . . what has my poor son done to be stuck with these mouse lovers?

We never figured out where he, i.e. Dickens, lived but we knew he went for a run every day through the house. And soon everyone who came home began Dickens-spotting. And B decided enough was enough. Then began the pogrom in our home.

Every grown male who came home tried his hand at mouse-catching. God knows what it is about a man and a mouse but men seem to think that catching a mouse is testimony to male prowess . . . never mind that Jim Corbett didn't need as much preparations when he went after his man-eaters.

Whenever my nephews and husband tried to trap Dickens, he did a Houdini. Tired and having created more havoc than a score of Dickens could possibly have, they would retire to the dining table and have a heated discussion about Dickens's DNA. Was he a rat, a mouse or a shrew? It was easy enough to see what had motivated Hitler and his generals . . .

Later when everyone had gone to bed I would sit up alone, reading. That was when I saw a movement from the corner of my eye. And into my mind swam another pair of feet from W.H. Auden's 'An Acre of Grass':

*Midnight, an old house  
Where nothing stirs but a mouse*



## *Twenty - six*

I moved the mouse this way and that. Should I block and delete? Or, should I send the standard response: Thank you for your mail . . . blah blah . . . In the end, I do neither and retreat to bed.

Someone, a total stranger, has sent a mail to my website:

*i am a \_\_\_\_\_ g \_\_\_\_\_, from 'Rajkot' Gujarat  
as i am a newcomer and completely a new  
person in publishing/writing industry, i need  
your help.*

*i have some great story ideas to publish  
books on it.*

*and i have my own real life story too but*

*if i publish it, it can create the most worst  
controversy, so i am afraid that what to do?*

*if you can hel me, or we publish/write  
gether, or you publish my books then*

*it will be the great work satisfaction to you.*

*please repy me soon, so we can go ahead.*

*or you can talk with me on phone too*

*thnx a lot*

*a\_\_\_\_\_<sup>1</sup>*

I am not sure what writers have in common.  
But this, I presume, is part of every writer's life.

Ever so often I feel that helpless look enter  
my eye and feel my mouth twist into a grimace  
that is a parody of a sure-I'm-interested smile  
when at parties or marriage feasts or family dos,  
someone grabs my arm and whispers urgently  
in my ear: 'Now if only I could write . . . I have  
such stories to tell. I'll tell you my story, why  
don't you just write it? I'll give you an outline,  
why don't you expand it and throw in a few  
nice words?'

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<sup>1</sup>The mail has been reproduced as it was sent to me  
with all the spelling mistakes and syntax errors intact.

Tonight I close my eyes and contemplate on nothing for a while. But mostly I ask myself: Is it just me? Or do all writers have to learn to endure<sup>2</sup> this along with all else that is part of laying your soul bare?

As if to remind me that elsewhere people lead perfectly normal lives, my phone lit up.

Belinda Bagmaker beeps again.

I read:

*In my beloved Fort Cochin for a day . . . Nice start to the last week before hols. But in catatonic state of immobility with too much work to catch up with . . . So shall leave it for New Year and resolve to have organized life next year . . . Oh God . . . I sound like Bridget Jones. Have found sweet + handsome taxi driver with a phone that rings with drinking song from La Traviata . . . I may marry him before sunset . . . Love BB*

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<sup>2</sup>At the Michelin's centenary dinner in 2000 in Lucas-Carton, celebrity chef Bernard Loiseau said, 'The toughest thing in life is to endure.' Anyone who puts themselves under public scrutiny will testify to the truth of this. Sadly, Loiseau himself didn't have it in him to endure. In early 2003, he chose to put a bullet to his head afraid of what the future may possibly hold—a fall from eminence to the ignominy of mediocrity.

## *Twenty-seven*

*T*t is not just chefs and writers who have to suffer public scrutiny, Maitreya tells me. I am lying in my bed and he is sitting on the sofa by the window. ‘I have to endure it each time you have guests,’ he growls. ‘The length of my hair and trousers; the music I listen to, the food I eat . . . why do you have people over? At least the kind who seem to find fault with everything?’

Out of the mouth of babes, I think . . .

Ever so often I indulge in a certain fantasy. Of throwing open the double doors of my home with a flourish. Welcome, welcome, I would say to my guests as they troop into my formal and elaborate sit-down dinner.

The dining table would be laid out in the

courtyard with another leaf attached and a cream lace tablecloth thrown over it. All my silverware and crockery would make their appearance and so would the ceramic nameplates at each place setting. There would be tall candles and low floral arrangements. There would be many courses and much conversation.

My guests would behave and arrive on time. Drink moderately and wouldn't ruin my tablecloth with spills. Or cause me anxiety with breakage or abrasive behaviour. And leave just about when all of us were beginning to tire of each other.

And all through invisible hands would cook, serve, clear and clean up while I play hostess in a spotless white ensemble and a tinkling laugh . . .

Sadly for me, I am much too uptight to be a good hostess. I can handle, without going to pieces, four people of the same age and culinary habits perhaps. Plonking a pasta and a pulao at the same table would wither my soul as does the notion of people perching wherever they can with a plate on their lap. It bothers me as does the sight of newspapers strewn haphazardly. Franklin tells me that I am getting to be a cantankerous

old lady who will soon start ironing her newspapers along with the napkins.

B in contrast is uncomplicated and laid-back. It makes him a superb host. Someone who can put his guests at ease and make each one feel important and cared for. Someone who will point out the oddities of our home and table and induce much mirth. I read somewhere what Sebastian Faulks had to say after a visit to Gordon Ramsay's restaurant: 'You are not there to indulge, but to take your place in a process.' So it is with B. Our guests know this and delight in it.

Such is the buoyancy of mood he creates that it allows him blithely to try out new recipes on our guests. If a recipe fails, he will laugh and apologize. And they will laugh as well and fill themselves with bread and go home thinking: What a splendid meal!

Tonight, we have a house full of guests. Just about every room in the house has people sleeping in it and I am sure there are a few strewn in the corridors as well. All day I have cooked; elaborate meals for a group ranging in age from an infant of a few months to an octogenarian. The appetites and palates have been just as extensive. As the

day progressed, I could sense that my laughter was verging on the unhinged and my eyes<sup>1</sup> were acquiring a manic gleam.

The next time I swear I will call in for food, transfer it into dishes before the guests arrive and put on my white outfit and tinkling laugh and be the at-my-ease hostess instead of the harried one wondering first if the food will stretch and then what to do with the mountains of leftovers . . .

I am exhausted mostly from trying to hide my uptight self. A bone-weary fatigue that will not let me sleep.

I pull towards me the magazine lying on the bed. B has left it there and forgotten to put it back.

I begin reading . . .

*'I entered El Bulli<sup>2</sup> and sat. No silverware on the table, no menu. I didn't ask for a thing, nor was I asked if I wanted anything . . . It came down to a*

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<sup>1</sup>John Banville describes this best in his novel *The Sea*: 'One's eyes are always those of someone else, the mad and desperate dwarf crouched within.'

<sup>2</sup>El Bulli—*Esquire*, July, 2001. The true tale of the amazing alchemical miracles and transcendental gastronomy of Ferran Adria, the world's greatest chef. Or, How to Eat. By Michael Paterniti.

*question of faith. And I suddenly felt the presence of this man, Ferran Adria, somewhere in the shadows, holding the fork in my hand, guiding it to the plate.'*



Tonight, more than ever I long for Krishnan Nair and the solace his guiding hand brought.

Unlike Ferran Adria, he had no theories about food. In fact, he wouldn't have known a theory unless it was cooked and placed before him on a banana leaf. But Krishnan Nair was as much an artist as Ferran Adria is. Not a conquistador of new culinary paths but a master nevertheless. No one knew about Krishnan Nair outside the periphery of Mundakotukurussi, my village in Kerala. But there is no mistaking the mastery of his medium—the wood fire and bronze uruli and a handful of ingredients.

For a long time food meant nothing to me; it was the mealtimes that were more important. In my grandmother's home with its doors and rafters of Burmese teak so stout that no termite would dare chew on it, we would sit, hordes of cousins and I, devouring endless meals that could have been sawdust seasoned and garnished with wood chips for all we cared. When I shrugged

aside childhood, I lost, perhaps irretrievably, much. Ticket stubs and broken bangle bits; funny-shaped pebbles and odds and ends ceased to enchant. But I acquired as if to compensate for that loss of innocence, a palate.

The thing about a palate is that everyone has it but only a few understand it or know what to do with it. It's like being able to waggle one's ears. And once you know how, you never forget it . . . For a while I abused this gift called a palate; the cuisines of the world were my oyster I spiked with a dash of Tabasco and a squeeze of lime and threw down my throat . . . I let the dictates of eating rule rather than the bouquet of buds in my mouth.

Then one Onam, I met Krishnan Nair. He was a retired family retainer who sometimes chose to help my mother in the kitchen when there were guests visiting. He cooked not because it was his profession but because he liked doing so. And that I could understand.

Krishnan Nair was teasing lime leaves and crushed ginger into swirls of buttermilk. 'How about a tiny sliver of one of these?' I asked pointing to an orange chilli.

We called it cheena molagu. Literally it translates into Chinese chilli. I do not know if the Chinese introduced this to Kerala or it is named so because of its diminutive size. But the cheena molagu is all fire and flavour. It can chase the demons out of you and fill your mouth with flame. It can fire up the blandest of meals and reduce to nothing the most exquisite of dishes. Cheena molagu demands a restraint, a caution and at the same time the gumption to make that leap of faith and introduce it into a dish at the right time in the right quantity . . . and it takes a master to make the cheena molagu do its bidding. Krishnan Nair smiled. Is that a challenge or what? his eyes demanded.

I shrugged; a shrug that Krishnan Nair read and took up as a gauntlet. When he offered me a glass of buttermilk, I tasted first the surface calm and in its depths an internal conflagration of a subterranean ocean. Flame licked at salt. The green of Kerala and the nuances of its spice . . . all in a glass of buttermilk.

He was in his seventies and I was in my early twenties but we looked at each other across a kitchen counter on which was heaped a small pile

of orange and white dwarf chillies. In that first glass of buttermilk, we had found the equivalent of a Masonic handshake.

For as long as he was alive, Krishnan Nair came to visit me each time I went home and he would cook for me. The food was typical Malayali cuisine but he imbued it with a certain flavour that was hard to replicate. But more than anything else what I treasured about those encounters was the free fall of his mind. He would talk as he cooked. From family anecdotes to village affairs to cooking hints to philosophical notions. There will never be another man like Krishnan Nair.

In certain cookbooks, I have stumbled upon something akin to the feeling that Krishnan Nair's conversation evoked. That while cooking was central, the peripheral world was just as interesting.

Almost every home (and kitchen) has its own set of cookbooks. In my home, there is a pile of cookbooks that I ignore mostly. The ones I dip into again and again are the ones that teach more than how to cook. In fact, perhaps anyone even remotely interested in food or cooking (or for that matter history or social customs) will find these a worthwhile read.

*Mrs. Beeton's Cookbook* is as much a cookbook as it is a study of a Victorian mind. In the preface to her first edition, she expresses a hope that the 'mistress and maid will find the information serviceable'. Along with plentiful recipes, there are practical hints on everything from servants to menus to utensils to invalid foods to housekeeping techniques.

And since this cookbook is 147 years old, it has a special section on Indian cookery with priceless gems like: 'The English housekeeper will soon learn that it is impossible to treat or trust Indian servants as we can our English ones . . . The cook, having the marketing to do will in all probability try to make out of it some profit for himself.'

The *Larousse Gastronomique* is the world's greatest cookery encyclopaedia. What it does is provide an anthology of haute cuisine and recipes for everyday cooking from across the world. Appealing to the gourmet, cook and aesthete, the *Larousse Gastronomique* will delight the historian and sociologist too. There are life histories of great chefs and quaint eating habits. There are descriptions of regions and their cuisines. There are eccentricities listed and sometimes even the entomological origins of certain dish names.

(For practical purposes, the cookbook I swear by is a textbook titled *Modern Cookery* for teaching and the trade by Thangam Philip. These have only recipes and each one is worth its weight in gold.)



One morning, a friend comes bearing a gift. A bag of wild mushrooms . . . I think of Krishnan Nair when I cook the mushrooms. A hint of chilli. A dash of onion paste. A tiny drizzle of coconut oil. Too much or too little can kill the taste.

Later, when I eat it for lunch and the mushrooms dissolve in my mouth with a crunch, with smoothness, with the flavours of an earth moistened with dew and burgeoning with spores of ripeness, it is the taste of a season spent and of one in sight. And I think if it weren't for Krishnan Nair, I would have never known why food is an obligatory emotion or what it is to taste, and taste more than just food.



## *Twenty-eight*

When Maitreya was about nine years old, we often played a game called Shipwrecked. It was a simple enough game and tremendous fun. In two minutes, each one of us had to collect as many things as possible that would help us survive on an uninhabited island. Then the assorted booty was gauged to see who stood a better chance of survival.

Maitreya is usually the winner. He picks sensible things like a bottle of water, a box of matches, a cheese slice and a mobile phone.

While I would stand before the bookcase hard pressed to choose between the complete works of Oscar Wilde and Gerald Durrell. Or wonder if I should take a dictionary and a ream of paper . . . and what about a fountain pen? . . .

Days before I leave Bangalore I gaze at my bookshelf of unread biographies, memoirs, essays and fiction from all over the world and I wonder which one of these will measure up to my RTDs . . .



Every few weeks, I bury myself in the little village my parents live in—Mundakotukurussi. A village in south Malabar whose uniqueness lies in its singular lack of uniqueness of any sort. It was here I met Krishnan Nair first and it is when I am here that I miss him the most.

‘What do you have in common?’ My parents would often ask perplexed by my friendship with Krishnan Nair. They refer to this predilection I have for nurturing friendships with old men as my RTD Syndrome. RTD being an abbreviation for Retired.

I don’t know how to explain it to them or to anyone else. That with my RTDs I could chit-chat with no fear of being misunderstood. Our brand of gossip was without malice, nevertheless it was salacious and when we slaughtered reputations, it was with a giggle. That silence weighed easily between us. That every conversation was a lesson in life. That if time had caused their compliance,

I had made a religion of it and together we could view life from our non-competitive perches. *What is the point of it all?* being our guiding motto.

For a while I am to be Mundakotukurussi's Ornamental Hermit<sup>1</sup>, minus the long grey beard and the small salary. One of the perquisites of being an ornamental hermit is that you are not expected to make conversation, scintillating or otherwise. And neither are you expected to be very worldly or a politically conscious being, so necessary to daily life here in Kerala. I don't read a newspaper unless someone thrusts it into my face.

When Krishnan Nair died, I retreated once again into my world of books. Only they could promise me the comfort and the companionship of my RTDs . . .

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<sup>1</sup>Ornamental Hermit—In eighteenth-century England, eccentric noblemen hired for a small salary ornamental hermits to embellish their grottoes. When they needed a new ornamental hermit, they placed an advertisement in the paper. It was felt nothing could give more delight to the eye than ‘the spectacle of an aged person with a long grey beard and goatish rough robe, doddering about amongst the discomforts and pleasures of nature’.

## *Twenty-nine*

I lie in bed staring at the skies. The stars glisten; but it is the green arc of the firefly that enchant me. I turn on my side and nuzzle my cheek into the pillow. A hard edge nudges me. The radio.

In Mundakotukurussi, I turn into a radio fiend. It perhaps has to do with the custom of the house—my parents' home.

As is routine in that household, some part of each waking day is spent listening to the radio. Television requires an effort to stay awake. The radio instead allows itself to be wedged between the pillows and disseminate into our ears a great deal of information most of which we may have no earthly use for. Or, at least, not yet . . .

If dialogue is the coinage of the television, it

is the essay that is the currency of this medium. Every afternoon, my mother used the radio as a source of white noise to help her snooze. And later it helped her speak with authority on varied subjects: Optimum temperature of milk to set curd is 70°C; 10 per cent of men marry women older than them, etc.

During the course of one afternoon, I learnt of the importance of sexual happiness in a marriage, how to make paneer pickle and a significant moment in a significant woman's life . . .



Tonight, I am preoccupied with a paper I am to present in a week's time. So, somewhere in the back of my mind, a machine whirrs constantly. Women's autobiographies. What does one say? Where shall one begin? How many of these did I actually know of or have read?

As a reader, I have always enjoyed autobiographies. The ones that have always drawn me are of two kinds. One, those by artists. I am always curious to know how they battled with the twin demands of life and art. The other, those written by nonentities. Not many reach

bookshops because obviously the publisher has to have something to peg the book on . . .

A dial-in music programme came on then. The first caller was a woman. On radio, unlike the trend in TV, anchors don't preen or lisp or ask silly questions. Nevertheless, the anchor did have to ask the name of the caller and in return, both she and I were subject to a flood of information. You could term it 'Portrait of a Home Nurse as a Young Woman'.

I was appalled rather than embarrassed by the woman's candour. And her need to share her life with just anybody, even an anchor who was probably looking at her watch with great impatience. And when I had got over the first flush of being a true-blue bleeding heart, I realized that in truth the best source of women's autobiographies is not to be found in bookshelves but in the radio programmes that give the woman a voice or women's magazines that give the woman a platform to speak her mind. And even here it is curbed by editorial policies of whatever be the medium.

Flippant though it is, I can't but see the aptness of Edmund Clerihew Bentley's verse:

*The art of biography  
Is different from Geography  
Geography is about maps  
But biography is about chaps*

I am not exactly a gender-correct person. I do not take umbrage at being referred to as poetess/authoress etc. And yet, even I couldn't but pause at the word 'chaps'. For here lies one, or perhaps two, of the fundamentals of women's autobiographies.

One: autobiographies are autobiographies when written by men. Literary trivia collectors might have an exact figure of the ratio of men's autobiographies to women's autobiographies. But I suspect the former would outweigh the latter not just in sheer numbers but in volume too . . . (This may be a faulty tool of research but as a dipstick test, I scanned the entire biography list the very well-stocked second-hand bookshop Blossoms had given me and it only confirmed my presumption.)

From a purely personal point of view, this may be because women's autobiographies are, at best, often termed 'lessons in living'.

Sue Townsend, in her collection of columns *Public Confessions of a Middle-Aged Woman*, mentions in her introduction that columnists have a predilection to write about members of the family, dogs and cats, and fill their columns with quotes by taxi drivers. Women's lives are expected to be confined within such peripheries.

Lessons in living may make entertaining reading but are seldom expected to be inspirational. And so for noble visions, we are told that we must seek the autobiographies by generals, presidents, statesmen, scientists, explorers, etc . . .

Sadly, there haven't been too many women in these arenas . . . and women's autobiographies remain matters of mother wit to borrow a phrase from Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Or brave outpourings from a marginalized member of society, be it a sex worker, or a confused heiress. Or a soul-searching account<sup>1</sup> by a woman

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<sup>1</sup>soul searching account—Isabelle Eberhardt being a prime example. 'She was the first hippy. She travelled with no money, living from day to day; she had no concept that chastity was of any value and was sexually voracious; she was into *kif*-smoking and she lived in Morocco dressed as a man.'—Juliet Stevenson

Eberhardt's travel accounts were published in many

who has deviated from the trodden path. Or a quick publishing buck made by someone who at that point has a claim to fame or notoriety. Or adventures of being an appendage to a famous man. No doubt, there are autobiographies by women of substance but they are exceptions rather than the rule.

Second women's autobiographies are not expected to extend beyond chaps. The chaps in their lives . . .

So what about the woman sans a chap in her life? What does she do?



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books and French newspapers, including *Nouvelles Algériennes* ('Algerian News') (1905), *Dans l'Ombre Chaude de l'Islam* ('In the Hot Shade of Islam') (1906), and *Les Journaliers* ('The Day Laborers') (1922). She also wrote a novel, *Vagabond*, translated by Annette Kobak into English. Her journals recovered from the flash flood which killed her when she was 27 and covering the last 4 years of her life, are also available. In addition to these works, 13 short pieces titled *The Oblivion Seekers* have been translated into English by Paul Bowles. (Reference: Wikipedia)

## *Thirty*

*W*hat does a woman do when she is all by herself?

It is the first time ever that I am in an apartment by myself.

Since the day I was born, if not in the room with me, then in the next room, there has always been someone I can call out to. I have always had family or household help or at least a pet. In hotels there are telephones to connect me to the reception. In airports, there are airline staff. In a train, there are other passengers and in a hospital, the night nurse. Tonight though, in the Heine House in Düsseldorf, there is no one.

The bed is made. The shower stall is clean and with fluffy towels hanging on the rail. But there is no soap. There are books, but all in

German. I recognize names but I cannot read them . . . There is a kitchenette but I can't find the light switch. Water flows from the tap but I can't find a glass. The night acquires an aura of a dream I wish to flee but cannot.



I know very little about Heine and have read nothing he's written. But on the net I remember reading of how Heine was constantly being torn between his German and Jewish identities . . . I am beginning to understand what it could mean. I ought to be pleased. This is what I have often fantasized about. Being by myself. Yet, in this sterile apartment, I miss my malted milk and my night-time routine. I long for home and the comforting solidity of my armchair.

Ever since I left my parents' home and my father's cane armchair painted a dull green, I wanted an armchair. An old, solid, planter's chair with history ingrained into its wood and the sag of a countless backs in its cane; and arms that extended if you wanted them to or lay cunningly hidden. In it, I saw myself seated with a pile of books by my side and a drink of something, depending on the hour of the day. I often thought

that once I found my armchair, my travelling days would come to an end.

Finally, some years ago, I chanced upon one. However, by a strange twist of fate, I now seem never to be at home. Research trips. Family visits. Business jaunts . . . I seem to be living out of a suitcase and am always in transit. The armchair waits (and so do I) for the day when I am able to hang up my bag and cry, ‘Honey, I’m home! And for good!’

Earlier as we walked back from the Heine Institute, I had noticed a pub near the street door of the Heine House.

Now as I lie here in this bed, the raucous sounds from the pub downstairs rise up. I am a disgrace, I know. Admitting to loneliness while I have always prided myself on being self-contained. And yet, I welcome the first semblance of life in this ghostly house. I, who have always whinged about never having a room of my own, discover that I need the soothing lullaby of sounds in the next room. Even if it is rough, drunken brawling . . .



## *Thirty-one*

Somewhere, as if in a dream, the bell rang. The long pealing note of a cathedral bell. I woke up suddenly. I didn't know where I was. I could be in any Catholic city. In the past one year I have been in and out of so many cities that sometimes the only constant is the church bell prodding through my dreams. And the thought: Where am I? And then it would come to me that I was yet again on the road . . .

I know just what each hotel breakfast buffet would throw up. I know exactly what names and brands I would find in the shopping districts. Nothing changes. Not even the position of the TV remote in the hotel room. Most days, to amuse myself more than anything else, to bring a semblance of normalcy into my life, I play a

harmless prank: I hide the remote in some unlikely place. Under the pillow, on the bathroom counter, behind the TV . . . and yet somehow they always find it and put it back precisely where it should be . . . It is ennui<sup>1</sup> that devastates me then. So much so when someone, a journalist, an editor, a friend of a friend, invites me to their home, I am pathetically grateful for having been able to remove myself from the comfortable but cold and detached hotel room for a few hours.

I reach for my mobile, search its screen for messages, for missed calls, for an inkling of change and a blank screen pauses my worry quotient for the moment. All is well at home. For now.



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<sup>1</sup>I often do wish I could summon once again the excitement of travel. Be it à la Arnold Bennett when he was in New York (*Those United States*):

At the centre of the first cross-roads, I saw a splendid and erect individual, flashing forth authority, gaiety, and utter smartness in the gloom. Impossible not to believe that he was the owner of all the adjacent ground, disguised as a cavalry officer on foot.

‘Who is that archduke?’ I inquired.

‘He’s just a cop.’

I knew then that I was in a great city.

I have often wondered how they do it. The legion of travel writers from Ibn Battuta to Fa Hien to R.L. Stevenson to T.E. Lawrence to their more contemporary editions—Eric Newby, Paul Theroux, Pico Iyer, Bruce Chatwin and William Dalrymple . . . I wonder how they set out on their travels.

Does the thought come upon them one day and do they pack a little bag and their lives in one neat and precise movement, lock the doors and set out upon their adventures?

Or do they dwell and ponder: should they? Or shouldn't they? Drawing little columns of figures and expenses; contemplating on perils to their own mortality and the ones they leave behind; making little lists of instructions for the milkman, newspaper boy and household help; leaving telephone numbers in case of an emergency on Post-it notes on fridge doors and bathroom mirrors . . . And then in spite of everything, the pros and cons and the intrusive voice of common sense, do they go because it is easier to leave than to stay?

I have always been a wanderer of sorts. Dating back to the time when I was in school, I was forever running away. All through, the rush for me was not getting to a point but the thought

that I had done something to break the monotony of everyday routine. That I had travelled to a place where I had no reason to go.

In my twenties, travel acquired a whole new dimension. In those days, I didn't see myself as a writer gathering experiences; every little episode to be marked and filed as grist to the mill for some future day. Instead travel became a way to still the restlessness that is part of my mental make-up. I ceased to be daughter, sister, and wife . . . I became this anonymous person soaking in every new sensation, thought and word. I felt my senses bloom and my mind open . . .

Then the writer in me surfaced and I made a new discovery. To be rooted to one place dulled my mind and hindered my creativity. But there was a minor problem. Maitreya.

So began the epoch of family jaunts. Fiercely planned, every little detail accounted for, itinerary schedules and advance reservations confirmed and reconfirmed, contingency plans made, our travels began to resemble military operations. Often I would look at the pile of baggage and sigh. My consolation those days was the thought that when Ibn Battuta had travelled, he had had with him a large train of attendants and followers

and also his own harem of legal wives and concubines. What was one husband, one child and an extra piece of baggage?

Just once, I decided, my family would have to agree to a whim of mine. ‘You must be cracked or a Catholic,’ a friend said. The prophet who spake thus was another ennui-ridden ex-Wall Street type who lived in Europe for most of the year and at other times tried to rid his ennui by coming to India and resisting corruption. ‘It’s very good for my global soul,’ he said as we sat trying to make sense of an application form he needed for a building extension sanction. ‘But why would you want to go to Assisi? And in April? In winter, you can at least feast on truffles and some good game . . . Listen to me, go to a city like Bologna . . . but this!!!’

I smiled and said nothing. I was disinclined to elaborate. And even if I were to, what would I say? That very often I went where there was no real reason for me to go to . . .

When we boarded the train from Florence, the train compartment was empty. There were just three of us. B, Maitreya and I. And then, just as it was getting ready to pull away, two women entered. One large and in her forties and the

other frail and in her seventies. ‘Is this the train to Assisi?’ The younger woman asked, her mid-western American accent resounding in the silence.

‘Si,’ I said. Maitreya shot me an amused glance. In two weeks’ time, I had almost completely learnt to replace ‘si’ for ‘yes’. The flip side of that was it usually unleashed a torrent of Italian which was incomprehensible.

‘Is that where you want to go?’ I asked. The woman smiled. I could see the relief in her eyes. I had my ‘si’, she had even less.

‘Sure,’ she said. ‘We are doing this great Europe hop. We were in Rome two days ago. Mom wanted to go to Assisi for at least a day. Something about having made a vow when she was a young girl. She’s Catholic. So I guess you must be Catholics as well . . .’

I sighed. Somewhere in the Holy Bible I had once stumbled on a line: ‘There is a path which no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture’s eye hath not seen: the lion’s whelps have not trodden it, nor the fierce lion passed by it.’

If trusting my instinct to seek that path in the course of my travels made me a Catholic, then I was one . . . Again I did what I was getting

to be quite good at when our reasons for going to Assisi came up. I smiled and said nothing.

I had a book. Nikos Kazantzakis's *God's Own Pauper* which was about Francis of Assisi written from the point of view of another companion, Brother Leo. I was seeking Brother Leo rather than Francis of Assisi.

In the lower basilica where the tombs are, I found a niche in the wall where Brother Leo is said to rest. It is this that clutched at my throat more than anything else. An acolyte, even in death, inspires more awe than the saint himself.



When a call came to travel again by myself, Maitreya was not so little any more and I said yes with only a few misgivings. Women colleagues—educated, sophisticated, well-travelled souls themselves—made little Os of their mouths: 'How can you go without your son?' they demanded. 'We could never do something like that!'

My parents offered to pitch in while I was away for two months. 'Do it while you can. Once you get old, travelling won't be such fun!' my mother said.

I came back from my peregrinations energized

and quite content to stay at home. For a while. That is the other aspect to going away. You come back with a greater sense of value for what you have . . .

When my Norwegian publisher wanted to know if I was interested in visiting, 'Sure,' I said, feeling that prickle down my spine that portended a journey and all the time wondering how I was going to pull it off.

In many ways, it resembled the trip I had wanted to make for a long time. I had the name of a hotel I was to stay at and very little information except what I could find on the net. I knew that Norway was home to the painter Edvard Munch and I knew that Roald Dahl had a Norwegian ancestry and I had read that in the course of travels, Tolkien had encountered the gigantic gnarled trees of Norway and that is how they found their way into the *Lord of the Rings*. Funnily enough, anything regarding the facilities offered in my hotel or how far away it was from the airport was missing.

I had no agendas, no preconceived notions about what I was going to do or a reason, save a whim, for going. I was going, I reasoned, because

I had never been there before. So I packed a bag and went.

I saw a fjord snake its way through the overwhelming Norwegian mountains and a flash of fish—a trout leaping in a stream. I saw a well-known woman writer<sup>2</sup> in Norway sip a cup of coffee as I cut a sliver from a reindeer steak and someone else pointed out to me Rushdie's publisher who got shot at after he published *The Satanic Verses*. I went tramping through Norwegian woods with my Norwegian editor and plucked wild cranberries. And snapped a small twig of a wild bush, its spicy scent staining my finger and hurling up my nostrils, to press between the pages of a book. I did what I do best—be me.

One night, as I sat in a mountain cabin high up in the Norwegian mountains looking down at a lake that remains frozen four months a year, I thought of all the travel writers I had read and pondered on the fact that most of them were men. Or single women.

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<sup>2</sup>Herbjørg Wassmo, author of *The House with the Black Glass Veranda*.

I wondered if, had they been women with husbands and children, it would have been any different for them? Would they have been rushing to make that call every night and every morning to check on the reality of their lives? Or would they, to echo that song in every traveller's heart, have stared some more at the leaping shadows that the log fire threw up on the wooden walls of the cabin, swirled the cognac in the bottom of the snifter, taken a long deep swallow of the fiery alcohol and then told themselves: Keep Walking.



## *Thirty-two*

*W*hile I am away from home, B, who knows that I am an inveterate collector of trivia, always clips anything interesting he may read in a newspaper. And that is how, when I come home from one of my journeys, I find a clipping on my pillow. A welcome-home gift if you please . . .

A delectable bit, this one is about Masti, a Labrador bitch<sup>1</sup>. Masti, who is part of the police force, slipped away when her trainer was not looking. She met a local boy who wowed her

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<sup>1</sup>How I abhor that word bitch used either in the figurative or literal sense. It insults both women and dogs. Frankly all the she-dogs I have met have nothing in common with the nasty selfish women that make the world refer to them as bitches.

with his bow, tail and macho-dog hormones. Masti frolicked with the unsuitable local boy. Masti paid for her few minutes of pleasure. She not only had pups but is also now penalized. She is suspended from the police force. And, if that isn't enough, her trainer too has been made to pay for her crime with an assortment of punishments.

And what may that crime be? Giving in to her natural urge . . . And don't we all do that one time or other?



For some time now, I have been researching the history of the province of Kerala<sup>2</sup> I come from. Part of it involves having to do a loose translation of some documented material<sup>3</sup> from Malayalam into English. It is an arduous task made enjoyable by glimpses into complexities of human behaviour. And what history reveals again and again is how natural urges seem to lead men and women into taking unnatural risks . . . Be it jealousy or rage, hunger or love.

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<sup>2</sup>Valluvanad and Malabar.

<sup>3</sup>An oral and anecdotal history of the region compiled by Tirur Dineshan.

One of my favourite legends has to do with the Trikandiyur Mahashiva temple. Of the many Shivalayas consecrated by Parasurama, one of them is the Trikandiyur Mahashiva Kshetram. A particular feature of this temple is that its northern gate is kept closed through the year except for one day when the temple festival is held.

The closed northern gate owes itself to a love story four hundred years ago when the caste division in Kerala was at its acme. Lower castes were forbidden from doing just about everything but serve the needs of the upper-caste Hindus. Such were the strictures of the caste system then that the lower-caste people were petrified of wandering through the countryside. If a lower-caste person were to meet an upper-caste person face to face, the former would be most severely punished.

During this period, a Namboodiri Brahmin from Annara Desham in Trikandiyur who was a priest at the Karuvat Kavu Devi temple there fell in love with Karytil Kochi, an untouchable girl. And they began a passionate but secret love affair.

As they got more and more involved with each other, they were unable to live apart. That was when the priest had a thought. Since none

of the other Brahmins would have ever seen a low-caste woman, he decided he could pass her off as a Brahmin woman and make her his wife. However, to ensure all went well, he decided to make a few brief experiments to help aid Kochi's launch into the Brahmin community.

First, he asked Kochi to bathe in the eastern pond at Trikandiyur. Besotted by her love for him, Kochi cast aside all fears of what would happen to her if she was discovered, and agreed.

Dressed as an 'antharjanam' and with her palm-leaf umbrella as a veil, she stepped into the pond and bathed quickly. No one would have thought she was anyone but a Brahmin woman but Kochi's heart was hammering as she climbed the steps of the pond when suddenly someone seized her from behind . . .

Kochi almost screamed in fright. According to the custom of the time, if the Brahmins saw through her disguise, they would kill her for having dared to enter the temple grounds.

Then she realized that what had held her back was her long hair that almost touched the ground. Her hair was entangled in a small plant. Kochi quickly snapped her hair from the plant and made her escape.

A little later, a few Namboodiri men reached the pond side and saw the hair clump in the plant. They were puzzled. There were no Brahmin women in Trikandiyur who had hair that touched the ground. So who could it be? they asked each other, but then went their way.

The priest was delighted. His first test had worked.

A few days later, the priest decided to introduce Kochi into a gathering of Brahmins. He heard of a koothu that was to be held at the Trikandiyur temple. Since the performance used to be held inside the temple, he had Kochi dressed as an antharjanam once again, taught her the ways of speech particular to that caste, their customs and their behaviour and then took her with him inside the temple.

The performance began and soon the Namboodiris and their women were engrossed.

Kochi exhaled. It seemed she had actually pulled it off. She began to relax. She settled back comfortably and took out her betel leaf bundle. She slowly applied lime on a leaf, added areca nut slivers to it and put it into her mouth.

Poor Kochi. Her lover had failed to tell her that it was forbidden to chew betel leaves inside

the temple and anyone familiar with temple customs wouldn't do it. However, Kochi had no inkling that she had committed a serious faux paus.

A horrified antharjanam spotted her. And she began a whisper campaign about this new antharjanam in their midst. Kochi, who felt dislike emanate from those around her, became nervous and in her anxious state spat out the mouthful of betel leaves into the palm of her hand.

The antharjanams created an uproar. No Brahmin woman would do such a thing. Who could this charlatan be? The performance was stopped.

The Namboodiris began questioning Kochi and they discovered the truth. The angry Brahmins dragged the two of them out through the northern gate and closed the door in their face. They and any children they may have were excommunicated from society. No one would be allowed to talk, trade, or have anything to do with them.

Kochi and the priest, knowing that they had no future together, jumped into the Tirur river and killed themselves.

The gate was closed forever as a mark of the desecration caused to the temple.



## *Thirty-three*

In the 1500s Dürer, the well-known artist, drew a rhinoceros based on hearsay. In many ways, Dürer's rhino resembled the real creature and in some ways fell short.

Each time I see a reference to Dürer's rhino my eyes tend to skip the reference. Dürer's rhinoceros tends to rub a rather sore spot in me.

A rather well-known literary critic in Kerala reviewing *Where the Rain is Born*, an anthology of writings about Kerala that I had edited, had scathingly referred to me as Dürer and to the anthology as my rhino. The critic had implied that my anthology was a desecration of the spirit of Kerala.

Since at that point I had no idea what he meant, I decided it would be best to not pursue

it. Particularly as I knew condescension was the intent.

But tonight I have just finished Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*. It is a book that was recommended to me by Vani Mahesh, the owner of an e-library service<sup>1</sup> in Bangalore with about 14,000 books in its inventory . . .

Often, I check with Vani on what she thinks of a much-touted new book. It isn't just the fact that Vani reads a great deal. But that she also has the uncanny knack of putting her finger on what is either commendable or failing in a book. Unfettered by windvane-ish reviews, Vani has always sent me books that I have delighted in.

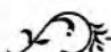
So it is with *What I Loved*. In Part 3 of the book I found a reference to Dürer's *Rhinoceros*<sup>2</sup>. But this time I chased the rhino.

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<sup>1</sup>[www.easylib.com](http://www.easylib.com)

<sup>2</sup>*Dürer's Rhinoceros* is the name commonly given to a woodcut created by German painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer in 1515. The image was based on a written description and brief sketch by an unknown artist of an Indian rhinoceros that had arrived in Lisbon earlier that year. Dürer never saw the actual rhinoceros, which was the first living example seen in Europe since Roman times. In late 1515, the King of Portugal, Manuel I, sent the animal as a gift for Pope Leo X, but it died in a shipwreck off the

I look at the woodcut of the rhino again. It is interesting. In fact, I think it is very good and it also makes me realize that critics very often forget that editors of an anthology are there to more than collate and commission. They have a point of view which is uniquely their own.



When I was a teenager and was tormented by literary peer pressure—being able to name-drop my acquaintance with the literary greats was as

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coast of Italy in early 1516. A live rhinoceros was not seen again in Europe until a second specimen arrived from India at the court of Philip II in Spain in around 1579. (Reference: Wikipedia)



crucial as my knowledge of the who's who of rock bands—anthologies came in very useful. I had neither the time nor the inclination to read all that I should traditionally have. Besides, once I began reading a book, I felt compelled to finish reading it, no matter how dull or how bad it was. And yet, I was human enough to want to know what it was that made the literary greats so praiseworthy. It was then I learnt to pick up anthologies.

In an anthology, I knew I wouldn't have to exercise my patience with precocious or precious writing. I could turn the page and go on . . .

Over the years I have acquired very many anthologies of my own. These have introduced me to several genres from science fiction to women's writing to erotica to limericks. And within each one of these anthologies I have discovered whether that genre appeals to me or not. Whether I would like to read more and enthrone the writers on my bookshelf. The best thing about an anthology, I found, was that there was none of the guilt that I felt when I have bought a book that didn't really pull me. In an anthology, I was sure to stumble upon at least three pieces of writing that made it worth owning.

Sometimes, as I have flipped through the pages of an anthology, I have wondered how an anthology is put together. The standard ‘Best of XXX Writing’ or ‘YYY Literature at a Glance’ are the cop-outs. You know what you are getting from page one. And then there are the concept-driven anthologies. For instance, I have read a Granta anthology titled *Love Stories* which deals with different facets of love. And I have read another Granta anthology titled *Fuck You Up* (from the Philip Larkin poem) about how families can make and break individuals. In that sense these anthologies were almost linear in the way they were put together. But the better anthologies are where I, the reader, have chanced upon a name I have never heard before. A piece of writing so original that I have wanted to read everything that this person has written.

When I was offered an anthology to edit, I said yes quite happily. What I didn’t realize was that trying to group diverse kinds of writing and writers necessitated that I have a platform to begin with. Finding that platform was the toughest part.

All my initial explorations had to be shrugged aside. Initially I had hoped for it to be a biography

of the state. But that didn't work. Nor was it to be a chronological narrative. So what then? Besides, so much has been written about Kerala, what angle would I take? Then it hit me that what I needed to avoid was superficial outpourings of lyrical excess.

Every time I have spent a few days in Kerala, at some point, a discussion comes up on what Kerala is really like. 'Does the world really know what Kerala is all about? Only if you have lived here, will you understand,' I am told again and again.

As I collated material for this anthology, *Where the Rain is Born: Writings about Kerala*, it is this I sought. Writers who have a congenital craving to want to read between the lines and see beyond what is on display. To probe beyond the surface and tap into the seams of the everyday. To shrug aside recycled nostalgia and to see Kerala for what it truly is. Voices that hadn't succumbed to the sheer beauty of Kerala and had been able to decipher if not appreciate the conundrum that Kerala is. A repertoire of voices that, either in English or in Malayalam, in essays, fiction and poetry, have made definite forays into understanding Kerala.

At the end of it all, when the book had gone to press, I decided that I would look up the word anthology. The dictionary meaning is: 'A collection of literary pieces, such as poems, short stories, or plays. Or a miscellany, assortment, or catalogue, as of complaints, comments, or ideas.' While the anthology in some sense is an amalgam of both meanings, I prefer the latter to the former.



## *Thirty-four*

This evening at the British Library, I met an acquaintance from my advertising days. ‘Congratulations! I heard about the anthology! It must have been something to edit all those big names,’ he said.

I smiled. Why is it that anthologies are considered more weighty, more interesting if the contributors have an impeccable literary pedigree? Is content of no relevance at all?

My advertising colleague wasn’t interested in a discussion. He had news of his own. He was writing a book, he said. ‘A novel,’ he added.

‘Oh,’ I murmured. ‘What’s it about?’ I asked as I was meant to.

‘I’m not sure yet. What I am trying to do is read all the Booker Prize winners in the last ten years or so . . . and then I’ll decide.’

‘Oh,’ I murmured again.

‘Would you tell me who are the writers I need to network with? Can I give you a call one of these days?’

‘Don’t you think you should write the book first before you consider networking?’ I said, a little bemused by this young man.

‘I haven’t read any of your books yet,’ he said. ‘But I will. I want to know why people read you,’ he added as he wrote my number down.

‘I haven’t won the Booker, you know. For that matter, I haven’t won a single prize<sup>1</sup>.’ I felt compelled to inform him.

‘That’s true,’ he said. ‘Do you write big fat books? I really don’t have too much time. But I’d like to see what you write about . . . learn from your mistakes etc.’

He is a nice man. A little silly at times but kind and earnest. But he made me feel as a

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<sup>1</sup>Just before the manuscript went to press, I was invited to an adieu aperitif thrown by Eric Rousseau, the Director of the Alliance Francaise in Bangalore. The evening began with what he called his Eric Rousseau International Chocolate Awards. So I did get my prize after all—a bar of dairy milk chocolate strung on a braid of French colours for helping open his eyes to what India truly was and is.

relative did when as a child I confessed to her that I had no intention of taking up medicine like my brother and that all I wanted to do was write stories. ‘I guess the world needs writers too! Ah, I suppose if you want to throw your life away, what can anyone do?’

Or when an acquaintance sought me out to tell me, ‘I must say I enjoyed your book!’

‘I must say’! To this day I do not know if I ought to feel outraged, or see in that clumsiness an encouraging pat.



Like it does on my ex-advertising associate, the soon-to-be Booker prizewinner, the Booker, more than any other literary prize, exerts a tremendous power over the dilettante reader.

Soon it will be that time of the year when the Booker will be on everyone’s lips. Waiting to spice all conversation till the Booker as a topic has been flogged to death by editors of literary supplements, literary columnists, TV show hosts, fiction aficionados and read-what-the-world-reads types . . .

I can imagine it already:

Pools of light. Ethnic motifs. Pineapple and

cheese on toothpicks; the clink of crystal; Verdi or is it L. Subramaniam in the air . . . and conversation spiked with international trivia . . .

Suddenly someone, perhaps the hostess in her flowing organdie salwar-kurta and glittering nails, brings up the Booker in the tones of one who has well rehearsed the subject.

And I can't remember a thing about it, except that Naipaul won it. Or did he now?

Sometime ago, the London literati were agog with the story of what Fay Weldon had been up to. Her *Bulgari Connection* was commissioned by the Italian jewellers Bulgari and there was much whispering about what Weldon had done, namely return to what was her first profession—writing advertising copy.

Maybe it is time the Booker too commissioned a book that would weave in everything you wanted to know about the Booker but was too lazy to visit the website for. I did go there and the fund of information I have discovered has me stumped . . .

For instance, I didn't know that Tom Maschler, Jonathan Cape's publisher, was inspired by the French Prix Goncourt and set up a meeting with the Booker brothers (they own the

largest Cash & Carry company in the UK with 180 branches nationwide and a turnover of £3.5 billion that is the key link between branded manufacturers and the independent sector) hoping to persuade them to plough a small percentage back into a literary prize. The Booker Prize for Fiction resulted from that meeting. (Whoever said that art can't be married to commerce?)

Or that the judging panel includes a literary critic, an academic, a literary editor, a novelist and a major figure. (And I always thought that a man called Booker just pulled lots from a hat.)

Or that UK publishers are allowed to enter up to two full-length novels for a specific year. In addition, any title by an author who has won the Booker prize in the past ten years and any title by an author who has been shortlisted in the last ten years may be submitted. Publishers may also submit a list of up to five further titles for the judges' consideration. (Which means pretty much all of the titles that fared well with reviewers and literary deacons.)

Or that the one thing which distinguishes the Booker prize from other literary awards is that

the judges read all of the submitted books. Approximately 120 books are submitted for the prize every year. (Does that mean that the judges of other prizes use submitted books as footstools, doorstoppers, steps or suchlike?)

But these are all facts that just about everyone in the wide wicked world have access to. What of the past winners? That too is on the website.

What isn't is *The Booker: A Book* by Simon Brett<sup>2</sup>. (By the way, this wasn't commissioned by the Booker and nor did it, I think, make it to the shortlist.) And yet if there is one book I recommend be read before the Booker prize-winner is announced every year, this is it. It may be outdated but it still remains a hugely funny and strangely relevant book.

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<sup>2</sup>Simon Brett is the editor of *The Faber Book of Parodies* and author of *After Henry*, and the Charles Paris Crime series. A former radio and television comedy producer, who has been writing full time for more than twenty years, Brett's psychological thriller, *A Shock to the System*, was filmed, starring Michael Caine. Married with three children, he lives in an Agatha Christie-style village in West Sussex, England—this is pretty much all I could find on the inside cover of the book.

*The Booker: A Book* is about Geraldine Byers, a novelist of little repute who knows the Booker prize is her destiny (the Booker website tells you how a Booker shortlist is good enough to catapult the writer to world-wide fame and mega sales). Her strategy is simple: write in the style of the latest Booker prizewinner. And the judges being the dodos that they are would go for the same the next year, she presumes.

And so she does. Trying to find the right voice, tone and style as she narrates her story which remains the same—a beautiful exploited young girl and her two hideous sisters (gosh, why does that story sound so horribly familiar . . . I've read that before somewhere . . . I'm sure I have. Haven't you?)

Never mind who Geraldine imitates, she does it with élan. So when Naipaul wins the prize, she rewrites her story with a Caribbean flavour:

I still cook for my sisters. They get invitations to party. The rain stop. Look, through the kitchen window. I see wet London building . . . My sisters are jokers. They are happy. And inside me, it is heavy.

But by then John Berger wins the Booker for 'G'. So Geraldine abandons her Caribbean novel and begins again. She goes back to her orange-covered feint-ruled school exercise books and green Venus 2B pencils. She calls her book 'C':

Beneath her shift Lucrezia is soft and hard (like an apricot) and soft and soft (like a feather pillow). She looms beneath him uninterrupted large. Her breasts predicate his maturity. Without hesitation, he puts his hand on her mythology ...

And in the meantime life, her literary friends and her marriage to George distracts Geraldine.

Every year, after the Booker prize has been announced, Geraldine reworks her texts in the style that is obviously the right one. Some are easier to emulate than others. Kingsley Amis is a breeze, J.G. Farrell a doddle. But oh that Keri Hulme, that Ruth Prawer Jhabvala ... And as for that Rushdie ...

How was she to tackle magic realism before she had perfected realism and then to tart it up with magic? But Geraldine, in spite of a tummy

bug acquired while in India to research her new book, does it . . .

*Midnight's Noses*  
By  
*Geraldine Byers*

*Bing, Bong*

. . . And my potential mother, bathed, refined, sanded with sandalwood, buffed in the buff, varnished with vanishing cream, French-polished, glances at the photograph of Edwina Mountbatten in *The Times of India* and lifts a languorous hand to pop a slice of Mountbatten burg cake under the great portcullis of her nose.

And on it goes. This brilliant parody of each of the prize-winning novels in the Booker history. The nuances of each writer perfectly captured.

Read this written à la Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*.

*Moonshine*  
By *Geraldine Byers*

'My life has been the stuff of legend,' she says. And the sisters stop checking her

pay-packet for a moment; she looks across at the faded old woman, the dying woman. ‘Mine and all,’ the sisters say. ‘Now why haven’t you eaten up your lovely rissoles?’

*The Booker: A Book* offers a scathingly funny picture of the literary manners of publishers, literary committees, agents and authors. Since the book was published in 1989, it doesn’t offer variegated thrills like Arundhati Roy or Roddy Doyle or Michael Ondaatje. And as it will never be the subject of hype like Harry Potter or the *Edge of Reason*, the chances of finding it in a bookshop are nil. I was fortunate in that I found it in the withdrawn books pile at the local British Council Library.



## *Thirty-five*

**T**It is almost midnight. We are sitting in the bar lounge of the Hotel Mercure in The Hague with glasses of assorted drinks—hot chocolate and cognac in front of me; beers for the two Dutch women and a whisky soda for the Dutch man. One of the Dutch women is my publisher and the other two, a journalist team.

All around us voices rise and fall; smoke curls into the air in thin wisps and glasses clink. Words like signature notes disentangle themselves from the hum of the conversation and rise above the din . . . at our table, the conversation veers towards action movies.

Earlier in the evening, I had confessed to my great fascination for action films. Of the worlds of Steven Segal and Van Damme; of the poetry

of movies like *Die Hard* and *The Edge*; of the orderliness of emotion one encountered in that genre of cinema. At some point, we discovered, all the three women present there, that we did share a common fondness for hard knocks, blood and gore. And so we arrived at that ultimate blood and gore film, *Kill Bill*.

As we dissect macabre scene by macabre scene, the voice of the lone man at our table rings out, 'Girls, Girls . . .'

It is a voice full of surprised shock. 'You are frightening to listen to,' he says. 'What are nice girls like you doing discussing such nasty things?'

We laugh. We had gone a little overboard. As I walk back to my hotel room, I was to ponder over this. So what are women expected to talk about?



While in Bogotá, Colombia, my calendar of social engagements included a dinner with an ex-Minister of Foreign Trade. I had never met a real politician before that and on a social basis . . . What was I going to chit-chat about? Or did one chit-chat with a politician? And that

too someone whose realm was totally removed from mine.

We freewheeled for a while. BPOs and the call centre phenomenon is always a great starting point. She came up with a nugget about China's AIDS rehabilitation programme being just a percentage of the budget allocated to build public toilets in Beijing. We moved to wine and wi-fi. She was just back from a wine tour in Chile.

In a few minutes though, we were discussing housemaids, drivers, husbands and in-laws . . . and for the rest of the evening stayed there. Women, I told myself, have a way of arriving at the four cornerstones of family life no matter who you are, hi-powered politician or writer, and somehow these are the stories that have greater entertaining power than anything else . . .

And yet, in the last couple of weeks, my conversations with two women friends have ranged over what is essentially regarded as masculine worlds. L, telling me about what she had lined up for the week, said she was going in for a discussion with her portfolio manager. She said she preferred high-risk investment. It assured her quick returns and she knew how to manage it so the capital wouldn't be affected. I swallowed. I still haven't

graduated beyond RBI bonds or a little 'piggy bank' in the kitchen cupboard. When she moved to quark<sup>1</sup> and modern physics, I admitted defeat . . .

With K, I thought I was on slightly more solid ground. Our conversation would be about literary matters: trivia, gossip, author tantrums, new books, plots and suchlike . . . So when we began with car purchases, I assumed that we would perhaps stop with the cost implications and move on to the world of letters. However, as we talked about engine power, and aerodynamics, alloy wheels and the merit of picking a fully loaded model versus an add-as-you-go-on model, it occurred to me that we could have been our fathers or husbands. Or our brothers or some day in the future, our sons . . . Whatever happened to the world of recipes, dress patterns, herbal rinses and jewellery indulgences?

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<sup>1</sup>The quark is one of the two basic constituents of matter and the only fundamental particles that interact through all four of the fundamental forces. In every proton or neutron, there are exactly three quarks. Quarks come in six flavors, and their names (up, down, charm, strange, top and bottom) were also chosen simply because they had to be named something.

## *Thirty-six*

**T**It began as a woman to woman chat and ended in yet another argument. I go upstairs to my study. I sit there shadowed by night. My mother and I have had yet another row. Mostly our disagreement is rooted in the fact that like Harry Angstrom ‘the smell of good advice always makes me want to run the other way’.

Whenever we have words<sup>1</sup> between us, I feel all the things she says I am when she is angry with me. Worst of all, I feel like a petulant child in an adult body. And I wonder whatever happened to that serenity I have cultivated, the state of calm that holds me in good stead normally.

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<sup>1</sup>The nature of our squabbles is always petty. It is primarily a battle of wills and my mother would never accuse me as Madame Flaubert did her son, the novelist Gustave: ‘Your mania for sentences has dried up your heart.’

My mother lives in Kerala and I in Bangalore. I wait for each one of her visits anxiously. I have so much to tell her. I wonder how I'll fit it all in. And I would tell myself I am so lucky to have a mother with a sense of fun. She taught me all that she knew and then left me alone to make my own discoveries. I owe her so much, I tell myself. She didn't blinker my mind or veil my thoughts. But after the first twenty-four hours, we are at each other's throats. 'Brush your hair,' she tells me when I wake up from a nap.

'I am 41 years old. Not four,' I snap back. When I see the hurt on her face, I feel like a monster.

'She brings out the disagreeable side in me; a few minutes in her company and I turn into this shrew who can't stop raving and ranting,' I confided in L, a close woman friend. Much to my relief and astonishment, L narrates of similar turbulence. It's not as if we don't love them. It's just that we are not like them. And they would like us to be so, we concluded, after swapping stories of mother-daughter upheavals.



And, so began my voyeuristic study of mothers and daughters. As always when troubled, it is to fiction I look for answers.

This time, though, there are no answers. But there are similar situations. From Janice Angstrom and Ma Springer in Updike's Rabbit series to Frances, Belle, Anastasia in Marilyn French's *Her Mother's Daughter* to Evan Hunter's *Mothers and Daughters* to Penelope and Rosemary in Margaret Forster's *Private Papers*, the fascination of the interaction, the currents that flow between, the power struggles, the camaraderie . . . I know them all first-hand.



Contrary to all those lessons in physics, like poles attract. Where a mother and daughter differ from each other, there are loud voices, stormy outbursts and tears. A difference nurtured by what a mother teaches her daughter.

What does a daughter learn from a mother? Simply: Whether to respect herself or the interest of the men in her life. Whether to feel comfortable and productive or weak, insecure, alone and terrified when bereft of a male presence. Whether to love her children or merely cling to them.

These are complicated times for daughters. Most women are taking seriously the business

of building a life for themselves. In this climate, a mother who shrinks from the world is an anachronism, an embarrassment. A daughter's struggle with her mother is what shapes her journey through childhood and makes her a woman. But what kind of a woman is the moot question.

There is an old Malayalam saying: 'If a cow jumped over a fence, its calf is bound to jump over a high wall.' Boundaries, that is what a mother is responsible for. Boundaries she draws in the unconscious of her daughter. Boundaries that'll make her docile, submissive and a clone of herself and a line of mothers before her. So when a daughter decides to be not like her mother, she is not fighting just against the system but her mother's mental make-up too. Sometimes, the mother, no matter how bewildered, goes with the tide. Sometimes she doesn't. She fights for the right to create and shape. She fights for what she has believed all through her life. The result: conflicts that leave both the mother and daughter exhausted and sorry for themselves.

My mother believed that she was responsible for the kind of woman I would be. 'You didn't

teach her the role in her life. You let her stray. And hence you are a bad mother.' It was this my mother feared the most.



In early adolescence, a daughter changes overnight from a cute child to a sulky surly challenger of authority. The daughter sees her mother as a prison. But unlike a midge mother<sup>2</sup>, human mothers rarely allow their daughters to escape without complaint. I look back and identify this period as one of intense divergence. Temperamental incompatibilities and mutual resentment were now almost palpable. When my mother talked of what it had cost her to put aside her own beliefs to shape my future, I saw

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<sup>2</sup>Midge mothers do not lay eggs. They reproduce young from the inside of their bodies without benefit of even any informal male assistance. And the baby develops inside the mother's body not in a uterus but in her tissues and eventually, fills her whole body, devouring it from the inside. When she is ready to be born, she breaks out of her mother/prison, leaving behind only a chitinous shell. They never have mother-daughter squabbles; midge mothers may sacrifice themselves entirely for their young, but the young never have to hear about it.

only a reproach there. Other mothers do it all the time, I thought. So what's the big deal?

With adulthood, I began to have very little to do with my mother. There were more important battles to be fought outside. Mothers tend to become irrelevant when you would rather concentrate on making a mark in your career. Anyway, I had decided that mothers have a tendency to ignore their daughter's ability to trespass the boundaries and leap into the horizon.

It was with marriage that our relationship entered a new dimension. The presence of the other woman: the mother-in-law.

My mother-in-law is a quiet, non-intrusive woman. Nevertheless, when there was a new way



of doing things, I started seeing life through my mother's eyes.

My mother-in-law and I never had to share a home. I wonder how the poor soul would have tolerated it if like daughters everywhere, I too had mouthed the refrain 'This is how we did it at my mother's house.'

How would she have coped with the existence of this phantom woman—my mother—who dictated where to place the dustbin and how to set the table. It would have irritated even someone as gentle as my mother-in-law. And yet, I would only have been unknowingly echoing my mother's thoughts<sup>3</sup>, feelings and beliefs. And demonstrating

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<sup>3</sup>My mother's thoughts—In Fay Weldon's *The Spa Decameron*, the Mortgage Broker captures this best: 'The thing is,' she said as she left the room, 'in the end we all turn into our own mothers, no matter how we struggle against it.'

L tells me that since her mother's death, she had taken to carrying a huge key ring with countless keys (many of which she has no clue as to what they might unlock) in a big handbag. I am becoming more and more like my mother, she says.

Belinda Bagmaker remembers a time when their toaster fell apart after almost thirty years of use and Belinda Bagmaker's mother bemoaned its loss saying they didn't make

the truth of Oscar Wilde's observation: *All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That is his.*

With pregnancy, my mother was again very much in my thoughts. When I felt the baby kicking in my stomach, I was plagued by a new thought. What if something went wrong? In the last weeks, I lay next to her hoping that by some strange quirk of osmosis she would absorb my morbid thoughts and worries and grant me in turn her firm belief that in the natural order of things, very little would go wrong . . . And so when I held Maitreya for the first time in my arms, I realized the strength of the bonding between my mother and myself.



My mother looks young, thinks young; I feel older than her. She has not noticed that I have become a woman. She expects me to look and

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things the way they used to. 'The other day some old decrepit gadget went dead in my house and I caught myself repeating almost the same words,' Belinda Bagmaker laughs . . .

As for me, I surprise myself every day in how much I am becoming like my mother. A word used, an intonation, a sigh, a habit . . . in the end there is no escaping one's genes . . .

be as I was at sixteen, slim and untouched by life. She sees herself through her mother's eyes. As her mother saw her last. Her clock came to a standstill then. Her voice has an edge when she remembers the past, a bitterness that sometimes seems ready to spill over onto her mother. Of how life has passed her by because she never questioned her mother's dictates and was content to remain a good daughter.

It irks me no end and I tell her so. 'You made the choice, how can you be bitter about it now?' I ask.

Even as I say it, I am appalled by my insensitivity. I am never as judgemental as I am with her.

And yet, when the meat burns just before a dinner party, or B falls ill, or I smart from a real or imaginary hurt, or I need to make an important career decision, it is her I call. It is her in whom I can easily confide the complexities of my thoughts. I slip into being what she likes me most to be. The little girl with a hurt only Mummy can heal with a kiss. The little girl whose best friend is her mother.

And that is the power mothers have over their daughters. An assurance that as long as your mother is there, nothing is as bad as it seems.

## *Thirty-seven*

Tonight, at Schiphol airport, I passed immigration control to spend the night in an airport hotel. The bed is narrow and the TV small. In contrast to my room the night before where one wall of the bathroom was all glass and which enabled me to continue watching TV as I lolled in the tub, this one resembles a cell where political asylum seekers are kept waiting. At least the ones I have seen in movies look like this.

I know what my mother would say. ‘You don’t have to put yourself through this. Do you?’

I don’t have to, I know. When I have been home, though, for a few weeks, I become restless. I need to expand my horizon, set my soul free . . .

But this experience, I ask myself, how do I categorize it? As global soul limbo<sup>1</sup>?



In Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, there is a scene between the two principal characters Carrie and Hurstwood which defines the making of the former and the unmaking of the latter:

*'Why, I should think,' she said turning upon him large eyes which were full of sympathy and feeling, 'that you would be very happy. You know so much of the world.'*

*'That's it,' he said, his voice dropping to a soft minor. 'I know too much of the world.'*

Twenty-five years ago, knowing the world, I thought, was the height of sophistication. In a family of Non-Resident Indians, mine was the only branch that hadn't strayed away from our shores. With the resolve of a limpet we clung

<sup>1</sup>limbo—Growing up as I did with stories of gods and demons, witchcraft and magical practices where the soul plays a principal role, the soul is something I ponder about every once in a while . . . where does it go to after the mortal body ceases to be? Or does it go anywhere at all because does it exist in the first place?

to our kitchen sinks and contained lives and wouldn't allow even the hint of travel to shadow our days. When we travelled, it was with our own bedrolls and tiffin boxes to my grandparents in Kerala. And that wasn't ever considered travel and only as going home.

Each year I waited for my uncles and aunts to arrive with the passion of an ornithologist waiting for migratory birds to speckle the horizon. It wasn't what they brought so as much as the combination of fragrances their presence unleashed—airline interiors and duty-free perfumes; air-conditioned homes and foreign lands . . . I would take a deep breath of that heady fragrance and sigh: Ah, the scent of travel! International travel!

In contrast was the faint corrosive odour of rusting iron and the overpowering stench of the bathrooms in the train compartments we rode to Kerala. My soul cringed as did my nostrils . . . With the existential angst so typical of the teen years I told myself that I was condemned, as the Hungarian proverb says, to an eternity of being beneath a frog's ass at the bottom of a coal mine. Destined to know nothing of the world.

Then there were the stories. Even everyday

things in their lives shimmered with the grandeur of a myth. For these were not the garden variety Gulf returnees. Instead they were travellers of the Occident. On my cupboard doors were postcards. A bull ring in Spain. Michelangelo's David. The Hudson Bay. The New York skyline. Bohemia was part of their lives. Or at least Greenwich Village in Manhattan. They ate tuna from a packet for lunch and talked of Thanksgiving turkeys and prom nights and evening dresses and rented tuxedos. Whisky on the rocks gleamed from their glasses and cinnamon-flavoured gum filled the interiors of my mouth with a desire to be part of it all. All I ever want to do in life is travel, I thought. No more. No less.

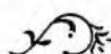
It wasn't just me who awaited these birds of paradise on their annual forays into our tropical lands. The entire neighbourhood did. So much so our association with them seemed to enhance our standing in their eyes . . . By default, we were the family who had kin in lands celebrated by cinema. Very few of us knew people who had actually been to these places . . . very few of us were people who travelled. The fear of travel was as much an obstacle as the actual process of travel.

Pilgrimages within India were undertaken when you began speculating on other world prospects. Even the Leave Travel Allowances were cashed in to go home to the ‘native’ place, a famous phrase of the 1980s, or visit a sibling in another part of India where he or she had recreated the ‘native’ to its minutest detail. So that you went to distant places only to discover you hadn’t travelled at all . . . Which was considered more a blessing than a curse.

Suddenly in the mid-1990s, I began encountering people who had just come back from a foreign trip. These weren’t birds of paradise any more and instead were more the babblers. Names of foreign cities speckled their conversation and even their bathrooms wore the marks of travel (hotel toiletries wearing hotel chain labels). And in my own mouth, the ashes of ennui had begun to settle. I was beginning to think my parents, like countless Indians of their generation, had a point after all by clinging to their armchairs and resisting the lure of discovery. The process of travel for a tourist—countless forms to fill, the relentless probing of details, the long queues, the waiting in airports, the discomfort—all of

it only to go to a city where even the shopping was circumscribed by brands you could buy from your nearest export reject store or labels that read ‘Made in India’.

In recent years, the joy of travel for me has been defined by forays into parts of India still unclaimed by the tourist map. A small town in Tamil Nadu. A little village in Madhya Pradesh. A glimpse of the bangle alley near the Charminar. The banks of the river Nila in Kerala . . . out of such obscurity one has to fashion the mythical prowess of travel again. It is only here that I feel that I encounter life as I have never known before. And not in the steel-and-chrome corridors of international airports or the cityscapes of foreign lands or the museums of art and merchandise.



## *Thirty-eight*

**F**ive years ago, I spent a night and a day in the women's quarters of a very cloistered Muslim community in southern Tamil Nadu. Since they trace their lineage to one of the Prophet's acolytes, they have always maintained very strict rules of purdah so that there is no occasion to fear the diluting of this bloodline.

I had no particular reason to go there except curiosity. I had heard about the village from a friend and when she said she intended visiting, I cadged a ride along.

I was in that heightened state of mind: the research mode before I actually began work on a book. Everything then was a piece of information I could use in the weaving of a tale. And so I stepped into the innards of a community and a place.

For a night and a day, I did all that I was asked to do. Using the woman's alley to go from one house to the other. Swaddling myself in a dupatta in the heat and even drawing it over my head. Letting the women use me as an excuse to fulfil their desire to go to the beach and then riding in the back seat of an auto-rickshaw which was partitioned off from the driver's seat with thick black curtains that ran along the sides as well. With peepholes in the curtains so that we may know where we were going, we rode the hundred metres to the beach. I went wearing the night as a veil and escorted by a gaggle of women in their burkhas, young children and two burly men, and later, having drawn our fill of the sea breeze, I allowed them to shut and barricade the door of the room I slept in from the outside.



I read again that marvellous story 'The Curtain' by Yashpal<sup>1</sup>. Originally written in Hindi, it is the story of a once well-to-do family gone to seed.

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<sup>1</sup>Yashpal (1903–76)—A Hindi writer with strong Marxist leanings. The author of over forty-two books, Yashpal is best known for his novel about the results of partition, *Jhutha Sach* (The False Truth), published in 1958.

Nevertheless the destitute family try very hard to keep up its veneer of respectability and so the curtain that separates them from the outside world is more than a piece of cloth across a doorway. It is the sole sheath of pretence that behind it all is well and there is much to be envied there . . .

For some reason the story brings to mind my time in the Muslim village—one of the strangest episodes of my life.

I lay Yashpal's story down. I have always prided myself on the fact that I fear nothing. For the first time, I knew what fear was after that night and a day; to be trapped in a life that was so bound by norms and conventions.

When the mobile beeps and I read the text, laughter bubbles to the surface, and then I feel a certain sadness too:

*Dearest, how do people in Kerala manage to look cool in this furnace? I have to walk very slowly to avoid tripping as my jeans are stuck to my legs and only allow the minimal movement of a Chinese princess in iron clogs. On my way to seek the cool embrace of air-conditioned airport—any pretty trolley-dolly that likes a sweaty shiny old nice daddy . . . BB*



Despite the laughs that Belinda Bagmaker routinely produces, it bothers me, even worries me, when I consider what my dearest Belinda Bagmaker has to contend with.

Nothing reveals better the degree of hypocrisy of a society than the way it regards homosexuality. A young friend of mine tells me about cruising grounds in Bangalore and the constant risk of having the law pounce on him.

We are still governed by an anachronistic legal system where Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalizes male to male sex with up to ten years' imprisonment. Although it criminalizes acts of sodomy, and bestiality committed by anyone, the law is commonly used to target, harass and punish lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons.

In February 2004 the Delhi High Court dismissed a legal challenge to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, India's sodomy law. Since the case was filed by the Naz Foundation International and the National AIDS Control Organization, the court claimed that the validity of the sodomy law could not be challenged by anyone 'not affected by it'. According to the court, since no sodomy charge had been filed against the groups,

they lacked standing to challenge the law. In contrast, in December 2004 a judge in the city of Amritsar dismissed a case against a lesbian couple saying there was no law that prevented the women from living together. While homosexuality is illegal, lesbians are not specifically mentioned in the law, the judge noted.

For several years now, gay activists in India have tried to have the country's sodomy law overturned. In most countries there are no sodomy laws. Instead there are laws to protect homosexuals from discrimination of any sort.

I do not know if it is any consolation that in India we do not offer a choice of four death styles: being hanged, stoned, halved by a sword, or dropped from the highest perch as they do in Iran or Afghanistan. But we do rob homosexuals of their dignity. For, with example after example, my young friend reveals, ours is a law that can be easily bought or encouraged to turn a blind eye.



## *Thirty-nine*

I am restless. A storm gathers outside. I have always been sensitive to weather changes and as the thunderclouds press down, I feel the beginning of something . . . a headache or a new book?

Thoughts swirl and rush through my mind. It is like that moment on the diving board . . . part excitement part tremendous fear. The thought of beginning a new novel is daunting. And exhilarating. It's been two years since I put the last one to bed and now it is time to gather the inner resources, find the stamina and set forth again.

Why are you doing this? I was to ask myself this question several times as I researched *Mistress*.

I was lying on my side on two sheets of newspaper spread on the cement floor. Alongside

me was a little lunch box in which I had brought two slices of french toast and a banana. The leaves rustled tirelessly and for the rest, a silence wreathed the kalari. Far above me in the rafters, a spider spun its web, glad for the reprieve of a few hours when neither the thundering feet of young males nor the beat of the chenda would make it falter in its tracks.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a chameleon enter the classroom. It was a large specimen with a little frill around its neck. I sat up. The chameleon nodded as if to ask: What?

It stared at me and I stared back.

For a moment I wondered, when the book was written, if I should call it *Chameleon*. I didn't need to extend myself very far to see the aptness of the simile—the frill could be the white chuti that frames the Kathakali dancer's face and the changing colours akin to the dancer's colours. But in this task I had set myself, the first dharma decreed that *I go beyond where I could with minimum effort . . .*

In the theory class, the master Aashan Gopalakrishnan<sup>1</sup> watched a final-year student

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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Kathakali, Kerala Kalamandalam, Cheruthuruthy, Kerala. The months spent under his tutelage

enact a scene from ‘*Subhadraharanam*’. ‘You need to do better,’ Aashan grunted. ‘Anyone can do this; what is going to make your artistry memorable is how far you extend yourself.’

I realized then that it wasn’t just Kathakali that I was making acquaintance with. This was the tutelage of art.

In the days to follow many such gems came my way. Technique is the mastery of rhythm, Aashan would say. You need to have total control of what you are doing to make a hash of your steps without missing a beat, he said, demonstrating as much.

Do not mistake competence for brilliance. Absorb first, question later.

Each day I would walk into the kalari with

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was my introduction to how a true master can shape one’s thoughts. Not just in his sphere of expertise but in all of life. But it occurred to me ever so often that this wonderful man seemed to be haunted by what tormented Dencombe from Henry James’s *The Middle Years*: ‘. . . this was the pang that had been the sharpest during the last few years—the sense of ebbing time, of shrinking opportunity . . . he had done all he should ever do, and yet hadn’t done what he wanted.’ Aashan died in early 2008 and with that came the end of an epoch for me.

a group of students almost half my age with a sense of mounting excitement . . . .

But soon it was time to begin my questions. Sometimes I wondered if I was tiring him with my relentless probing. In my mind I saw another creature from the animal world. The vulture pecking between the bones. I hurled the thought away and told myself that the second dharma decreed that *you put your art first*. In this case, my need to understand Kathakali to be able to write about it.

Nothing else would justify what I was demanding of others: That my mother, who had lived out her karmic cycle of motherhood, is forced to return to it—to rise early and cook me breakfast and plant interesting morsels in my lunch box so I don't toss it away. A father who switched on the early morning news to keep tabs on lightning strikes and bandhs and heated the water for my early morning bath. A ten-year-old child who had to put up with his mother's absence. A husband who had been told to cope. A taxi driver who regulated his trips for two whole months so he could chauffeur me to the institute and on my midnight forays as I played Kathakali

groupie and sought out performances . . . I was asking a great deal of others for a personal whim and yet that too was the dharma of art. That it has to be all or nothing . . .

What in the beginning was a great love for the Kathakali music was becoming a grand obsession. From merely wanting to know how these padams were set within the context of the story, Kathakali itself was beginning to consume me. And yet, it would have rested there if one morning I hadn't walked in to work to see a Kathakali dancer in full costume in the reception area.

Bundled up in an SUV, he was being taken from one ad agency to the other as a living rate card . . . I didn't know how the dancer was received in the other agencies but in the one I worked in those days, there were sniggers and giggles . . . he was an object of ridicule more than anything else and my heart went out to him . . . I probably felt more wretched than him. He was playing a role after all. The irony being that a Kathakali performer has so very few opportunities to don his colours he will accept anything that comes his way. Be it standing as a prop for a detergent or playing the fool for a candy

advertisement or being a walking, gesticulating rate card . . . This trivializing of all that is sacred about art, how could I remain immune to it? How could I not address it? I wasn't to know it then. But the third dharma of art had just brushed my soul. *What you do may mean nothing to the world. What matters is that it means everything to you.*

In the world of Kathakali, it is said, you need 100 hours of practise before you can perform for a minute; I would need at least 100 hours of study to be able to write a page on Kathakali. And where was I to begin?

In Kerala, we make much of the word 'nimittam'. The dictionary defines this as reason, cause, indication and omen . . . in many ways all of these compounded to lead me to the Kerala Kalamandalam and to Aashan Gopalakrishnan. At any other time, it may have been another guru I was assigned to. At that point, he was the only one available and perhaps it was the *nimittam* that found me an Aashan who would sculpt forever my understanding of art. With a generosity that was as overwhelming as humbling, he held nothing back. All that he knew he made available for me to draw from: of the man; of the dancer;

of the student; of the performer. And somewhere in between all these, he laid bare the makings of an artist.

I was surrounded by young men who by day had their personalities so submerged by the dictates of the art form that at night when they transformed into magnificent creatures, gods, or demons, they were that completely. The moment you allowed yourself to emerge, the character regressed. And so I learnt the fourth and final dharma. *In the world of art, there is no first person.* It is the artistry and not the artist that is significant. It is the creation that dazzles and not the creator.

Under Aashan's guidance, from a passive onlooker, I became a very involved and cued-in observer. I read all the texts I could find, attended classes to see how the students are taught, took lessons myself, both theory and practical, to know what it entailed, attended all the performances I could, listened to all the Kathakali padams that were recorded, asked countless questions (knowing very well how foolish it sounded at times) of everyone associated from teachers, students, musicians and green-room assistants, visited homes of artists and students, gleaned anecdotes from anyone willing to talk, and

probed for more and more minutiae . . . I was so completely wrapped up that in spirit, if not in body, I had donned the colours of a Kathakali artist. There was no other option really . . . so much so when I heard a rattling lid on top of a pot of boiling water, instead of turning the gas off, my mind searched for the thalam—was it chempa or chempada?

And yet, there would come an occasional moment of self-doubt. Why am I doing this?

To stay resolute in what I was doing, I had to convince myself that I may not have the answers for it now but eventually it would all fall into place.

When the apsaras emerged from the cosmic ocean ‘with all gifts of grace, of youth and beauty . . . neither god nor demon sought their wedded love’. Why is it that we alone must remain ‘common treasure of the host of heaven’? Why is it that ‘we cannot live our lives bound by the dictates of samsara? Couldn’t our joys and triumphs, sorrows and failures be the mortal kind?’ The apsaras were to ask this of themselves again and again. The apsaras were condemned to an eternity of not knowing why.

Perhaps that is the curse they wish upon their

kin—all handmaidens and page-boys of art. That you continue to serve not knowing why . . . But there is a hidden blessing too that is mine to discover. In the end, I realize for myself that what is important is that for a few moments I knew a perfect sense of oneness with the world and all that was around me. In that perfect moment, I was dancing with the gods rather than for the gods.

The rest then was of no consequence.



## *Forty*

If I had considered consequences, there wouldn't have been three of us in this marital bed. B, I and Churchill's black dog<sup>1</sup>.

Ever since I got on first name basis with parts of my spine, I am not the woman I used to be. I now see myself as a banyan tree on its side.

Somewhere deep in the ground a tap root feeds. But above, the aerial roots dangle helplessly. Leaves curl at the edges and float. New leaves wonder if they should or shouldn't shoot forth. Birds do not know if they should roost or flee.

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<sup>1</sup>After Winston Churchill ceased to be Prime Minister in 1945, he sank into a thunderous black mood. Frustrated and bored, he often flew into a tempestuous rage over petty things. His family would describe him as having his 'black dog'.

And the tree continues to lie on its side. Clueless, waiting for reprieve—a tree doctor or the woodcutter's axe?—and with its life on hold.

That's me. For more than a month now, I am a woman felled. One day I was this person whose life resembled greased lightning on wheels. I was in and out of planes, trains and automobiles. I was discoursing on novels written in English by Indians and marginalized voices; I was discussing the best means of waterproofing a leaking roof; I was planning a book tour to Europe in the month ahead; I was considering streaking my hair purple; I was researching a new book; I was the kind of woman who like the Joad family in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* thought there was life even in a pork bone. To be gnawed on till all that was left was a mouthful of shards.

The next day I was a writhing mass of pain. It was like being fed into a mangle from the hip downwards. In the jaws of that torturous mangle, I could neither sit, stand nor lie down. All I could do was time the pain like labour contractions and wait the hours out till help could be found. A pain that made me throw caution to the winds about germs and hygiene and curl up on

a railway platform bench. Never mind the mess beneath the bench, the pong of urine or the dishevelled drunk in the adjacent bench. A pain that almost made me like Oates in the ill-fated Scott expedition to the Antarctic, tell my parents travelling with me ‘I am stepping out. I’ll be gone for a while’.

A pain that had me at half past six on a Sunday morning wake my doctor up with a desperate plea for help. A pain that slowly allowed itself to be tamed into a numbness so that I began to feel that what I have for a leg now is a wooden stump.

In the film *Dead Poets Society*, Robin Williams who plays the English teacher urges his class to stand on the desk for a different perspective. Confined to a bed, that’s how I feel. As though I have been born again.

This time I am a woman who has the time to ponder on the wooden beams that herring-bone my ceiling. Seven. The number 7 apart from all that numerologists claim for it is a number loaded with an expanse of possibilities. In the seven diatonic degrees, the seventh note is the leading one. There are seven liberal arts in medieval classification. The seven seas. The seven wonders

of the world. The Seven Years War. The Seventh Day Adventists. I was in seventh heaven.

I am the woman who watches a bumblebee bang its head on a glass pane. Not once, but four times. What was it doing? Didn't it realize there was a glass pane there?

I am the woman who is now beginning to have a glimmering of what it is to be deposed. I now know what Napoleon in Elba and Aurangzeb in chains felt to see one's fiefdom turn into a state of chaos. Coloureds are mixed with whites in the washing machine; vases stand tall and forlorn; dust settles on the leaves of house plants; books stand in piles because there is no one to put them away . . . at first the mind agitates. It frets and fumes . . . and slowly a resignation creeps in.

When B reports that guests of a house guest staying with us were served tea in cups with chipped edges and the saucers used were actually side plates, I do not tumble into hysterics as I would have otherwise. I smile and raise a languorous eyebrow, 'Oh!'

When my maid runs into my room to tell me of the enormous serpent sunning itself in the front lawn, I do not even ruffle my forehead.

A month ago I would have called for a snake catcher, looked for a forked stick to attempt catching the snake myself or yelled for help.

Now I lie here in my bed, stare at the seven rafters and smile. A benign sweet smile that implies à la Rhett Butler, 'My dear, I don't give a damn!'



## *Forty-one*

**B** has wound strings of fairy lights through the banister rails. From where I lie, I can see the fairy lights that shimmer like fireflies. There is a certain magic in the air and a reined-in excitement. Each time Maitreya walks past, he presses a button on the string. The bulbs dance to Jingle Bells. What was enchanting suddenly transformed into digital bling! Erasing the romance of pinpoints of lights amidst long shadows.

It is that time of the year again when shops begin to wear countenances of jaded bonhomie. Cotton wool snow; aluminium foil tinsel; electric bulbs that creep along shop facades on little feet of blue, green and red; ragged trees; gaily-wrapped gift boxes of nothing and Santas of various shapes

and sizes uniform in their ill-fitting red suits and rather-be-elsewhere expressions. Canned music wafts out. The message could as well have been written on neon billboards. Folks, it is Christmas time. Open up your wallets and spread some cheer. In the manner of a much-hated man from the world of fictitious characters, I'm willing to declare that Christmas is a humbug<sup>1</sup>.

And yet, this is also that time of the year when I bring out an old, dog-eared edition of *Christmas Tales*, dust the patina of age that has settled on it and once again seek the spirit of the season in its pages.

In the distance I can hear singing. Hymns and carols. Music that seems to resound from the heavens through the nippy night. And, for the first time this year I feel as if Christmas is truly here. Some of the houses that line the street I live in boast of a star announcing the birth of the Christ child. It is a night for quiet contemplation and much pondering. Particularly as before me is a Christmas wish-list from Maitreya who knows

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<sup>1</sup>Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol In Prose* by Charles Dickens.

the best way to get around me and into my pocket is by making me laugh<sup>2</sup>:

**Things which I want:**

X box 360 + games

An electric guitar

**Things which I have a small chance of getting:**

A new pair of shoes my choice (think Rs 5000 upwards)

All the Red Hot Chilli Peppers albums

**Things which I get every X'mas whether I want it or not:**

A factory second T-shirt

2 books

It isn't easy being a mother these days. On the one hand, my maternal instincts make me

<sup>2</sup>Even when I am hopping mad with him, I find Maitreya's droll wit irresistible. On our way home from his school after a meeting with his Hindi teacher, as I harangued him about not working hard enough, he turned to me and asked, 'Do you think I would ever write a letter in Hindi to my grandfather about my best friend's house in his village? So why do I need to study Hindi?'

As I laughed, I thought that his grandfather, my father, wouldn't but agree. (See chapter 15)

want to buy him every single thing on that list, never mind the starving millions, the homeless and the ill . . . On the other hand, I would be failing in my maternal duties by giving too much and taking away forever from him the joy of receiving a much-awaited gift. The promise of tomorrow: the not knowing, the hope, the surprise and the eventual elation that accompanies a gift long hungered for . . .

More and more, even in a country like ours where the Christian population constitutes only a 2.34 per cent, the resonance of Christmas pervades most homes. The TV romances it for us and we then let the momentum of the mood take over as paper chains are hung, trees bought and cakes baked.

A couple of weeks ago my father and I spent a large part of an evening trying to hang a star in our porch as my mother talked of buying a chicken and plum cake for Christmas Day. 'It's just the two of us here anyway,' she added. And I felt a pang shoot through me.

We are Hindus. Nevertheless, be it in fiction or real life, Christmas is that day when the knife turns in that wound of not having.

Frank McCourt in his memoir *Angela's Ashes* narrates the humiliations that become the ornament

of each Christmas Day. One Christmas, it is 'No goose, says the butcher, no ham. No fancy items ... What you can have now Missus, is black pudding or tripe or a sheep's head or a nice pig's head'.

The next year Frank and his mother go to the railway station to wait for his father to come home for Christmas and he is not on the train. And McCourt writes: 'I don't tell her I wish I had a father like the man in the signal tower who gives you sandwiches and cocoa.'

In Sue Townsend's Adrian Mole series, one Christmas Mole goes to the Kent residence and discovers 'Mr. Kent had been out in the community and found a large branch, painted it with white gloss paint and stuck it into the empty paint tin . . .' And Mrs. Kent says sadly, 'But it's not the same really, not if the only reason you've got it is because you can't afford to have a real plastic one . . .'

Unlike McCourt's real trauma, Mrs Kent's line makes you laugh until you realize that it could be the truth in several homes . . . That necessities take the place of frivolities. That the mundane has an aura of the extraordinary. And what could be dismissed as commonplace becomes the pinnacle of that day.

And so it is in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*: 'And now for the pudding. Lights are put out and there it arrives. First the fragrance of the steam. A great deal of steam. A smell like an eating house and a pastry cook's next door to each other with a laundress' next door to that. There it arrives. High on a platter, after seven hours of steaming, the flour, the suet, the raisins, the candied peel, the eggs, the spice, the bread crumbs have all turned into a speckled cannon ball, hard and firm blazing in ignited brandy and crested by a sprig of holly. Everybody has something to say about it and as plates are filled and fresh cream poured over every slice, the content of the day seeps into every heart.'



It is hard for me to dissociate myself from the books I read and the reality of life around me. And it is these I remember as I think of that rather beautiful (even if sentimental) story 'Gift of the Magi'<sup>3</sup> by O. Henry. Perhaps the most

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<sup>3</sup>O. Henry, wasn't exactly a stickler for deadlines. He was commissioned to write a special Christmas story but as the date for receiving the copy approached, he still hadn't

poignant lines of that story lie in its first paragraph: 'Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.'

And so when Della and Jim buy gifts for each other, you know that it has been requisitioned out of much soul-searching and paid for with a sacrifice.

While Christmas may be a time to give, is excess allowed? Even if the recipient is one's own child or a loved one . . .



I have to make a choice in the next few hours. Am I going to be a doting mother who will buy him a guitar he will twang and throw or a pair

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written his story. The frantic editor sent his illustrator to look for O. Henry who is said to have told the illustrator: 'I'll tell you what to do . . . just draw a picture of a poorly furnished room . . . On the bed, a man and a girl are sitting side by side. They are talking about Christmas. The man has a fob watch in his hand . . . the girl's principal feature is the long beautiful hair that is hanging down her back. That's all I can think of now, but the story is coming.' (From *The Mammoth Book of Literary Anecdotes* edited by Philip Gooden, Robinson, London)

of expensive shoes his feet will outgrow in two months' time (the irony being he can't even hand-me-down the shoes to B whose foot size stays a resolute size 9) or be a diligent parent who will eventually settle for the much-maligned factory second T-shirt and two books?



## *Forty-two*

When Maitreya was a little boy, like all little boys he wondered what God's house looked like. As politically and ideologically incorrect parents, B and I described a heaven that resembled part Legoland, part chocolate shop and mostly trees and flowers and angels with dragonfly wings.

When he was a little older, he was drawn to temples because of the trinket shops that lined their walls like burrs on a dog rather than divine blessings.

B's relationship with the man up there, as he refers to him, is ambiguous. He likes the pomp and ceremony of Hindu rituals, not the penance and abstinence part, though. In his youth however, B went to Sabarimala every year for twelve years.

He observed the prescribed forty-one-day ritual with all that it entailed—no haircuts or shaves, cold water baths, no meat, fish or eggs, no liquor or cigarettes, no having a good time . . . Later I was to use this as a bargaining chip when trying to persuade my father on B's suitability as a potential husband for me. 'He can't be too bad a man, could he? If he were to have done all this . . . look, even you went to Sabarimala only thrice!'

Now B will go to a temple or pray at home on festival days. Otherwise God is like a supermarket, he says. You know you can count on it if you run out of options.

In his early years in advertising, while trying to get a firm foothold, B discovered he was running out of options and given his penchant for grand gestures, made a vow of offering a 'thulabharam' of pencils at Guruvayur. Eventually when B decided to fulfil the vow, it involved much planning and many long-distance calls. To source the pencils, to check with the temple authorities, to round up various relatives, to find a date when political dignitaries wouldn't swamp the temple, etc.

We reached the temple by evening; a mini bus full of the devout and me, an accidental

pilgrim. Minutes ticked by and as it became closing time the crowds grew more fervent and feverish. A couple of women tried to jump the line; I glared at them. They retreated into their place. Suddenly a door in a wall opened and from it streamed a film actress and her director husband and their entourage of minion actors. 'They have had a special darshan,' one of the women murmured, awed by the presence of the film actress.

When I finally stood before the sanctum sanctorum, jostled, poked, pinched, I found it hard to fold my hands and see divinity imprinted on the back of the head of the man or woman before me . . . Instead I watched the faces of the people around me trying to see what it was that they saw . . .

As I stood there, I thought of the countless millions that flow into the coffers of the temple every day and know that God, mine or theirs, would prefer for those millions to be routed to help give dignity back to a person rather than gild a temple dome.

But who ever listens to an accidental pilgrim?



God knows that my faith in the omnipotent is implicit and total. Nevertheless when it comes to rituals and temples, I find myself veering closer to the iconoclast. It wasn't as if I was born with me mouthing polemics on the needlessness of rituals rather than the mandatory bawls. But when I was very little there was the visit to Tirupati where even before dawn broke, a barber shaved my hair and self-esteem off. I remember the glint of steel, the ice-cold water sprayed and the tug of fear when a mysterious hand gathered my hair to take it all away. I was not yet four but I remember wondering if it would ever grow back or if I had to go through life with a bald head and glinting spectacles. And for the life of me I couldn't figure out why I was to be subjected to the jeers of peers . . .

Then there was the ritual of the family row every time we had a puja. My very devout father and my not so devout mother began the puja by squabbling about the coconut's beard. My father insisted that the coconut on the puja platter have a beard and my mother demanded, 'Give me one good reason why God would prefer a hirsute coconut to a clean-shaven one?'

When I was old enough to be trusted with a box of matches, as daughter of the family, I was allotted the task of lighting the lamp at dusk. I almost always forgot and had my head bitten off ritually every evening. In sheer self-defence, I made an announcement that all of this meant nothing to me. I said, 'You make God seem like cod liver oil capsules to be taken at dawn and dusk every day . . .'



Omnipotence was not the question here. Merely manifestations of worship. In time, my reticence to pray became part of conversation topics along with the latest piece of furniture acquired, the family dog and the price of cauliflowers. I didn't mind being the family atheist except that occasionally I had to endure the repugnance attached to rotten eggs. Even a left-wing trade union leader friend of my father eyed me suspiciously. How could I, a petty bourgeois child, who knew nothing of Marx or Lenin or Stalin or Trotsky or anyone of those deacons of godlessness, be godless? It spoke of a congenital subversiveness . . .

As I grew older, nothing changed. That I had

found faith was lost in my unwillingness to bow to the conventional expressions of devotion.



Every night, and because my father told him to, Maitreya lies in bed muttering an impromptu prayer in Malayalam. And when I ask him if he thinks God wouldn't understand English, or Swahili for that matter, he shoots me an aggrieved look . . . rather like the bearded coconut; the lexicon of the faithful tolerates no questioning.

At times, I think how much easier it would have been if I had been able to find solace in rituals.

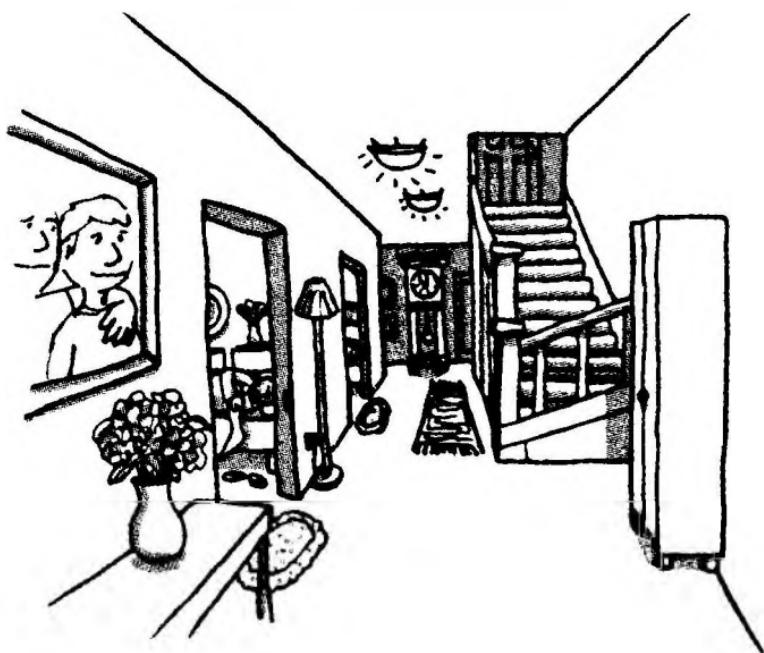
Perhaps the only ritual that bears any meaning for me is the ritual of the nightly routine. Once again it is Updike's Harry Angstrom who defines the moment: 'He is in his bed, his molars in their crowns.'

So it is for me as I lie in bed waiting for sleep. That last paragraph before I shut the book for the night. Waiting for Sugar and B to arrive. For Maitreya to call from his room across the passage his nightly benediction: 'Goodnight and God Bless'.

For those syllables with dragonfly wings to

hover till they settle on the hands of the old clock  
in the passageway. Time gathered. Time echoing  
in long strikes of the hour.

A day spent well. Another to begin. Under  
the avocado trees in paradise. Mine.



## *A Footnote on the Genesis of This Book*

I had always seen myself as a teller of stories; someone who thrived in an imaginary world of my own making. Then one December morning in 2000, Suresh Menon<sup>1</sup>, then the Editor of *The New Sunday Express* invited me to write a fortnightly

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<sup>1</sup>Suresh Menon—A columnist and cricket writer. We first met when he came to pick me up from the Central Station in Chennai in 2001. I was in Chennai for a reading and was to stay with Suresh, his wife Dimpy and their son Tushar. Later as we rode the lift to his office in the Express Estates, I couldn't help confessing.

'I can't tell you how many times I have come here trying to get my foot in the door,' I said, thinking of my tremulous knocks at the various journalistic doors of Chennai and how I was turned away with a cursory 'come back when you have some experience'. It had reminded me of my mother's aphorism that was a family joke: You can get into the water when you have

column in the magazine section. It was an open brief: Write what you wish.

But somewhere in that ambiguity was a gauntlet thrown: 'Surprise me. Surprise the reader.' And so, I delved into the world of literature and learnt to meld my discoveries there with the everyday. My everyday.

A literary essayist, I learnt, didn't always have to deconstruct or annihilate; voice a polemic or ponder on the ponderous. The inconsequential and the trivia, the silly and the ridiculous, the minutiae and even the personal, the vagaries of human behaviour and life, all of it had a place in the essays I wrote on literature. In a sense I was creating a niche for myself. Suddenly it wasn't only my fiction that gave me much joy. I was beginning to enjoy writing these essays.

It is to Suresh Menon that I owe this book. And my own avatar as an essayist.



Several of these essays originally appeared, in slightly different form, in *The Times of India*, *The Hindu*, *The Sunday Express*, *Mid-day*, *India Today*, *Verve* and *Swagat*.

learnt to swim! 'So to have the editor of the *New Sunday Express* help tote my bags to his office is rather like a Judith Krantz "I'll take Manhattan" moment. No matter what happens in my life, nothing is going to be as remarkable as this!' I giggled.

Suresh, who has a great eye for irony, smiled and said, 'You should write about it!'

# *Recommended Reading*

Agynar Mykle, *The Song of the Red Ruby*

Anand, *Govardhan's Travels*

Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*

St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*

Barbara Pym, *Crampton Hodnet*

E.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

Mrs. Beeton, *Mrs. Beeton's Cookbook*

Blake Morrison, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?*

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Colleen McCullough, *The Thorn Birds*

Evan Hunter, *Mothers and Daughters*

Fay Weldon, *The Fat Woman's Joke; The President's Child; Watching Me, Watching You; The Life and Times of the She-Devil*

- Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*
- Gabriel Garcia Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*; *News of a Kidnapping*
- Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*
- Henry Miller, *Colossus of Maroussi*
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*Anita Nair* is the best-selling author of *The Better Man*, *Ladies Coupe* and *Mistress*. Her books have been translated into over twenty-six languages around the world.

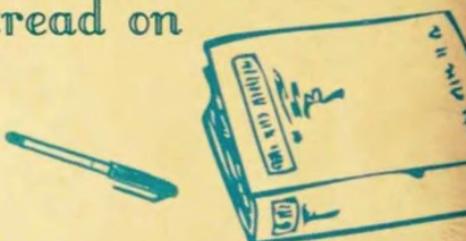
Anita divides her time between her homes in Bangalore and Mundakotukurussi, Kerala, airport lounges, railway station waiting rooms, hotel rooms and other people's guest bedrooms. She is married and has a son.

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Dog nails click on the tiles of the passage. A snout pushes open the door. I dip my finger in the milk and let Sugar lick...

I wait for B. For the slam of a door. For that tread on the staircase...



Between that first sip and last, I dwell on this and that. Every night there is something to ruminate on. The vagrant mind knows no boundaries. It leaps...

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