

ARUNA NAMBIAR

# *Mango Cheeks, Metal Teeth*



TRANQUEBAR PRESS  
MANGO CHEEKS, METAL TEETH

Aruna Nambiar is a writer and editor who grew up in Mumbai and now lives in Bangalore. After an engineering degree and a post-graduation in management, she worked with an international bank, before rekindling a lifelong passion for writing. Her short stories and travelogues have been published in the anthologies *Curtains*, *The Itinerant Indian* and *Winners Vol. I*, and articles and essays in publications like *Timeout Bengaluru*, *Deccan Herald*, *Indian Express*, *Economic Times* and *India Today Travel Plus*. She also conceived and wrote the text for *Portrait: Kerala*, a coffee table book about the state. *Mango Cheeks*, *Metal Teeth* is her first novel.

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*This book is for Raghu, Mama, Papa and Anjana.*

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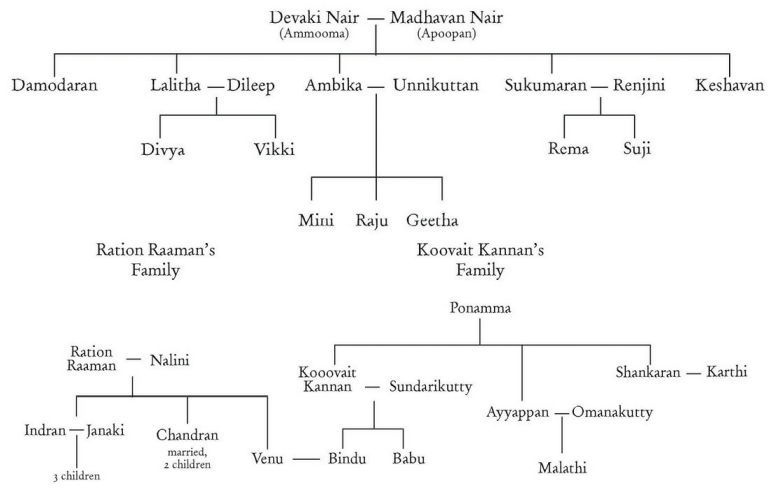
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Mango Cheeks, Metal Teeth

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## Nair Family



# One

If anybody had asked Geetha – not that anybody would, but sometimes, as she took a shower or went about her chores, she allowed herself to daydream that she was a celebrity whose every thought, every action was momentous and newsworthy – she would have identified that metamorphic summer in Ambalakunnu as the time when she left her childhood behind and stepped into adulthood. It was a transformation that had been brewing for some time: physical changes had already begun to manifest and would continue to do so for many years after. But that particular summer had brought, along with its soul-sapping afternoons and roof-rattling thunderstorms, its bumper crop of mangoes and houseflies, a dashing of innocence, a comprehension of all that had been hinted at, all that she had suspected of the adult world but never fully experienced, that had finally propelled her to a newfound maturity.

It was a different time: Sridevi was the reigning queen of Bollywood and Charles and Diana were still married; Ivan Lendl was winning unsmiling Grand Slams and Kapil Dev was yet to retire. A lakh could buy a house and a crore was the annual revenue of a respectable-size firm; it was still considered a little odd for a man to dye his hair or a woman to remain unmarried. The upwardly-mobile-types in Bombay (and yes, it was Bombay then, not Mumbai) dined at the Shamiana at the Taj, and club sandwiches and au gratins were the epitome of culinary sophistication, to be washed down with IMFL if you were a gentleman of means, fresh-lime-soda-sweet if you were a lady of leisure, and Gold Spot or Limca or Thums Up if you were yet to come of age.

For all it was to portend, the summer started innocuously, much like any other. Raju finished his exams first, and spent the early days of liberty holed up in his best friend Jerry Coutinho's house. 'Making mixed tapes,' he told Mini and Geetha importantly, 'Jerry's brother in the US records music from the radio and sends the cassettes to Jerry once in three months. Jerry will record it on to my blank cassettes.' Jerry had also been gifted a Walkman by this god-like elder brother, which he had magnanimously offered to lend Raju for the holidays, but it had been quickly vetoed by Ambika and Unnikuttan.

'No, no – no need to take things from others.'

'Then will you at least buy me a new deck for my birthday?' Raju's single-



cassette player, a hand-me-down from Unnikuttan, didn't even have a record function.

'We'll see,' Unnikuttan had said, and Raju had groaned, because he knew that 'we'll see' actually meant 'we won't, but I need some time to think of a plausible excuse'.

Then, all of a sudden, Raju stopped going over to Jerry's, and had taken to coiling up like an earthworm in various corners of their tiny two-bedroom flat. Ambika, who was trying to tie up loose ends and get packed for their annual summer vacation in Ambalakunnu, could barely control her irritation as Raju raided the fridge seven times a day and Michael Jackson chanted *Beat it! Beat it!!* on the cassette player when Mrs Subramaniam from downstairs dropped in for a cup of tea. She tried to cajole Raju into returning Jerry's calls or going over, but whenever the subject was brought up Raju just turned a fiery crimson and bolted off to curl up in another nook. Mini finally prised the reason out of him under a vow of secrecy: When Raju had gone over to visit one day, Jerry's mother, usually away doing secretarial things in an office in the Fort area, had been at home, sick and on leave. She had spent the whole morning lolling around the house in a low-cut and see-through nightie, even bending over Raju to offer them homemade cake and biscuits. Raju had been quite traumatized at the end of it all; he didn't think he could look Jerry in the eye for the rest of his life, he told Mini. It took Mini all of three minutes to break the news to Ambika and Unnikuttan and when they had finished cackling heartlessly and wiping their tears of mirth away, they agreed that it was only merciful to let Raju hide out at home. Unnikuttan even fended off the steadily decreasing calls from an increasingly perplexed Jerry.

Mini, on the other hand, celebrated the arrival of the vacations by tearing up all her textbooks and chucking them in the trash. Almost immediately she was wracked with apprehension, and spent a couple of days chewing her nails down to the cuticle. 'Shit, it's the board exams, what if I flunk?' she asked Raju about two hundred and thirteen times, till Raju finally burst out, 'If you flunk, Mom is going to KILL you!' This acknowledgement of the worst-case scenario seemed to comfort Mini, and from then on she stopped contemplating the great unknown and settled down to her usual holiday routine of reading a page of Dostoevsky a day in between two Mills and Boons and a stack of Archie comics, interrupted only by hours in front of the mirror contemplating the shape and size of her pimples.

As for Geetha, she was beside herself with excitement. Every year, it

appeared to her as though she was merely marking time till the summer vacations rolled in. As the rains made a cesspool out of Colaba Market, she thought of the wind pounding against the Mangalore tiles on the roof of Devaki Nilayam and the thunder that made Pooch and Goldie scoot under the bed. As she got ready for tests in August, she wondered what payasam Ammooma would be directing the maids to make for Onam that year. As the lights and big neon stars came up on Colaba Causeway for Christmas, she hankered for the plum cake sold by George's bakery in Ambalakunnu all through the year. As usual, the last two months had been almost unbearable with anticipation.

Although the year had hardly been uneventful. For one thing, she had finally made the transition from junior school to senior school. The elevation had resulted in a brand-new uniform – not the old girlish checked one-piece but a more mature beige pinafore worn over a white shirt with polished brown shoes; or on PT days, white canvas shoes, a white blouse and a white skirt worn over the white shorts that were unveiled only during PT period, only to disappear under the white skirt thereafter. Senior school had also brought new subjects, new classrooms, even a new school building, which she shared with Mini. Not that it made a difference – Mini barely acknowledged her when they met in the hallway and just about tolerated her presence as they walked home from school with Mini's friends.

Then, after a long struggle with Ambika, Geetha had been forced into a training bra that year, but only at the very end of the second term. 'What is wrong with you?' Ambika had asked when Geetha had kept resisting, 'Every girl is excited to wear her first bra.'

But Ambika didn't know about Geetha's classmate, Terrible Tasneem, who sneaked up on girls from behind and drew back their bra straps as though they were catapults, only to release them with a smart snap, causing teeth-clenching pain and, if she had been successful in unhooking the bra in the process, a hasty retreat to the stinky school toilets to secure it again. Terrible Tasneem also found it diverting to jump on your painstakingly polished PT shoes, often just before PT period, so that you didn't have time to touch them up with white chalk and had to run five extra rounds when the PT teacher discovered your scuffed keds.

At first, Ambika had tried to be the Modern Mom and coax Geetha gently into the bra. But faced with stubborn resistance over many months, she had eventually done what any good mother would do – she had resorted to

intimidation. ‘Do you want to become like Narayaniamma?’ she had threatened. Narayaniamma, God rest her soul, had been Ammooma’s long-in-the-tooth retainer in Kerala, who had lived in a time when even blouses were optional, let alone bras. The effect of gravity on her breasts had been so unequivocal that Geetha had shrugged on the bra faster than you could say ‘Ente Narayaniammey!’

The late initiation had meant that Tasneem had not discovered Geetha’s bra yet, but it was only a matter of time before she did. Oh well, thought Geetha, the new term was still a couple of months away. She refused to let the spectre of Tasneem ruin the precious days in Ambalakunnu.

Eclipsing all the other events of the year was the long-due installation of the STD facility on their phone, which Unnikuttan had so far been resisting with all the self-righteousness of a hard-working, penny-pinching father. But visions of long conversations with their cousins Divya and Vikki in Delhi had been soon scuttled.

‘Do you know how much an STD call costs?’ Unnikuttan had asked.

‘No, Papa,’ they had chorused, mass-rolling their eyes, knowing they would be told in a moment.

A sum total of one minute was all they were allowed – twenty seconds each if it was evenly distributed between the siblings, which it never was – there was much jostling for phone monopoly, especially between Mini and Geetha, with Mini managing to wrest control most of the time. So it was back to the monthly letters, written on blue inland paper – one shared between the three of them – actually the two of them, because Raju could never manage more than a couple of lines (Hi Vikki, How are you, I am fine, Did you see the latest *Sportstar*? It has a full write-up about the Test match. Bye, Raju) – and so bursting with news of their last month’s escapades that the letter would spill over on to the sides and flaps, sometimes even on to the outside, just below the return address. Divya would write back religiously, not on inland but on two or three sheets of foolscap paper, complete with elaborately coloured hearts, smileys and an occasional scratch-n-sniff sticker, and stuffed into a white envelope, ‘with no regard to the increased cost of postage,’ Ambika sniffed. Why, Divya had even Express-Delivered a letter to them once!

Anyway, it wouldn’t be long before they saw Divya and Vikki again – they were already in Ambalakunnu along with their mother, Lalitha Valliamma, Ambika’s elder sister and Geetha’s favourite aunt.

This time, Geetha and her family would be spending the entire summer vacation at Ambalakunnu with Ammooma and Apoopan. That was because Geetha's other grandparents, Muthassan and Muthassi, Unnikuttan's parents, with whom they normally spent the first half of their summer holidays, had closed up their house in Ernakulam this year to be with Unnikuttan's sister in Calcutta because she was undergoing a hysterectomy.

Now, there was no denying that Muthassi made the best biryani ever, fragrant and spicy and laced with extra onions fried in ghee, the mutton as tender as a heartbroken adolescent. And there was nothing more entertaining than watching Muthassan using the handle of a long broom to align the blades of all the fans so that they rested symmetrically east-west, or commanding all the vendors who stopped by to halt at the gate so that he could wash the dirt off their cycle tyres before he allowed them to enter the compound. (Later they had to wash their hands and feet at the garden pipe before they were permitted entry into the veranda or kitchen. Muthassan was oblivious to the bruised egos and festering tempers that he left in his wake.) Despite all this, vacations in Ernakulam were a little bit like the *Ek Titli*, *Anek Titliya* national integration advertisements they showed at the theatres before the movies began. A mandatory filler, Geetha thought of it as, a curtain-raiser, at best.

For one, Unnikuttan's two sisters were much older than him, with grown-up children, and rarely visited at the same time as Unnikuttan and his family. So Unnikuttan's rambling family house, with many of the rooms locked up and just one doddering maid to keep Muthassan and Muthassi company, felt as empty as an eggshell. And then Muthassan, a retired army doctor, believed firmly in timetables, discipline, building of character, and keeping children gainfully employed and well-versed with the Kerala ethos. Which translated to: waking up at the crack of dawn, bathing immediately, going for long, brisk walks with Muthassan accompanied by monologues about the simpler, more frugal (and therefore implicitly better) days of his distant youth, afternoon lessons in written Malayalam (which were inevitably forgotten by the time the next annual trip came around, thus provoking pursed lips and disapproving shakes of the head from Muthassan), evening visits to the temple with Muthassi, an early turn-in to bed, all interspersed by good healthy meals on the dot of the appointed hour.

But holidays in Ambalakunnu . . . Why, that was another thing altogether. To begin with, Ambalakunnu was a place quite unlike anything Geetha had

ever seen – a barely-a-town that for all practical purposes was a suburb of Trivandrum, as it was destined to become many years later. You could traverse it on foot in half a day; it had just a handful of neighbourhoods that radiated uphill and downhill from one main road named, but naturally, MG Road. Uphill was upmarket, housing all the large tharavad houses, the Ambalakunnu Mahadeva temple, the convent school, women's college, hostel, hospital and missionary home. Downhill lay the downmarket neighbourhoods like Kuttipuram and BTN Nagar where the children were forbidden to wander, as well as the Vedungalserry market and the local jail.

Most importantly, Ambalakunnu had Devaki Nilayam, the house her maternal grandparents, Ammooma and Apoopan, lived in. It was a big old Kerala mansion with cathedral-tall ceilings, a veranda that ran along the front and sides, a tiled sloping roof, cool dingy rooms, cement floors, a beautiful front garden, an overgrown backyard, musty corners, bizarre noises, weird creepy-crawlies and plenty of nooks and crannies to explore and hide in. During the summer it was always filled with uncles and aunts and cousins and the occasional visiting guest, resulting in a state of boisterous tumult that kept the adults preoccupied and gave the children an almost free rein.

So summer holidays in Devaki Nilayam meant sleeping till nine – and bathing at any time you chose. Divya often forgot to bathe at all and usually nobody noticed. It meant eating meals whenever the maids finally managed to conjure up what Ammooma deemed as food sufficient for the entire household, and raiding the meat safe in the dining room for laddus and murukkus and jalebis when you felt hungry in between. It meant en masse visits to the beach at Trivandrum or Kovalam with Apoopan, and trips to the Vedungalserry market with the maids to buy multicoloured glass bangles for the girls and kites or shuttlecocks for the boys. Rambles around the more genteel neighbourhoods of Ambalakunnu with Mini and Divya during the day, and lazy afternoons under the shade of the mango tree in the garden, with Pooch and Goldie curled up beside them. Evenings with the whole family in the front veranda, listening to Apoopan's ridiculous ghost stories which he swore were all true, and overhearing gossip that the elders inadvertently spilt in their presence. Marathon sessions of Bluff and Donkey that stretched out for so many hours, that they would have to take breaks for dinner – carrying their cards with them so that Vikki and Raju wouldn't peek – and return to their games post-meal. And when the adults weren't looking, ferocious boys-versus-girls eerkillu battles with the bristles of brooms that

were made from coconut-palm fibres, which when whipped across the skin induced a pain so intense that tears sprang to the eyes unbidden, even in trying-very-hard-to-be-manly Vikki.

Geetha could barely contain herself. As Ambika got ready for the two-day train journey that would take them to Ambalakunnu, she followed her around like the tail on a dog. ‘Do you think that many will be enough?’ she asked, as her mother sorted, ironed and packed clothes for all of them. ‘Did you get the Georgette Heyer for Divya?’ she quizzed as Ambika unearthed the presents she had collected for all the relatives over the past year. ‘Please will you buy some Cheeselings too?’ she pestered, while Ambika built a famine-proof stockpile of biscuits, wafers and chocolate to sustain them between the railway meals during the train journey. ‘Can I carry three storybooks instead of one?’ she pleaded, as Unnikuttan leaned on an overstuffed suitcase, willing it to shut. Finally Ambika grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and ejected her from the room, commanding her to stay out of her sight until it was time to leave.

And then, at last, it was time to leave. Actually, it was a couple of hours before the time to leave, but Ambika believed that a two-hour buffer was always required in case any unforeseen emergency befell them in the fifteen-minute journey from Colaba to VT station. While six suitcases, three kit bags, a barrel-sized flask of drinking water and assorted plastic bags filled with food, magazines, books and back issues of *Reader’s Digest* bought from the roadside hawkers outside Churchgate station were taken down to a waiting taxi, Unnikuttan set up his elaborate anti-theft system. It consisted of a clothesline tied to the inside bolt of the front door and passed through the ventilator above. When pulled from the outside at a particular angle, the line allowed him to bolt the front door from the inside. The front door was then locked from the outside. On their return, Unnikuttan would use the clothesline once again to open the inside bolt, applying an elaborate manoeuvre that only he had been able to master. After hiding the telltale clothesline in a niche in the ventilator, Unnikuttan went down to instal the anti-theft system on the Fiat, which was a more straightforward iron chain and padlock around the steering wheel. The car would be parked on the street outside their building – for there were no provisions for parking in the 1940s apartments in which they stayed – and Unnikuttan lived in the perennial fear that he would return from their annual holiday in Kerala to find his car missing. The windshield wipers had already been removed and locked up at

home the day before, and Tejpal the car washer had been instructed to clean the car daily lest anybody notice that the vehicle had been left unattended.

The valuables were safeguarded, the taxi was loaded, the children were squashed inside. Ambika tapped her right foot impatiently. There was nothing left to do now but leave.

## Two

In Kuttipuram, euphemistically referred to as Ambalakunnu's 'working-class neighbourhood', success was measured in modest terms. A roof over the head, a couple of years of schooling, a job of any description, and you would be one of the star performers of the locality.

And yet there had been one man who had defied odds and reset expectations. This man had come to be known as Koovait Kannan and his remarkable turnaround tale had become a legend of sorts in Kuttipuram; a benchmark for high achievers, a dream just out of the reach of most. Whenever incredulous neighbours asked Kannan how he had managed his miraculous resurrection, he put it down with befitting humility to the blessings of Lord Mahadeva – and never before had the Ambalakunnu Mahadeva temple witnessed such a rush of devotees. The priest, who had led a quiet life till then, opening and closing the nada, the sanctum sanctorum, as and when he saw fit, now found a line of unfamiliar faces outside the temple doors if he was so much as a few minutes late. Soon the coins in his dakshina plate doubled, then tripled, and every day, the hundi was filled to the brim with offerings from those hoping for Kannan-like miracles. Admittedly, when the miracles had not materialized, as miracles are wont to do, the initial throng had been replaced by a modest but nevertheless steady stream of more patient faithfuls.

What was particularly astounding was that the protagonist of the tale was the most unlikely of heroes: Kannan was a man of some earnestness, much seriousness, a pinch of ambition, but no discernible talent. It was true that in his youth he had dreamed of studying further than all his peers, but it was not to be. After stumbling repeatedly at the fifth standard exams he had been hauled out of school and put to apprentice under his father, a plumber whose favourite – some said, only – tool was a formidable hammer. Not surprisingly Kannan, like his father, did not turn out to be the most delicate of craftsmen, and for more intricate operations like piping and fitting, the good people of Ambalakunnu would often take on the added expense and inconvenience of employing a plumber from Trivandrum rather than risk the questionable expertise of Kannan. Kannan was called in mainly to unclog sinks and toilets – jobs that plumbers from Trivandrum would demur to do, even if you could somehow lure them to Ambalakunnu on false pretences – and he had a



certain stoic patience and lack of queasiness that lent itself well to the task. Soon, he came to be known as Kakoos (Latrine) Kannan.

At the age of thirty-one, after his parents had searched far and wide for many years and been rejected dozens of times, Kakoos Kannan had finally found a match in a woman who had been similarly passed over. She was like a coconut palm, people said uncharitably; taller than most men in Kuttipuram, not to mention the women. And she was all straight lines and angles; there was not a single curve on her body. Her teeth protruded so much that even when her mouth was closed, the top two incisors jutted out like a canopy over her lower lip – wags remarked unkindly that they were trying to escape the foul breath inside. Unsurprisingly, even as a toddler, she wore a permanent look of discontent. But ironically her mother, in an act of blind motherly love – or sheer defiance, nobody could say for sure – had named her Sundarikutty, or beautiful child.

Sundarikutty had remained unmarried till the age of twenty-three by which time most of her peers had churned out a couple of children. So when Kannan's father had offered his son's hand in marriage, Sundarikutty's parents had agreed readily. The boy was normal as far as they could tell; no vices. Not a great job, not too many prospects, but how many people in Kuttipuram could boast of steady or respectable employment? They were getting old, and their youngest daughter had to be settled.

Sundarikutty, of course, felt differently – apart from being known as the wife of a man called Kakoos Kannan, who was shorter than her and far from good-looking, she found her husband to be far too laidback for her liking. Sundarikutty wanted a big house and all the comforts – Kannan was content with the one-room hovel that his parents lived in. She wanted the polyester saris that her better-off neighbours flaunted – thorthu-mundus of the most inferior quality were all that Kannan's earnings would afford.

But she didn't have much choice.

As a daughter and a son, Bindu and Babu, added to her responsibilities and her outgoings, Sundarikutty's disgruntled frown became more pronounced. Many an evening her neighbours had ringside seats to long harangues, as Sundarikutty complained to Kannan about the growing cost of living, with two children to bring up and settle, and the unpredictable and meagre income he brought in. Kannan listened meekly with head bowed, which only seemed to infuriate Sundarikutty further.

The family's finances were fortified a little when Sundarikutty found a job

as a cook in Devaki Nilayam, one of those grand mansions on the uptown side of MG Road and the abode of Madhavan and Devaki Nair. Sundarikutty wasn't thrilled with the job – Devaki Amma was far too much of a despot – but it gave her access to some extra money, not to mention the free rations that were easy to pilfer despite Devaki Amma's eagle eye.

Still not satisfied, Sundarikutty arranged with Tilakan the truck driver for a month of driving lessons for Kannan – and paid him in bananas plucked from the Nairs' garden and rice sneaked out from their storeroom. True to his talentless form, Kannan was unable to pass the driving test, but Sundarikutty greased the instructor's palm and arranged for a driving licence to be issued. Not long after, Kannan found a supplementary income as a substitute tempo driver at the wholesale market at Vedungalserry. Since the regular driver was an incorrigible slacker who bunked more often than he reported for work, Kannan was often seen ferrying vegetables in the morning to a couple of stores in Trivandrum. Soon the income he got from driving surpassed his earnings as a plumber.

And so it continued for a while. There was now sufficient income for Kakoos Kannan's family to somehow get by from month to month but never enough for unexpected expenses, much less any luxuries. Bindu and Babu wore cast-offs from the Nair household and no matter how much Sundarikutty saved, she never had enough for that polyester sari she longed for. There was always something else – books for the children or a chappal to be repaired or medicines to be bought.

Until one fateful day. It was a steamy afternoon in May, the year Kannan's youngest sister got married. Kannan had had to take a loan of twenty thousand rupees to finance the festivities and Sundarikutty had been livid for the best part of two months. As she crouched by the Nairs' tap washing the lunch vessels with Vim powder and a coconut-fibre scrub, she banged the plates around in frustration. She was muttering to herself about the unfairness of life and the evil nature of her youngest sister-in-law when a huge shadow fell gradually across her, like on the moon in an eclipse. She turned to find the colossal bulk of Devaki Nair behind her. This was unusual; Devaki Amma usually lumbered off like a bear to a cave to hibernate soon after lunch, and emerged only well into the evening to summon for tea. Sundarikutty braced herself for a tirade; she thought that Devaki Amma was going to berate her for banging the plates or perhaps for the fish which had been marinated indifferently. She really was not in the mood for this.

‘One of Madhavan saar’s friends needs a driver, Sundarikutty amma,’ Devaki Amma said unexpectedly, her tone more ingratiating than usual. She was wheezing with the effort of walking from the dining room. ‘Do you know anybody?’

Sundarikutty was taken aback for a minute. ‘No Amma, I . . .’ Recovering, she corrected herself. ‘Oh my husband is a driver!’ Sundarikutty paused; although she was keen to add a fourth avenue of income, she knew better than to seem over-eager. ‘But he’s a little busy, I will have to ask if he has the time.’

‘Isn’t he a plumber?’ Devaki Amma frowned. Madhavan Nair had got Kannan to do some work in the upstairs bathroom some years before and the amount of money they had spent to redo it was still a touchy subject between husband and wife.

‘Yes, plumber also Amma, but driver also – he drives tempo all the way to Trivandrum and back, every morning almost,’ Sundarikutty said, as she made a production of scrubbing a cheenachatti vigorously.

‘Oh, a tempo,’ Devaki Amma said dismissively, bending over with some difficulty to pick up a washed vessel and holding it to the light for inspection. It passed quality control. ‘No, no. We need a car driver – a chauffeur. This is for saar’s friend’s boss actually – a white man living in the Gulf.’

Sundarikutty took a sharp intake of breath – even the two protruding teeth seemed to recede a bit. Devaki Amma had just uttered the two magic words: The Gulf. It had been a dream of Sundarikutty’s to marry a man working in the Gulf, who would bring back gold nuggets and two-in-ones and Dove soap for her on his annual vacations. She had tried prodding Kannan to find a job in Doobai or Bahrain or Koovait or Aaboo Daabi, but a combination of factors had thwarted her best-laid plans: his notorious lack of skills and enterprise, distant Gulf-settled relatives who promised help but never delivered, a recruitment mafia that demanded exorbitant fees that they could not afford, and Kannan’s reluctance to take up a job that promised money but few comforts – oh yes, he said, he had heard about the long working hours, the overcrowded, filthy living quarters, the strict supervisors. Theirs may be a one-room hovel, he added, bravely raking up one of Sundarikutty’s favourite taunts, but at least they didn’t have to share it with thirty other men.

But this was different – a golden opportunity being presented to Sundarikutty like an offering to a deity! Without running to a recruitment agent, without taking a huge loan to pay all the blasted middlemen!

Sundarikutty decided then and there that she would not allow little details to come in the way. 'No, no Amma, he can drive car also,' she lied flagrantly. 'Fiat, Ambassador – everything.'

'Are you sure?' Devaki Amma asked doubtfully.

'Yes, yes Amma!' Sundarikutty had now abandoned any pretence of scrubbing and the water from the tap was splashing uselessly onto the ground.

Devaki Amma leaned over heavily to shut the tap. 'Would he be willing to take a job in Kuwait?'

Koovait! Would he!

Kannan had not taken much convincing; the job came with private quarters, free food and a monthly salary that was more than their combined family income for a year. After a few covert lessons in a local taxi whose driver was the friend of Sundarikutty's second cousin's husband, Kannan had passed a driving test administered by Madhavan Nair, whose safety standards were admittedly lax. Kannan was deemed fit to recommend to Madhavan Nair's friend's boss and within a couple of months Kannan was in Kuwait, local licence in hand, driving not a Fiat or an Ambassador, Sundarikutty told all of Kuttipuram, but a great big foreign car with air-conditioning and music system and all. Soon there was a framed colour photograph on Sundarikutty's window ledge, showing Kannan, out of his trademark black flowered lungi and in pants and shirt, standing by a cobalt-blue car as big as an elephant, next to an equally humongous white man in a grey suit.

The humongous white man was Wilhelm Keller, Kannan's German boss. When Kannan tried to pronounce the name, it sounded like Villum Guller, which made the Keller children laugh. Kannan reddened with pleasure at having brought smiles to those talcum-powder-white faces, cheeks as pink as the almond sweets in George's bakery, he told an awestruck Sundarikutty. The Kellers were demanding but good employers; Kannan was given a room to stay in, with attached toilet, and all his meals were taken care of by the Malaysian cook. To Kannan's astonishment, on occasion Keller even invited him and the cook to dine with the family, and with time, Kannan overcame his initial embarrassment and became quite adept at handling a fork and spoon and at restraining the burp that seemed to always well up inside him after a meal. He often had to work into the nights but he got overtime, in addition to medical benefits and a month's paid leave every year along with travel fares from Kuwait and back.

With no living expenses and a spartan lifestyle, Kannan was able to send most of his salary back home, and life changed dramatically for the family. First they paid off all the loans they had taken over the years. Then they expanded and modified the house, so that it transformed from a one-room mud hut with a thatched covering to a pucca three-room structure with a tiled roof. It had a separate hall (albeit usually a storage area that was cleaned up and used only for the most exalted of guests), two bedrooms and a multipurpose wrap-around veranda which served as kitchen and washing-up area at the back and as a visitor's area/family room/dining room in the front. In Kuttipuram, where all the houses were snuggled up close together, with barely a patch of land separating one from the other, Kannan's was the only one with a compound wall and a gate. Neighbours also noted resentfully that Kannan's was the only house in the neighbourhood where money plants grew copiously, winding around the trees in the front, creeping up from the pots in the house and meandering over walls and window frames before taking up residence in the pelmets. Everyone knew that flourishing money plants were a harbinger of good luck and affluence, but no matter how much they planted and watered and weeded, not one of Kannan's neighbours could coax the plants to grow in their house.

Soon Kannan's house was fitted with every comfort, with every luxury that Sundarikutty could conceive: a well was dug at the back of the house near the outhouse so that water was always available, the linesman was paid a monthly retainer to allow an illegal line to be taken from the main power lines, fans were installed in the hall and one bedroom, and bulbs lit up the entire house. Kannan even bought a small television, and whenever Sundarikutty was away, Babu let in the entire neighbourhood to gather around it and watch Malayalam film songs or the news.

By and by Sundarikutty became accustomed to greater comforts and got tired of Devaki Amma's tirades and the thankless job of feeding and cleaning the Nair household. She left the Nairs' employment to the mutual relief of both parties and settled into a life of leisure, disparaging her former employers and forever dressed in polyester saris.

It had been some years now since Kannan had gone to the Gulf, enough time for the image of Kakoos Kannan to have well and truly receded in the collective memory of Kuttipuram. In its place had risen the larger-than-life icon of Koovait Kannan. And now, much to the despair of Sundarikutty's long-suffering neighbours, it seemed that another happy chapter was about to

be added to Koovait Kannan's rags-to-riches saga.

## Three

Geetha pressed her face to the window. During the night the train had slipped out of Andhra Pradesh, passed quietly through Tamil Nadu and emerged into Kerala. Gone were the stark rocky outcrops of Andhra, its blazing barren plains, and in its place were the familiar swathes of lush paddy fields, the beloved coconut palms rising into the sky, the whitewashed tiled-roof houses dotting the impossibly green landscape.

Geetha sighed in relief. It had been two days now and they were all caked with dirt, despite the rudimentary washes in the reeking bathroom of the compartment. Ambika's ration of chips and chocolate was dwindling alarmingly and the thought of another bite of the Railways' watery cauliflower curry, rubbery chapattis or questionable biryani ('Dog meat,' Raju pronounced knowledgably) was almost too much to bear. Mini and Raju had been bickering constantly since Cudappah, not least because of the blazing heat which had converted the compartment into a tandoor. But now, they were almost there.

After Varkala, they all took turns washing up, combing their hair and changing their clothes in order to be presentable by the time they reached Trivandrum. Ambika traded her wrinkle-free 'train sari' for a cotton chungdi one. Mini changed into the fluorescent green shirt with padded shoulders that she had bought at Fashion Street and put on the dangling earrings she had picked up at Colaba Causeway. Geetha wore the ruffled lemon-yellow top and denim skirt that Ambika had bought for her birthday the year before. Unnikuttan and Raju refused to change, but scrubbed their faces and underarms vigorously, slapped some Nycil on their backs and patted down their hair with some water.

At last, the train chugged into Trivandrum Central station. By now Ambika had ensured that they were standing by the door, their luggage trailing behind them and preventing other passengers from alighting before they could.

'There they are!' Raju cried.

Geetha climbed over a kit bag to join him at the door. There was Apoopan, in his usual off-white shirt and white mundu ('It's his uniform, never wears anything else,' Mini had once observed, 'like Richie Rich.'). What was remaining of his white hair flapped wildly in the draught of the incoming

train. As soon as he spotted Geetha, he raised a salutary hand and let out a strangled shout, a scrambled mix, she thought, of ‘Ayyy!’ and ‘Stay away from the open door, child!’ Geetha felt a surge of love and relief – Apoopan had had a heart attack the previous year, scaring the daylights out of the entire family and causing Ambika to fly to his side mid-term, leaving Raju, Mini and Geetha under the care of a flapping Unnikuttan. ‘Just a spot of indigestion,’ Apoopan maintained testily, ‘Why is everybody making such a fuss?’, and he ate cheese cubes and butter and eggs with a relish he had never shown before the attack. But here he was, looking hale and hearty, his cheeks as rosy as ever, his smile as broad as she remembered.

Behind him stood Keshavan Maama, Ambika’s youngest brother, Cash to his ‘idiotic friends’, as Ambika often remarked. His hands were folded over his chest and head thrown back in his customary stance of disdain. In contrast to Apoopan, he spurned anything that vaguely hinted at the fact that he lived and worked in Kerala. Today, he was sporting blue jeans made from a heavy denim, and a thick, full-sleeved black-and-white checked shirt, which, despite all his self-fanning with a rolled-up newspaper, had sprung dark damp patches under the arms.

The train came to a stop and as Raju and Unnikuttan wrestled with the luggage, Geetha ran ahead and leapt into Apoopan’s tight embrace. She nestled there comfortably, happily accepting a whiskery kiss from Apoopan and a tousle of the hair from Keshavan Maama, and drinking in, as though for the first time, the uniformly moustachioed men in their white mundus, the thin-limbed coolies, the sudden babble of Malayalam all around – yes, they had arrived in Kerala, well and truly.

‘What the hell is that?’ Ambika asked, appraising Keshavan Maama’s new hairstyle, an extravagantly oiled and combed-back mound in the style of Dev Anand circa *Hum Dono*.

Keshavan Maama merely sniffed in response, and looked mockingly at their a-little-worse-for-wear luggage. ‘What, bought the bags second-hand at Chor Bazaar?’ he retorted. Mini noticed that as Unnikuttan turned away on the pretext of finding a coolie, his already thin lips almost disappeared in a grimace.

They piled into two cars – Unnikuttan, Geetha and Mini climbed into Apoopan’s ten-year-old Ambassador, while Ambika, Raju and most of the luggage were loaded into Keshavan Maama’s Standard 2000 which, Apoopan remarked, ‘spent more time in the workshop than the mechanic’. It was a sore



point between them – Apoopan had been horrified by the small fortune that Keshavan Maama had taken out of the family business to buy the car, ostensibly to impress clients. ‘What clients?’ Apoopan had asked Ammooma. ‘Small-time shopkeepers from Kottayam and Kollam?’ It had been said, often by Apoopan himself during a thunderous tirade against his youngest son, that one could be forgiven for thinking that it was Keshavan who was the proprietor of Madhavan Textiles, the way he strutted around town, while Madhavan Nair (i.e. Apoopan) was the apprentice and heir-in-waiting. Sukumaran Maama, Ambika’s other, more sober younger brother, had also been against the idea. Despite the family’s opposition and the hundreds of rupees spent on repairs practically every month, Keshavan Maama was delighted with the huge car and its ‘international feel’; it had air-conditioning and electric windows!

As they set off, Geetha and Mini nudged each other and giggled. They had raced ahead to get into Apoopan’s car, because it was always so much fun to watch him drive. Once he had made the entire trip to Ambalakunnu with the handbrake up, wondering why the car was responding so poorly and vowing to tar and feather his mechanic for his inefficiency. Now, with cataracts obscuring much of his vision and warping most of his spatial ability, he drove largely on the right side of the road, cursing oncoming traffic for drifting into *his* lane. As he talked and gestured animatedly his hands frequently lifted off the steering wheel, leaving the car to careen freely from side to side. An ashen-faced Unnikuttan sat with his back braced against the front passenger seat, hands clutching the dashboard for support and right leg reaching frantically for imaginary brakes when Apoopan almost rear-ended a bus at the corner of the Electricity Board office where a crowd of picketers were dispersing for an earlyish lunch, and again on the outskirts of Trivandrum, when Apoopan nearly ran over a hapless pedestrian attempting to cross the road and stuck midway, directly in Apoopan’s path.

As they turned a corner, the salty breeze from the ocean lifted the sultry heat for a moment. The water smelled so different here, of salt and chlorophyll and freshness, unlike the sea off Bombay which let out a bouquet of fish and garbage and sweat and bhelpuri. Apoopan pointed out the sliver of beach that could be glimpsed just beyond the road and the coconut trees.

They took a left at a colourful film hoarding showing a portly man beating the daylights out of an entire army of thugs, with an elaborately dressed woman in a tight blouse looking nervously on. Then they were climbing up

the familiar road to Ambalakunnu. Soon they were at MG Road, Ambalakunnu's main street, and Geetha and Mini squealed with excitement. There was George's bakery where Ammooma bought apple cakes and puffs for tea. The auto-parts shop where Raju and Vikki got air filled in their cycle tyres. The government store from which Ambika bought litres of coconut oil to carry back to Bombay, unmindful of Unnikuttan's griping. The Milma booth that sold yummy flavoured milk and tiny cups of ice cream. The tailor who Ambika refused to go to because he puffed the sleeves of all her blouses. The pazham pori hawker at the corner – there he was, mundu folded up and towel wrapped around his head, dipping pieces of banana in batter and tossing them carelessly into a huge blackened cheenachatti full of sizzling oil.

They took the road that climbed uphill all the way to Thenganad, 'the Malabar Hill of Ambalakunnu,' Ambika used to say proudly. As always, on Convent Street, Apooan pointed out the missionary hospital, which had been established fifty years ago and was credited with converting Ambalakunnu from an off-the-map village into a certified, albeit tiny, census town.

It couldn't be far now, thought Geetha . . . yes, there was the cream and maroon compound wall with the green gate. Even from the car they could hear Pooch barking his head off. Geetha and Mini bounced on the seats and shrieked with joy, subsiding only when Unnikuttan turned around to say that he would thrash them soundly if they didn't pipe down. They complied, although they knew that it was an empty threat, for all Unnikuttan ever managed was a twist of the ear or a well-placed pinch; Ambika specialized in impatient slaps on the side of the arm and explosive outbursts that were usually far more effective than the slaps.

They passed through the gate which had been left open for them and drove up the short driveway lined with potted plants, and finally pulled to a stop behind the Standard 2000 by the front veranda of Devaki Nilayam. The whole family was lined up on the steps as though posing for a photograph. At the top of the steps stood Ammooma, the Devaki of the said Nilayam, holding on to a wooden pillar for support and oozing out gently from the restraints of her saffron blouse and white mundu-veshti. Ammooma was spectacularly fat and seemed to get rounder every year, a direct result of her favourite hobby – lying down. Not sleeping, but finding the nearest X axis and aligning herself to it. People often wondered how she managed such a large household despite her supine state – the secret was in her band of maids

and helpers and her unmatched ability to drum them into a frenetic state of activity with a few choice insults. Ammooma was not given to public displays of emotion but the fact that she was lightly coated with Cuticura powder and wore a string of jasmine flowers in her bun indicated that she considered this a special and happy occasion.

On her left stood Renjini Ammayi, Sukumaran Maama's wife, wearing a pinched smile and patting an imaginary stray hair down. Since she had age on her side and was forever on some strange fad diet (the latest involved drinking nothing but honey dissolved in water throughout the day), Renjini Ammayi was still on the right side of voluptuous. That, along with her peaches and cream complexion, her faultlessly made-up face and the heavy gold ornaments that she always wore, even if it was just to go to the fish market – not that Renjini Ammayi ever did anything so proletarian as going to the fish market – made her something of a superstar in Ambalakunnu. Today she was in a green and gold Kancheevaram sari.

Hanging on to her was Suji, her angel-faced three-year-old daughter, dressed in a matching green and gold ghagra-choli. Next to Suji stood Rema, the Satan-hearted seven-year-old. She was in a slightly larger green and gold ghagra-choli, for Renjini Ammayi thought it was adorable for families to dress in matching clothes. (The other things that Renjini Ammayi found adorable: creating names for your children using the syllables of the parents' names – thus Re-ma and Su-ji; having Rema and Suji put up foul little skits for the entire family and recruiting the desperately skulking Divya, Mini and Geetha as stagehands and bit actors; taking super-formal studio photos of her entire family in full regalia, usually against a backdrop of a famous monument like the Taj Mahal, or in one particularly ghastly instance, the Charminar.)

If Sukumaran Maama had been here, he would have certainly been wearing a green shirt, possibly with a gold border. But Sukumaran Maama was in Kottivakkam trying to revive a wounded factory of Madhavan Textiles which had been bled to bankruptcy by a thieving foreman. Renjini Ammayi had fled home with the children after a couple of months in Kottivakkam. 'She says it's too small a town for her, who does she think she is?' Geetha had overheard Ambika telling Lalitha Valliamma on the phone. 'She's doing it for the children's education, it seems – huh! You'd think they were studying for engineering! Poor Sukumaran, it isn't enough that he has to work in the middle of nowhere; not even a wife to come home to in the evenings!'

Renjini Ammayi was staying with her parents four houses away, but it was common knowledge that she preferred to lunch and sup at Ammooma and Apoopan's where food was in plenty and unaccounted for, unlike at her parents', where strict records were kept and a division of expenses was done at the end of the month.

Standing one step below was Lalitha Valliamma. If Renjini Ammayi was peaches and cream, Lalitha Valliamma was kaajal and Godrej hairdye. 'A speck of soot,' Keshavan Maama often quipped, 'A chunk of coal.' To make matters worse, she was as thin as a paper clip. With her kohl-lined eyes, printed cotton salwar kameezes and oxidized-silver jewellery, Lalitha Valliamma might have been considered in some circles as quite the glamour girl, in an art-house, Deepti Naval/Smita Patil kind of way. But not in fair-complexion-obsessed, curve-loving Ambalakunnu, where ladies wore gold, as ladies should, and worked assiduously at maintaining their curves. Ammooma had despaired during Lalitha Valliamma's adolescent years, and had wrung her hands later as fair suitor after well-fed suitor had taken one look at Lalitha Valliamma and fled. But all that had been a long time ago. Along had come Dileep Valliathan – fair, Bahrain-born and with a job that came with an expense account and quarterly trips abroad. Ambalakunnu had gagged with surprise.

Predictably, Dileep Valliathan was missing from the scene. Geetha vividly remembered his handsome face and wide smile, as also the extravagant presents he used to bring them; cans of Kraft cheese and corned beef, bottles of Tang and big fat slabs of Toblerone. But it had been some years now since he had stopped coming to Kerala for the vacations. Geetha didn't know why but going by the meaningful looks exchanged between Ambika and Unnikuttan whenever she asked, and the fact that Mini had taken her aside a couple of years ago and threatened to execute her, slowly and painfully, if she ever, ever brought it up with Divya or Vikki, Geetha had gathered that he was on a top-secret and dangerous government mission of some sort.

Next to Lalitha Valliamma and already bounding towards them was Divya. She was wearing a billowy checked shirt over black tights, which Mini coveted instantly. Lalitha Valliamma had finally allowed Divya to cut her hair, and now she had thick bangs falling over her forehead and dense waves cascading to her shoulders. Geetha, who had not yet been permitted to grow her hair because of the lice outbreak in her class, made a note to bring up a change of hairstyle for herself with Ambika later. Vikki, in light-blue acid-

washed jeans, taller this year but still not as tall as Raju, was holding back, striving to look casual. He held up his hand in a nonchalant wave.

At the topmost right-hand corner of the frame was Damodaran Maama, leaning out from the Delivery Room where Ammooma had birthed all her five children. It was now Damodaran Maama's bedroom, from which he rarely descended. Meals were sent up to him, and dirty dishes and laundry were picked up by the maids from outside his room. Though she had been warned to leave him alone, Geetha had ventured into his room a couple of times, only to discover that it was not so much a room as a big crazy cave of books, newspapers, magazines and board games covering every available surface; the floor, the bed, the table in the corner, the shelves – she was sure she saw some on top of the cistern in the bathroom as well. Damodaran Maama, sitting sedately in the midst of this mayhem, had been courteous enough, even allowing her to borrow a dusty and fraying Ludo board on one occasion. And when Geetha had found out that he had once spanked Rema for cutting up one of his *National Geographics*, she had decided that she quite liked Damodaran Maama after all.

He had been a brilliant scientist once, Divya had confided in Geetha, went to office and everything, and not in little old Ambalakunnu, but in Madras. But he had just stopped going to work one day, no one knew why. The fall-through of a promised promotion, whispered some. Unrequited love, suggested others. Apoopan had tried everything – given him an opportunity to learn his textile business, wangled a job for him as a teacher in the university in Trivandrum, but Damodaran Maama had spurned them all, and finally Ammooma and Apoopan had given up trying and resigned themselves to his self-imposed exile in the Delivery Room.

At the left corner of this family snapshot and peeping out inquisitively from the side of the house that led to the kitchen and backyard stood the alternative household: Kamala the live-in cook, Thankappan the gardener and odd-job man, Valsamma the cleaner, and a girl in plaits whom Geetha didn't recognize – probably the temporary maid who came to help cutting and cleaning and grinding and washing during the peak holiday rush at Devaki Nilayam.

Completing the welcome party were Pooch and Goldie. While Goldie was waddling towards them with instant recognition, Pooch had been tied to the railing of the veranda and was straining rabidly at his leash. Among his many quirks, Pooch's complete inability to remember the people he had been

introduced to earlier coupled with his fierce distrust of strangers made it imperative that he be tied up until the opportunity arose to get reintroduced. For the moment, he seemed convinced that this little army of aliens with their arsenal of suitcases had come to burn down the house and kill the occupants.

As the army of aliens tumbled out of the cars, the group on the steps dissolved from their picture-perfect pose and flowed towards them in welcome. Geetha felt a familiar little frisson of pleasure. She knew it in her bones: this was going to be the best summer vacation ever!

## Four

Ration Raaman, as his nickname suggested, owned a ration shop near the Vedungalserry Market. Old-timers remembered that he was one of the hired minions there at first, but when the owner died, the shop had passed on to Raaman; by fraudulent means, people speculated. How he had wangled the ownership would remain a mystery, but the fact remained that Raaman had been the proprietor of Mahadeva Stores for two decades now. It was a dingy little place that belied the wealth of the owner, for everybody knew that Ration Raaman had made a tidy little fortune by adulterating his supplies and selling the excess on the black market. In fact all the tea stalls and hotels in Ambalakunnu bought their sugar and kerosene at three times the fair value price (but yet marginally lower than market price) from Raaman. Nobody dared complain, because Raaman was also a powerful man – he could cut off your supplies just by pretending your ration card was bogus, and everyone knew that it would take a lifetime to disprove him, a long, ration-less lifetime.

Over the years, Ration Raaman had built a large house in Kuttipuram and then, just as everybody was marvelling over that feat, a second one in BTN Nagar, where the roads were tarred and the municipal water supply came right up to the house and not just to the communal tap at the end of the road. When Raaman and his family moved to BTN Nagar, the house in Kuttipuram was rented out, adding to his inflows. It was said that Raaman and his wife Nalini slept on mattresses stuffed with wads of money and that trunks of gold and silver were immersed in the well.

Ration Raaman was also known for his immense piety, which he took great pains to advertise. A pantheon of gods and goddesses smiled down from the walls of his tiny ration shop as he went about his adulterating activities. A sacred rudraksha mala hung from his neck, his forehead was perennially emblazoned with chandanam and bhasmam, sandalwood paste and holy ash, and he never failed to mention the pujas he had conducted and the offerings he had made to various temples. He had undertaken the arduous pilgrimage to the hallowed Sabarimala temple seven times, he visited the Padmanabhaswamy, Attukal and Pazhavangadi temples in Trivandrum at least once a month, and went to the Mahadeva temple in Ambalakunnu every day, walking barefoot all the way from Kuttipuram even on the hottest of

mornings when the scorching tarmac could scald your soles away.

As if this was not enough to impress, Ration Raaman's youngest son Venu had joined the Kerala state police as a constable, and Raaman's stock had gone up even further in Kuttipuram and BTN Nagar. Now, while Ration Raaman had two older sons, Indran and Chandran, they were so slow on the uptake that they were considered unfit even for sorting provisions in the ration shop, leave alone handling the till or balancing Raaman's complicated books. After an unsuccessful apprenticeship at Mahadeva Stores, which had somehow resulted in the cops coming to investigate Raaman's supplies and much money having to change hands, the boys had been thrown out on their ear; there was only so much you could tolerate even as an indulgent father, Raaman declared. Somehow the boys had inveigled themselves into jobs around town, but jobs that promised little advancement. Indran was a delivery man for a gas agency, and the best he could hope for was to reach a level where he could divert a cylinder or two for personal gain. Chandran was the tea boy at the Ambalakunnu Co-operative Bank, and short of robbing the safe, which everybody agreed was beyond the expertise of the duffer, there was little he could expect apart from his paltry, if steady, salary.

But as a member of the force – now that was another thing altogether. For one, you didn't have to pay for a thing – that was common knowledge. By the virtue of your khaki uniform you had access to free groceries, free rides in buses and autorickshaws, free beedis and toddy and vettilla-paaku, even free newspapers. Then there were the 'bonuses' you collected from all the shops on your beat. Even Constable Lenin, a strange young man with all kinds of peculiar notions, was never allowed to pay so much as a rupee for a cup of tea, no matter how much he insisted. To convince everybody to take his Marxist ideals seriously, he finally had to throw Mutta Mani, the egg seller, into jail for refusing to accept payment for a dozen eggs. From then on, Constable Lenin's money was reluctantly accepted by Ambalakunnu's traders and merchants even though all of them were convinced that Lenin would come back later to exact his revenge for their impertinence.

Of course, being the son of Ration Raaman, Venu could have no such silly notions. From the day Venu started work, the Raaman family's household expenses had halved; apart from huge savings on groceries and transportation, Raaman no longer had to contribute to either the local police station so that they would ignore consumer complaints about his diluted kerosene and suspiciously whimsical weighing scales, nor to knife-wielding



Pichathi Pappu who turned up at Vedungalserry Market every Wednesday to collect his 'weekly salary' from the local shopkeepers. In fact, it was the Raaman family that descended en masse on Krishna Canteen and Mess in BTN Nagar on the weekends, making short work of the non-vegetarian thalis (large) and leaving without so much as a tip for the waiter, let alone clearing the bill. But Diwakaran, the owner, was a happy man because it was a small price to pay for Constable Venu to turn a blind eye to the underage boys in the kitchen and the liquor served without a licence in the back room.

Now five years into his job, Venu had established himself as an expert thrasher of suspects and a formidable presence in a riot squad. His promotion to head constable seemed imminent and it was clear that Ration Raaman's star was on the ascendant. The mattresses in Raaman's house, people conjectured, would be getting thicker and thicker.

So naturally everyone was shocked when it came to be known that Raaman wanted to get Venu married off, and soon; after all, Raaman and Nalini didn't seem the sort to let go of such a promising source of income without resistance. 'Let me enjoy their salary for a few years,' Nalini had said frankly when Indran and Chandran had found jobs and her relatives had suggested that she get them married. 'You know what happens when a wife comes.' And thus they had remained unmarried well into their thirties until finally the boys had joined ranks and rebelled, threatening to elope with the next girls they set their eyes upon. A double wedding had been hastily fixed and between them the brothers had produced five grandchildren in the space of four years. As Nalini had feared, that was the last that she had seen of either of their salaries.

So what was the big hurry with Venu now? Tongues had already started to wag. Achuthan, the cowherd, who sometimes grazed his cattle in the patch of vacant land adjoining Raaman's house, had seen Uma, the drunkard's wife, talking to Venu on many an occasion. From the way she twisted the end of her plait as she spoke to him and laughed loudly at everything he said, it was clear that Venu had caught Uma's attention. Now Uma was known for her glad eye, and the rubber chappals of Meen Mommad the fisherman and the plastic sandals of Hariharan the tailor had been seen outside her door on many nights when her husband was lying senseless in some field. 'Not both on the same night, you understand,' said Achuthan, making his cronies at the toddy shop snigger.

'Doesn't get a paisa from her husband,' he continued, 'but I swear on my

dead mother that I saw her bringing Venu a pile of fried fish one afternoon. Seer fish it was too – fifty rupees a kilo at least. Supplied by Meen Mommad no doubt!’ And his cronies guffawed, thumping the tables and making the bottles of milky-white toddy jump.

But Uma was married with five children (the last bearing a striking resemblance to Hariharan the tailor) and Venu was the most eligible bachelor in BTN Nagar and twenty-odd years her junior, so the flirtations had appeared to be a passing phase, and Nalini and Raaman hadn’t seemed overly concerned, taking a ‘boys will be boys’ attitude. But now the drunkard, it was rumoured, was on his deathbed and Uma was throwing more wood on the fire, so to speak. Whenever Venu was at home, Uma could be seen squatting on her haunches by the stream that ran past Ration Raaman’s house under the pretext of washing clothes or vessels, her sari hiked up to her knees and the pallu slipping provocatively down her body. Venu, Achuthan reported, had taken to spending much of his time on the wooden bench in the veranda in his banian and checked lungi, pretending to be immersed in a newspaper but allowing his gaze to fall further afield. When Venu was alone at home, Uma would venture on to the veranda, feeding him sob stories about the drunkard’s sorry ways. Venu would listen sympathetically and occasionally parted with a twenty-rupee note or two to tide her over for a few days. Once, as she sobbed theatrically into the edge of her pallu, he was seen giving her a consoling, if tentative, pat on the head. Within a few weeks Uma had managed to worm her way from the veranda into the house, for a few minutes at a time at first, and then for longer interludes. It was on one such occasion that Nalini had returned home unexpectedly. Achuthan didn’t know what had transpired, but Uma was seen coming out of Ration Raaman’s house in a hurry, and two days later, Laxmanan the astrologer revealed that Nalini and Raaman had consulted him about arranging a match for Venu. ‘Perhaps they’re worried that Uma’s sixth child might look like Venu,’ Achuthan quipped snidely.

Whatever the reason, at this very moment Ration Raaman and his family were in Koovait Kannan’s house to finalize the nuptials of Venu to Kannan’s daughter, Bindu. All of Kuttipuram knew this, for Sundarikutty had publicized it well, and half of Kuttipuram had come to investigate. When the proposal party of eight – Nalini, Raaman, Venu, Chandran, Indran, Indran’s wife and one-year-old son, and Nalini’s mother’s sister who had happened to come over from Kollam that day for an indefinite stay – stepped out of the

bus on to the main road that led up to Kuttipuram, there was already a crowd of curious onlookers gathered by the side of the road.

The party proceeded carefully down the muddy track that tumbled downhill all the way to Kannan's gate. Raaman, a thin unremarkable man, led the stately procession, his big black umbrella shielding his bald pate from the late afternoon glare. Nalini trailed behind him in a purple and gold silk sari quite inappropriate for her age. The Lacto Calamine that she had smoothed on to her face was slowly melting in the heat, leaving brown skid marks on her artificially pink cheeks. She was flanked by Indran, a bow-legged man who would have been as unremarkable as his father if it had not been for the mouthful of gold teeth that he exhibited every time he smiled, and Chandran, the tea boy, whose only outstanding feature was his rather large head. Behind them trudged Indran's long-suffering wife Janaki, her son wedged on her waist. Janaki was followed by a strapping young man who exuded an air of confident superiority – the man of the hour, prospective groom and soon-to-be head constable R Venugopal. He was leading Nalini's bent-up old aunt rather impatiently by the hand, in the manner he employed with handcuffed thieves and drunkards he brought to the lock-up. Bringing up the rear were seventeen of Kannan's neighbours, four stray dogs and a troop of chattering children who wanted a closer look at Indran's gold teeth. The rest of the neighbourhood had found ringside seats on Kannan's compound wall and on the higher reaches of the tamarind tree outside his gate. A couple of old ladies who were past their climbing days tried to wheedle their way through the back door but were shooed away by Kannan's mother, Ponamma, an irascible old crone who was already seething because Sundarikutty and Kannan had banished her indoors as soon as the initial introductions were made; she was known to be loose of tongue and they had decided that they could not afford any gaffes on this important occasion. And this after she had slaved all day in the kitchen, making snacks for the proposal party! 'Don't mind, Ammooma,' Kannan's son Babu said cheerfully. 'I too have been told to stay out of the way.'

So grandmother and grandson contented themselves with a vantage point from where they could monitor not just the small hall into which Sundarikutty was ushering the star members of the proposal party, but also the front veranda where Kannan was apologetically accommodating the peripheral members on plastic chairs. As previously agreed, Kannan's brothers, Ayyappan and Shankaran, along with their wives Omanakutty and

Karthi, settled down to mingle with the peripheral party so that they would not feel indignant when Kannan slipped inside.

By this time Nalini had sunk into the generously stuffed, velvet-upholstered brown sofa that Sundarikutty had carefully selected from the third most expensive shop in Trivandrum. A thin line of fresh black dye had seeped down from Nalini's hairline and now framed her Lacto-Calamine-pink face, deepening the impression that it was an elaborate mask. She was surveying the room quite blatantly; the television, the two-in-one, the carpet on the floor woven with camels and sand dunes and bearded men, the incredible date-palm-shaped table lamp in the corner which had been switched on for effect though twilight was many hours away and now spouted light along its fronds like water from a fountain. Nalini's eyes darted hither and thither, in an uncanny likeness of a Kathakali dancer in the throes of a performance.

Raaman sat to her left, puffing gently through his moustache. He wiped the sweat from his bald head with a handkerchief, smearing the chandanam kuri, the sandalwood-paste mark on his forehead, a little. To Nalini's right, occupying a lion's share of the sofa, sat Venu. Babu craned his neck to take a closer look at his future brother-in-law's copious moustache, his chunky neck, the prosperous tyre around his middle and the bulging muscles in his arms and legs.

'What a body! And handsome too!' Ponamma marvelled and Bindu, standing in the shadows just outside the living room, blushed furiously.

'Ssshhh!' said Babu, for he was straining to hear the conversation. Ponamma clipped him on the back of the head for his impudence, but subsided. Kannan and Sundarikutty were carrying on parallel dialogues with Raaman and Nalini respectively, while Venu sat staring into the middle distance. Snatches of conversation drifted up to them.

'Yes, full desert, very hot, very dry, but everything is air-conditioned, the houses, the cars, so no problem,' said Kannan to Raaman.

'Such a handsome boy, chechi, looks just like you,' Sundarikutty was saying as Nalini simpered.

Omanakutty, the troublemaker, was revealing in the veranda, 'Five-six proposals came and went. What to do? Poor thing, even Bindu's mother got married very late.'

'Very obedient girl, chechi. Does only as I say,' Sundarikutty was telling Nalini, who was still doing her Kathakali performance. 'God-fearing, quiet, homely.'

‘We are simple people, no needs. All we want is to see our three sons happy,’ Raaman said to Kannan. ‘Then we can die in peace.’ Kannan made appropriate clucking noises at the inauspicious mention of death.

‘Got admission for nursing college, but Bindu didn’t want to leave her parents – transferable job, you know,’ Sundarikutty was continuing her eulogy. ‘She is very home-loving girl. So that is why she took job in garment factory. Close by, overtime, lunch-breakfast, two-times-tea, everything.’

‘Yes, Babu will go into eighth next year, very good student,’ said Kannan. ‘Yes, he is fifteen now, one-two years fail, but you know, very good student. Playful, careless at exams sometimes.’

‘Bindu is very, very, very good at stitching. Also at cooking. You will see,’ said Sundarikutty.

This was the cue Bindu had been waiting for. She floated into the living room, bearing a tray of stainless steel tumblers of tea before her. She smiled shyly but kept her eyes downcast as she had been instructed, so she couldn’t help but notice the dry scab on her future mother-in-law’s left ankle and the flaky, broken skin on her prospective father-in-law’s heels. And then, despite herself, her eyes wandered to the neatly clipped toenails sticking out of scrupulously clean black sandals, the curling bushes of hair on a thick fair leg, the gold-tipped edge of a crisp white mundu . . . and Bindu fell in love.

. . . For the seventh time. For that was how many proposals Bindu had received thus far, and like the dutiful daughter that she was, she had assiduously fallen in love with each prospective groom, including a bald-headed autorickshaw driver. When each proposal had fallen through for some reason or the other – the autorickshaw driver turned out to be already keeping a mistress – she had just as diligently fallen out of love.

But this, she realized, was the real thing. The tea tumblers rattled as her hands trembled. She hurried forward and decanted the tumblers on to the small table which had been pulled from the corner and sat in the middle of the hall within reach of the guests. Now quite red, she turned and flew back into the kitchen. Ignoring Babu’s buck-toothed smirk in the corridor, she gathered the plates of banana halva, neyappams, laddu, murukku, mixture, small yellow bananas, jackfruit payasam and the dates that Kannan had brought from Koovait and, taking a deep breath, returned to the hall to lay them all on the table. (An identical set of goodies was being served to the peripheral party on the veranda by Kannan’s sisters-in-law Omanakutty and Karthi.)

‘Please have,’ said Bindu in a small voice and backed away as though she was leaving a temple without turning her back on the deity.

‘All made by Bindu,’ Sundarikutty lied and Bindu, now having reversed herself to the door, assumed a look of humble efficiency.

Ponamma snorted, and Babu shushed her again.

Nalini looked appreciatively at her future daughter-in-law. She was no beauty of course – what could you expect with a mother who looked like that? – but obviously a well-brought-up, obedient girl. And well turned out too. The orange sari – at least one thousand rupees, with all that zari on the border. The gold chain that hung down to her waist – ten pavans minimum. Along with the bangles, the payals, the earrings – twenty pavans on her person, Nalini reckoned. And Sundarikutty had mentioned an oddiyanam in the wedding trousseau as well – that would be, what, another twenty pavans?

Nalini felt her reservations melting away like the three teaspoons of sugar she was stirring into her tea. Her eyes met her husband’s and she bobbed her head sideways in a gesture of acquiescence. Raaman, who considered himself something of a master of body language, took it upon himself to give voice to her unspoken thought.

‘Does she dance?’ he asked, and as he uttered the words, he frowned in confusion. Why did Nalini want to know that?

‘Oh! Like Mohini!’ Sundarikutty replied, hoping that he would not ask for a performance.

But Raaman had just caught Nalini’s puzzled glare. ‘Okay, okay,’ he said hastily. ‘Baby, is there something you want to ask?’

Baby, all of twenty-three, was the liberally padded hulk by his side, also known as Venu – the wearer of the black sandals, the owner of the curling leg hair. Being the youngest son, he had been stuck with the pet name well into adulthood and despite repeated warnings to his family to desist from calling him Baby in public, they tended to slip up from time to time. Raaman, fully expecting an irritable tirade, clapped his hand to his mouth belatedly.

But Baby was preoccupied. After demolishing a slab of banana halva, half a dozen neyappams, four laddus (gulped down whole), a large fistful of mixture, two bananas (for he wasn’t really fond of bananas) and a stack of murukkus, he was immersed quite deeply in the jackfruit payasam. And it was a payasam most worthy of self-immersion – exuding steamy sighs fresh with the fragrance of jackfruit, voluptuous with jaggery, anointed with a generous garnish of fried coconut.

‘Venu?’ tried Raaman.

But Venu was in the throes of passion.

‘Venu!’

‘Shluuurm?’ Venu lifted his head from the bowl mid-swirl.

‘Do you have anything to ask?’

Venu wiped away a morsel of coconut that had got lodged in his moustache, burped gently and appeared to consider the question with the gravitas befitting a soon-to-be head constable. But the truth was that Venu didn’t really have to consider; like Chandran and Indran before him, he was getting restless. At first he had been happy to hand over his salary (and ‘fringe benefits’) to Nalini, imagining that she would manage it with the care and frugality that she displayed when it came to Raaman’s earnings. But as months rolled into years, and the figures in his passbook at Ambalakunnu Co-operative Bank remained unmoving at a meagre sum while Nalini’s saris got heavier and bangles became thicker, a seed of discontent had been sown in Venu’s mind. When he had tried to bring up the topic of prudence and economy with Nalini she had looked at him tearfully. ‘All these years I’ve slaved for three sons and this is the thanks I get? First Chandran and Indran, now you? What, you think I’m eating up your money with chutney and sambar? Hah, just try to run a house on what you give me. If it wasn’t for your father’s generosity, I would be bankrupt.’ Being a good son, Venu had lapsed into disbelieving silence but he ground his teeth every time he had to ask Nalini for a handout from what was, after all, his own money; it was usually accompanied by an inquisition. ‘What do you need it for? Not for that slut across the road I hope? Have you taken up drinking? Can’t you stop smoking those beedis?’

Now, in what was nothing short of a miracle, just when he was expecting a promotion and a raise, his parents were actually giving him sanction to get married, a full ten years before Indran and eight years before Chandran had been allowed to wed. Of course, there was always the danger that they could change their minds. So when Raaman put the question to him, Venu considered it for an entire two and a half minutes. Then, looking past Sundarikutty and Kannan to Bindu in the doorway, he asked, ‘By when can we get married?’

A collective gasp rent the air. It was as though Yesudas had burst into song. Bindu unlocked her gaze from the floor and for the first time looked up at her husband-to-be. Her eyes travelled up quite wantonly over the powerful legs,

their muscles barely veiled by the white mundu, flitted shyly over the outline of the green briefs that showed through the thin cloth, lingered over the wide chest and broad shoulders and came to rest on a face, she later told the girls in her garment factory, as round as a full moon and just as radiant, and crowned by a mop of hair as thick as a jungle.

Their eyes met and Venu smiled encouragingly. Bindu reddened like coconut roasting in a pan. They were quite oblivious to the hubbub around them – until Sundarikutty rushed up to Venu and planted on his forehead one of the kisses she was famous for in all of Kuttipuram – part deep breath, part slurp. ‘Oh monay, son, we are so happy! Don’t worry, we will arrange everything as fast as possible.’

Venu wiped his brow.

Kannan nodded vigorously. ‘As soon as possible, as soon as possible.’ Just six months ago Kannan had flown down to India expecting the wedding with the autorickshaw driver to be fixed. That, of course, had been a wasted trip. This time around he had ensured that Sundarikutty had verified the credentials, the character, the finances, even the medical history of not just Venu, but the entire Raaman clan, before he had approached his boss for another six weeks’ vacation, this time as an advance on future leave. Keller had not been pleased but Kannan had wheedled long, promising that he would forgo leave not just the following year but for five years after that as well if Keller so wished. Keller had caved in finally, but there would be no question of an extension.

‘Wait a minute!’ cried Nalini. Things were moving too fast for her liking. It was true that Sundarikutty, along with Kannan’s brothers, had met the Raaman clan a few weeks ago and a union had been agreed to in principle by both parties. But Venu and Bindu had just met! There was a protocol to these things, a dancing-around, a beating-around-the-bush, that was imperative for the pride of both families to be preserved. What was that stupid boy doing? ‘There are things to be discussed.’

‘Tchheh!’ spat Venu, years of resentment rising to the surface like oil in a curry. ‘What to discuss, woman? Just make the arrangements.’

‘Yes, monay, yes monay,’ Nalini pacified, cowed down by this unexpected show of filial strength. ‘But there are things to be checked, things to be decided.’

‘Decide everything now,’ Venu commanded. Bindu looked at him adoringly.



‘Don’t worry, chechi,’ Sundarikutty chimed in. ‘We will arrange a grand wedding – three payasams and ice cream too,’ she added, looking at Venu. ‘Sofa, bed, two cupboards, vessels for the boy-girl’s house – and clothes, cash and motorcycle for Venu also.’

‘He must have a gold chain also,’ Nalini said. ‘Five pavans.’

Raaman flinched; he was a man of suggestions and insinuations, but it was clear that Nalini believed in a more straightforward approach. Glossing over his wife’s tactlessness, he said softly, ‘It is part of our customs, you know. Not that we need anything; what do we need more gold for? But traditions must be followed.’

Sundarikutty looked at Kannan. He nodded. Keller had generously promised to finance half of the cost of the wedding, provided they didn’t pay a dowry; but then what

Keller didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him. And two or three pavans could easily be adulterated to seem like five pavans. ‘Okay.’

‘And the girl must have at least fifty pavans total,’ declared Nalini.

‘You know, for her security,’ Raaman said hastily. ‘Gold is an appreciating asset. It will be in her interest.’

‘Yes, her interest,’ agreed Nalini.

‘Oh, no problem, she will have more than that,’ Sundarikutty said smugly. Kannan had been smuggling in gold in jars of Nivea face cream for many years now. This was later converted into jewellery by the goldsmith who lived east of the Mahadeva temple. She had built up quite a stash for Bindu.

‘We will have at least three hundred guests,’ Raaman said in an apologetic tone. ‘You know, I will need to call people from my shop, the government suppliers and all. So many well-wishers.’

Sundarikutty blanched. ‘Oh, no problem, we will arrange,’ she said hesitantly. Kannan and she exchanged worried looks. Three hundred! They had budgeted only for a *total* of three hundred from both sides! Now there would be close to five hundred! Would Keller agree to the inflated costs? Perhaps they would have to reduce one sweet and scale down some of the decorations.

‘And we want an engagement ceremony to be fixed in one month’s time,’ Nalini said, clutching at straws. ‘Gold rings to be provided for Venu and Bindu, and lunch for close family from our side – only one hundred people. Customs,’ she added clumsily.

Kannan nodded mournfully.

‘We can fix the engagement within three weeks or so,’ said Sundarikutty, summoning up as firm a tone as she could. ‘But the wedding will have to be soon after. My husband must get back to Koovait after that.’

Raaman and Nalini exchanged sidelong glances. There seemed to be nothing more to say. If Kannan could meet all their demands in the space of a month, it was clear that Venu was in good hands. And Venu was looking impatiently at them.

Raaman’s face collapsed into an ingratiating smile. ‘Of course, of course. As you wish. O Mahadeva, O Sabarimala Ayyappa, may this couple always be happy!’

Venu picked his teeth contentedly.

## Five

There was a feeling of timelessness about Devaki Nilayam; an aura of immutability. Nothing ever seemed to change. The fishmonger, the vegetable vendor, the flower seller made their appearance at the kitchen door on exactly the same days, at exactly the same time as they always did. The planter's chair that Apoopan sat in to solve *The Hindu* crossword before he left for work stood at its customary forty-five-degree angle from the wall. One Mangalore tile was still missing from the roof over the corridor to the kitchen, despite the fact that a bucket had to be placed under it to catch noisy raindrops every monsoon. The linen cupboard was as ever stocked with handloom bedspreads, cotton bedsheets and tablecloths from Madhavan Textiles, for the family's use as well as for gifting to unexpected visitors. Even the swing that Unnikuttan had fashioned for them with a plank of wood and some coir rope a few years ago was still strung up from the mango tree in the garden.

And yet, something had changed.

Or some people.

Namely, Divya and Mini.

There they were, sitting in a corner of the garage where Apoopan and Keshavan Maama parked their cars. As though Geetha couldn't see them! Heads bent over that stupid book as usual. Every time Geetha came into the room they snapped it shut and hid it behind their backs in the most obvious way. Like she was interested anyway! It was probably one of those *Star Romance* comics which Mini borrowed in stacks from the library behind Colaba Market but always kept out of Geetha's reach. Once, out of curiosity, Geetha had sneaked up on Mini when she was reading one and pulled it out of her grasp. As she had dodged Mini's slaps and flipped through it, she had been disgusted: it had been full of the most obscene drawings of men and women doing the most revolting things – that one picture of the couple in an open-mouthed kiss – yuck! What were they doing, *chewing* each other's faces off? She had flung the comic back at Mini as though they were playing an exceptionally lively round of Passing the Parcel, and had scampered off, mortified.

So they could keep their dumb *Star Romance* to themselves. But they never wanted to do any of the fun things with her any more either: feed the

chickens in the coop in the backyard, play Charles and Di Getting Married (with a towel over the head substituting for Di's twenty-five-foot veil), string jasmine garlands for Ammooma's bun with Valsamma the cleaning lady, water the garden with Thankappan, the gardener-handyman. They always found a reason to decline.

'No, we're tired, you go.'

'Nah, it's too hot, we'll get all dark in the sun.'

'Chickens? Yuck! You know you'll be eating them soon?' Geetha had been horrified, until she realized they were kidding; the fat white hens were reared only for their eggs.

It had been like this for days now. Geetha had tried to put on a game face, but it was no fun playing hopscotch by yourself and there were only so many hands of Patience you could play before your patience ran out. And half the fun of Charles and Di Getting Married was fighting over who got to play Di with the towel on the head.

Sometimes she suspected that Divya and Mini were a little envious of her – Mini had clearly pursed her lips when Apoopan had marvelled at how tall Geetha had become – in fact, Lalitha Valliamma had reckoned that she would outgrow both Mini and Divya soon. Or could it be because she had beaten them at Bluff? On previous holidays, she had always lost; but that had been different, she had not perfected her poker face at the time. She used to be as transparent as a newly-washed window, squirming and blushing and covering up her cards elaborately every time she tried to bluff – not surprisingly, her hand was as easy to read as though the cards were face-up, and she used to be caught every time she bluffed. But she had been covertly plotting and secretly practising a deadpan expression before the mirror for months now, and this time, she had been ready. She had deviously used her previous naivety to her advantage; pretending to be shifty and making a great production about covering her cards whenever she played straight, and playing blithely when she bluffed. They had all fallen for it, Vikki and Raju included, and before they knew it, she had won the game.

'Bluffmaster!' Vikki had cried admiringly. 'Our little Geetha has become an expert!' Geetha had simpered with pleasure, but Mini and Divya's lack of enthusiasm had not passed her notice. After that, every time she had suggested a game, they had invented some excuse to refuse.

All they wanted to do was sit and talk about the fun Mini was going to have in college; Mini had just finished her SSC board exams and, provided she

passed, would be making the all-important transition from school to junior college when they got back to Bombay. 'Out with the uniforms!' she exulted. 'No more physics, no more chem!' she rejoiced, for she had decided to take up literature. Although Divya was the same age, she wouldn't go to college till she finished the twelfth. 'Stupid Delhi University!' she cursed. 'At least you're in a co-ed school,' Mini consoled and Divya agreed grudgingly. Then they looked at Geetha with exaggerated pity and Mini taunted, 'Poor Geetha, so many more years to go,' but Geetha just shrugged her shoulders to indicate an indifference she didn't feel. In the nights, when they were all lying side by side under the mosquito net on the four-poster bed in the Sewing Room (which retained its name although Ammooma's battered old Singer machine had long ceased to work) and they thought she had drifted off to sleep, they would be whispering about whether Mini would get ragged in college and how many classes she would be able to bunk. 'When I finish the twelfth, I'm going to join St Stephen's,' Divya asserted often, and while Divya's grades did nothing to inspire confidence that she would get admission into the exalted Stephen's, she perhaps thought that it was some kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. To hear her talk one would be impressed with Divya's devotion to higher learning and quality education, but the real reason she wanted to join Stephen's was because Sunil was applying there. Sunil was Divya and Vikki's seventeen-year-old neighbour and Divya was always talking about him with a coy smile; Sunil said this, and Sunil did that. Divya had shown them a picture of him once – a colourless lanky boy standing with his arm around Vikki – and although Mini made appreciative 'Ooh, nice, ya!' comments, Geetha couldn't see what the fuss was all about.

Even when Vikki and Raju had discovered a spider as big as a saucer just outside the upstairs bathroom – the one with the Indian-style toilet that Geetha tried her best to avoid using – Mini and Divya had refused to come upstairs to see. This was definitely unusual; spider-killing was a not-to-be-missed drama and always one of the highlights of their holidays in Ambalakunnu. It was considered inauspicious to squash spiders with the heel of your chappal as you would cockroaches – Ammooma's scientific reason for this was that the poison in the spider's stomach would splatter all around the room, and if, God forbid, some fell in your eye, you would be blinded for life. Despite universal scepticism about her theory no one wanted to risk being living proof of her premise, so the spider was usually doused with soapy water which made it wriggle and writhe spectacularly until it died.

When at dinner Vikki had graphically compared an idiappam swimming in his egg curry to the death throes of the slain spider, Divya had acted all faint and ladylike and complained to Lalitha Valliamma, who had curtly instructed Vikki to knock it off. This from Divya, the person who routinely forgot to brush her teeth and often had to be hauled to the bathroom in the middle of the day! Vikki had shot a loathing look in Divya's direction which had been met with a smug smile.

So it was with little hope that Geetha approached the girls in the garage. Apoopan had agreed to tell them a ghost story – real-life, one-hundred-percent-true, he swore as always – and Geetha had been sent to fetch Mini and Divya. As usual Mini shut the book as she drew up to them but to Geetha's delight, they got up eagerly when she told them about the ghost story. It was one of those summer-time rituals, much like idli-eating competitions and discordant games of Antakshari. Apoopan knew how to spin the longest, tallest yarns, about apparitions encountered on deserted streets, mysterious sounds reported from haunted houses, corpses that came alive. They laughed about it, and yet, they couldn't repress a shiver when Apoopan told them, in all seriousness, how even today he carried an iron rod in his car to ward off evil spirits (apparently this was one of the many practical functions of iron, hitherto unknown to writers of chemistry books) or urged them not to walk by the jail on a deserted afternoon if they didn't want to encounter the tortured spirits of hanged men.

The sun had set, the birds had finished their evening symphony and left the stage, and the rest of the adults had fled indoors, away from the man-eating mosquitoes. Apoopan had changed into his regulation home wear of sleeveless banian and mundu, slathered pungent yellow Odomos on his hands and legs as though it was Oil of Olay and settled himself in one of the wicker garden chairs, a brandy and salted peanuts at hand. Usually he favoured whisky, and allowed all the grandchildren to take a sip, but today, suspecting a cold, he had opted for a therapeutic brandy and had liberally laced it with a pre-emptive Crocin and two tablets of Vitamin C, so they had to be content with only the story.

'This happened to me a long time ago,' he started in all seriousness. 'Your grandmother was pregnant with your Sukumaran Maama and wanted to be left alone one night.' He paused to take a sip of the brandy. 'So I went up to the room on the terrace.'

The cousins tittered nervously. The Room on the Terrace was an eerie place

that had started out as a storage room covered by a tin sheet and, at some point, had transformed into an extra bedroom. Keshavan Maama had used it when he was in college – ‘so that I could smoke cigarettes without your Ammooma catching me,’ he confided to the kids. Keshavan Maama claimed that he had often heard footsteps outside the room during the nights. Ammooma had explained it away saying it was the civets that prowled around in the night, sometimes leaving sunrise offerings of urine outside the door and once, when Keshavan Maama had left the door open, even on the bed. But Keshavan Maama insisted that they were not animal footsteps, and anything left outside the Room on the Terrace – towels left on the clothesline to dry overnight, for instance, or slippers forgotten outside the door – would disappear mysteriously by the morning. ‘Probably just thieves,’ Ammooma said, as though that was a more comforting thought.

The Room on the Terrace was strictly out of bounds to the cousins, ostensibly because the wooden banister and steps on the staircase leading up to the room was in poor condition and liable to crumble at any moment, taking any children leaning on them plunging to an untimely conclusion. But the cousins were convinced it was actually because of the mysterious night-time goings-on on the terrace which Ammooma refused to confirm. Once Vikki and Raju had ventured as far as the top of the stairs but had been so spooked by their own imaginations that they had come darting down in a hurry, three stairs at a time.

‘Anyway, I was just falling asleep,’ Apooan continued. ‘When I thought I heard somebody hissing and calling my name. “Psssst. Madhava!” The light had come on – I swear I had switched it off just before dozing off. I looked up with bleary eyes and found a child at the foot of my bed. He looked vaguely familiar but I couldn’t place him. I asked him, “Ay, kutty, who are you and how did you get up here?” but he just looked back at me. “How do you know my name – do I know you?” I asked, but he just smiled. “What’s your name?” I tried, but the boy remained silent. I hoisted myself up on one elbow, annoyed now. The boy didn’t move. He was wearing long baggy shorts, quite unfashionable for the time – and a necklace. You know that long, green nagapadam your Ammooma has? Something like that. Who wore necklaces these days, I thought. It’s true that boys used to wear them in the olden days, but not anymore! I thought: who is this pompous little thing? Does he think he’s the Maharaja’s son? Even though I was irritated, I didn’t

speaking my mind – I didn't want to be rude. "Eda, who stole your tongue?" I barked instead. The boy's face fell. He backed away, and then, I promise you, he just *melted* into the door.'

Geetha felt a cold finger of fear running down her spine. Mini and Divya let out involuntary squeals. The boys somehow mustered up disbelieving looks.

'Did you see him ever again?' Geetha asked.

'Once, running across the terrace – I called out to him but he just disappeared behind the water tank, and no matter how much I searched, I could never find him.'

'Oh my God! I wonder who he was!' said Divya.

'Ah, that is the rest of the story,' said Apoopan, taking another long, leisurely sip from his glass. 'One day I was looking through your Ammooma's albums and suddenly I shouted, "That's him! That's the boy I saw." Ammooma came over to have a look and she turned white. "That's Rajan – my brother who died when he was a child!" she said. I nearly fainted! "Poor boy, got a bout of tuberculosis *that turned him deaf and dumb* – and then, *fell from the roof* while playing one day.'" Apoopan paused for theatrical effect. 'Never napped on the roof after that!'

After Apoopan had retired indoors, they sat on the steps of the front porch and debated whether the story was true or not. 'I've always felt a presence,' Divya said, and Raju and Vikki scoffed, but not very convincingly.

Geetha began to think that Mini and Divya were maybe coming around, but at dinner they were back to their aloof ways, whispering to each other when she went to take a second helping of pepper chicken and clamming up when she returned to their customary mealtime perch on the steps of the dining room veranda, as far away from the tubelight as they could get so that moths and other insects would not fall into their food. To make matters worse, they were whispering to Suji, who was staying over at Devaki Nilayam that night. Now, Geetha had no grouse against Suji, who was only half as irritating as her whining sister Rema. In fact, Suji had been quite fascinating as an infant when she would put everything in her mouth, including ants, ladybugs and in one unforgettable incident, urged on by Mini and Divya, a grasshopper. But now Suji was just a boring little toddler with humdrum dietary requirements, and the fact that Mini and Divya seemed to trust her with their confidences, and not Geetha, was a little galling.

After dinner Geetha stalked off in a sulk, and seeing that Ambika was already upstairs, went to change into her nightie. She never ventured upstairs



alone, not even in daylight, for the rooms had a breathing, living quality about them that unnerved her thoroughly, with doors that creaked even at rest and windows that slammed shut of their own volition. Washed and changed, she came down to say her goodnights, and found a ruckus around the dining table. Everybody seemed to be rolling around laughing – only Vikki and Raju seeming subdued.

Forgetting her sulk, she tugged at Mini's arm to find out what had transpired, and the story was related in bits and pieces by Mini and Divya. Apparently, as Vikki had gone to lock up the gate at the end of the driveway in the dark, Mini and Divya had hidden in the shadows of the front porch, and as Vikki passed by, Divya had called out, 'Psst!'

If the upstairs was eerie, the garden at night was positively spooky, with unexplained rustling from the bushes and sinister shadows that seemed to stalk you as you walked by. Locking the gate at night was considered as something of a manly rite of passage, and while Raju and Vikki took turns to do it, the girls always suspected that they were scared out of their wits. To their delight, Vikki, still skittish after Apoopan's story, had started and whirled around. Seeing nothing, he had hurried on to the gate. 'Vikkkkiii!!' hissed Divya and Mini in a stage whisper, and Vikki had swung around again.

'Stop it Divya,' he'd quavered. 'I know it's you!' Nevertheless, the padlock had rattled as he'd struggled to bolt the gate double-quick.

'Psssssst,' Divya had hissed again. When Vikki had finished locking the gate he had started back in a half-run up the driveway. Suddenly the lights in the veranda had blazed to life. At the same time Suji had toddled forward. 'With her short hair she looked exactly like a boy!' Mini giggled. Mini and Divya had dressed her up in Mini's night shorts, which hung loosely to Suji's knees, and had draped Ammooma's nagapadam necklace – Ammooma was clearly in on the joke – around Suji's neck.

'AAAAHHHH!' Vikki had shrieked. 'AAAAHHHH . . . aaahhhh.'

'I did not shriek!' Vikki protested. 'She's just exaggerating!'

'You should have seen his face when he saw it was only Suji!' Divya hooted, and Lalitha Valliamma, who had just recovered from a stitch in her side, launched into a fresh gale of laughter.

'They got you!' Keshavan Maama jeered.

'Yah, yah,' Vikki said sheepishly, suddenly very interested in a spot on the floor.

Geetha was livid that she had missed all the fun. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ she asked the girls querulously.

‘Oh you’d have spilled the beans,’ Mini said.

That was not fair! And not true!

The boys tried to settle the score of course. The next day Raju made a very realistic lizard out of aata – with mustard seeds for eyes – and placed it on the dining table next to the sambar, hoping to startle Mini at breakfast. But Keshavan Maama unfortunately beat Mini to the sambar. Startled out of his wits, he jumped up, knocking over the chair and upsetting the table, making hot sambar spill all over Apoopan. Ambika was furious and bellowed at Raju for a good half-hour.

Then Vikki and Raju challenged the girls to an impromptu eerkillu fight, convinced that in their long-sleeved kurtas and pyjamas they were far better equipped to deal with the stings from the eerkillu bristles than the bare-limbed girls. But completely ignoring the unwritten rules of the game, Divya launched a fierce attack using the sole of her hawai chappal as a supplementary weapon. Vikki and Raju were cornered into the bathroom which had the ancient bathtub that was never used to bathe in but served as a receptacle where Ammooma stored all the soaps and other toiletries. Desperate to escape, the boys filled two buckets of water and flung it out at the girls, in the process also drenching Valsamma, who was passing by. Even in the normal course, Valsamma’s customary attire of tight blouse and mundu, with only a tiny towel thrown over her shoulder to cover her bulging stomach and drooping breasts, was by no means modest; Raju had avoided the kitchen for many years out of the sheer dread of coming face to face with her. But now she was positively Mandakini-like. To make things worse she marched up to Ammooma just as she was entertaining a group of elderly women from the temple trust and protested stridently, throwing in a threat of immediate resignation for effect. Ammooma had to give Valsamma ten rupees and an old sari to mollify her. That was it – Ammooma would tolerate many things, but not the possible loss of her domestic help or incurring an unnecessary expenditure. Vikki and Raju were taken to task and now they were forbidden to throw so much as a paper plane at the girls.

‘Just you wait,’ Raju threatened Mini.

‘Get lost, STAYFREE!’ she hissed. It was a cheap shot – it had been many years since Ambika had sent an unsuspecting Raju to buy sanitary napkins from Sahakari Bhandar telling him that it was cotton for household use – but

it served its purpose. Raju slunk off, face aflame.

To say that relations were getting strained would be an understatement. Everything was changing, Geetha thought helplessly.

## Six

Babu squeezed between his mother and father; they were sitting with Bindu on the cement floor of their front veranda cum family room/dining room/visitor's area, among a sheaf of papers and four newly-cut tender coconuts. The task for the morning was editing their guest list for the wedding; Ration Raaman's lengthy list had arrived the day before and it was clear that some industrial-scale pruning would have to be done on the bride's list to keep the overall numbers down. It was a tricky operation; they could not risk offending anyone, because everyone knew that the curses of rejected wedding guests were notoriously potent, causing all kinds of evil to befall the couple. Why, when old Velayudhan had not been called for the wedding of his niece, the groom had died just two years later after mysteriously getting caught in a sugarcane press. And when Nagamma the flower seller was wondering why her daughter was still childless even when the girl's husband was reputed to have sired several illegitimate children, the reason was traced back to the exclusion from the wedding of the girl's school principal, an erudite but vengeful man.

Babu had hung around under the pretext of helping but actually to ensure that his friends Jolly and Satyen would not be lopped off when he wasn't looking; Sundarikutty was not their biggest fan, rightly considering them to be worthless wastrels. In addition, Satyen's father was Tilakan, the truck driver who had initially taught Kannan how to drive, and Sundarikutty had always held him personally responsible for Kannan failing to pass the driving test. She still seethed at the thought of how she had had to shell out an extra couple of hundred rupees to ensure that Kannan got the licence. As for Jolly's mother, she was one of Sundarikutty's many foes, for some distant infraction that both parties had forgotten but not forgiven. So Babu knew he would have to battle for his friends' inclusion. Nevertheless, a few minutes into the operation, Babu was beginning to wish he had not stayed back; he could make out from the way his father was licking his lips worriedly that he was about to launch into one of his sermons.

Now Babu was usually happy when his father came home from Koovait. At the very least it meant a new watch that he could show off to his friends. This time Kannan had outdone himself; not only had he bought Babu a water-resistant watch with an in-built calculator but also a football-type satiny T-

shirt and a set of sunglasses that glinted rainbow colours in the sun. And finally, after years of cajoling, Babu had been granted the braces for his teeth that he so yearned for. He ran his tongue around the ridges lovingly. Sundarikutty had always considered braces a wasteful expenditure on a boy, although Bindu had had her teeth straightened a few years ago in anticipation of her coming of age, but Kannan had overruled Sundarikutty this time and Babu had got his braces although Sundarikutty continued to snipe about the unnecessary cost.

That was another thing: Kannan's arrival also brought a relative respite from his mother, who was the champion nag of the family. Of course, chivvied along by Sundarikutty, his father sometimes reviewed his school reports of the previous year with a shake of the head and questioned him about his poor marks or his indifferent attendance, but Babu was adept at dodging these inconveniences, stalling valiantly when the subject was broached and vanishing as soon he could find an opportunity. This year Babu hadn't expected to be pestered; he had passed all his exams and with Bindu's impending nuptials, surely his father would be too distracted to take much notice of him? But as luck would have it, the prospective groom had only made matters worse. Venu With The Plum Job was the new benchmark, and Babu had not been allowed to forget it.

And now his parents had him cornered; a captive audience if ever there was one. Babu looked around desperately for an escape route but it was of no use; Bindu was blocking the door to the house, and his mother the steps to the compound. It would be impossible to make a discreet exit.

Kannan licked his lips one last time and began, 'Babu, monay, it is good that you managed to pass the seventh standard . . .'

'Finally!' Sundarikutty interrupted, slashing half a page worth of out-of-town guests; they could always pretend that the invitations had got lost in the mail.

' . . . but next year is only going to be tougher,' Kannan completed. 'You will have to apply yourself much more, study harder. And why do your reports show such bad attendance? Have you been cutting classes?'

It was true that Babu had spent a disproportionate amount of time outside class, in cinema halls or smoking in the alley behind school, or wandering up to the missionary college to ogle the girls, but Babu merely murmured noncommittally.

'Your mother says that you're loitering around with your friends always?'

‘Useless oafs!’ Sundarikutty cleared her throat noisily and spat impressively past the steps into the compound. The glob of spittle sat glimmering in the sun like some discarded trinket. ‘It is after you met that loafer Satyen that you have become like this – bunking classes and roaming all over town, burning up all your money on beedis. Ah, don’t think I don’t know, how much ever you may deny it. But if I ever catch you . . . And that Jolly – just because his mother works as a cleaner in the missionary library, he thinks he’s Ezhuthachan himself!’

Babu bit back a retort. His mother could scoff all she wanted but the only reason he had passed this year, when he had failed twice before, was because Jolly had allowed him to copy from his paper. This would not be a good time to bring that up, however, because Sundarikutty was at full-rant. So he took a swig from his tender coconut instead, and watched his mother dispassionately as she raved. She had obviously not exhausted her reserves of spit; more spewed from her mouth, at intervals, like steam escaping from under the weight of a pressure cooker. Her unruly eyebrows had curled into reclining S-shapes over her eyes, and her mouth was drawn back to expose the buck teeth to the fullest extent. He often wondered why his father had married her – stunted, emaciated and with an insipid moustache that drooped defeatedly over his upper lip, Kannan was no Mammootty, but surely he could have done better?

‘What are you gaping at?’ Sundarikutty snapped and Babu lowered his gaze hastily.

‘I know you may think we are nagging you,’ Kannan interrupted, in a more conciliatory tone, ‘but later on you’ll thank me for it.’

‘Yes, I’m sure I will,’ Babu muttered, almost to himself.

‘Ay! What are you mumbling?’ Sundarikutty asked sharply. ‘Acting smart, huh? I’ll give you one! Don’t think you’re too big to get a good thrashing!’

Thrashing. Now *that* was something his mother could have done with, Babu thought wistfully – but Kannan was clearly not up to the task. Not like Satyen’s father, whose wife had an intimate acquaintance with the back of her husband’s hand.

‘Can’t you just leave me alone for two months, Amma?’ Babu groaned finally, in his best long-suffering tone. ‘It’s the summer holidays, isn’t it? I passed the seventh, didn’t I?’

‘Ohh-ho! Big achievement, passing the seventh standard on the third attempt! Do you want me to call the newspaper and ask them to publish this

great feat? Maybe they will garland you and give you an award!’

At that, Bindu giggled into a cupped palm.

Babu ground his teeth. His natural hostility towards Bindu had lessened somewhat after a few prospective matches for her had been scuppered, causing her to creep listlessly around the house like a cockroach just sprayed with FINIT. But ever since her marriage to Venu had been fixed, she had become insufferable. It was as though she was marrying the crown prince of Travancore – Raja Venu Varma! Babu wished she was five years younger and he could give her a good pinch like he used to, the kind that drew blood.

‘The point is this, Babu,’ Kannan said, reinstating an aunt of his that Sundarikutty had expunged, ‘if you ever want to make something of yourself you need to pull yourself up – you will have to study hard, get much better marks from now on. And no more bunking classes.’

Studying hard was the last thing Babu wanted to do, so he pretended to be immersed in the wedding list. What his parents didn’t understand was that he was a simple boy with little drive and no concrete ambitions, apart from a vague notion that he could become a cinema-hall usher so that he could watch all the latest blockbusters free for the rest of his life. Considering that Ambalakunnu had only one dingy theatre, whose underpaid ushers were all relatives of the owner, it seemed unlikely that he would be able to achieve even this modest goal.

As Babu saw it, educating him was a waste of his parent’s money. He could barely concentrate for a few minutes in any class, before he got distracted by the louse creeping down from the plait of the girl who sat in front of him, or the smell of bondas frying in some nearby house, or the graphic picture that Satyen was etching into the desk with a compass. He realized that he would have to start earning a living at some point, to support the beautiful wife and children he would no doubt have, but everyone knew that you really didn’t need to know anything about the digestive system of a cow or the area of a trapezium to get a job. Why, at this very moment, the missionary school had an ad out for peons, Diwakaran wanted kitchen hands for Krishna Canteen and Mess, and Jolly said his uncle in Trivandrum, a hoarding painter who was responsible for shaping the mammoth breasts and giant bellies of film actresses, was looking for an apprentice without a fear of heights.

But his father, fifth-standard-fail, who was rarely obdurate about anything, was adamant that Babu complete his schooling at the very least. ‘It’s because your grandfather never allowed your father to complete his studies, you

know. Your father just wants you to have the opportunities he never had,' Sundarikutty routinely explained in answer to Babu's whingeing. As though it was any solace! Completing his studies meant another three years of school – with subjects like geometry and physics, just the thought of which made Babu's head spin. Babu cursed his long-dead grandfather.

'Listen monay,' Kannan said now, 'You will understand when you get older. I know you think that you can take some little odd jobs here and there and life will go on smoothly. But I am telling you from bitter experience, there is no respect, no value, no prestige in that.'

Babu spoke up, not without hesitation. It was useless he knew, like pulling at a scab before the wound had healed, but he couldn't control himself. 'But you have no education, and you have respect and value and prestige!'

'Ah but that is now, because I have some money, a house.'

'So see, you don't need education for money!'

'But you need luck, and just because I was lucky, doesn't mean you will be. Now if you have some education, there are so many more opportunities. Look at Venu, could he have become a constable if he had not finished his schooling?'

'Huh, where is he going to get a job like Venu!' Bindu interjected, scratching out the name of a childhood friend. 'You have to pass a physical exam you know, and they have minimum chest measurements and all that. Where will this matchstick pass?'

Babu bristled. 'And what good is a big chest when you have to run after a thief?' he retorted. 'I've heard that fat fiancé of yours needs an oxygen tank every time he has to run a few yards!'

'How dare you! Don't you come running to us when you're unemployed and bankrupt!'

'Ha! As though I . . .'

'Okay, okay, that's enough, you two . . .'

 Kannan intervened. He leaned back on the veranda wall and tipped the last of the water from his tender coconut into his mouth, hanging out his tongue to catch the final few drops. He wiped his jaw. 'It is because you have had an easy life, Babu, that you think you can just fritter away your life like this. You were too young, you probably don't remember how hard times were.'

'How I suffered at that fatso Devaki Nair's house, listening to all her nonsense, breaking my back with all the work,' Sundarikutty moaned. 'Only I know how much we suffered. There was no other option – your father was



making next to no money from plumbing. It is only Lord Mahadeva who has helped him get that job in Koovait.’ Sundarikutty looked up reverentially at the framed photo of the temple deity that stood above the threshold of the house.

‘So Lord Mahadeva will help me too,’ Babu reasoned.

Sundarikutty exploded like a leaking cylinder. ‘Don’t be cheeky – you think no end of yourself these days! You don’t know what opportunities you are getting. We could not study even if we wanted to! All we could ever hope to get was some job that would help us make ends meet. You’ll know when you have no money.’

For a moment, Babu considered quoting Jolly: ‘Man cannot live by bread alone.’ And who had Jolly been quoting? Was it Kamala Das or MT Vasudevan Nair? Babu couldn’t remember, but that was not the point. And although Jolly had been referring to Babu’s undue fondness for the jam buns in George’s bakery, Babu had grasped the larger context.

It was clear however that Sundarikutty would not, and while it would have been entertaining to see her reaction to the comment, Babu held his tongue and merely sighed like a steam train coming to a halt. Luckily, before Sundarikutty could take offence at his impertinent exhalation of breath, there was the telltale creak of the gate opening and the sound of heavy footsteps approaching. Bindu craned her neck to look towards the gate, expecting it to be her grandmother, Ponamma, returning from one of her gossip sessions with the neighbours. But it was Venu, paying an unexpected visit. Bindu rose to her feet all aflutter – she was in a sweaty old nightie and hadn’t even bothered to put on a pair of earrings! As she shot inside like a startled rat to a hole, Sundarikutty scurried to the kitchen to rustle up some snacks fit for a future son-in-law and head constable. Kannan got up to welcome Venu, and Babu saw his opening. He slipped into the house and made a quiet exit through the back door. His father would no doubt soon be complaining to Venu about Babu’s lack of interest in studies, and Babu didn’t feel up to listening to any brotherly advice.

## Seven

**A**fter the Valsamma incident, Vikki and Raju were barely talking to Mini and Divya, but they were affable enough with Geetha, who they considered as an innocent led astray by the Jezebels. They even invited her to hang out with them.

Unfortunately Vikki and Raju were not the most fascinating people to hang out with. They spent practically the whole day just lolling around in the Portrait Room (christened thus because of the lone creepy photo of Ammooma's father that hung there, so lifelike that it seemed to breathe if you looked at it long enough; and as you walked around the room, you could swear that his eyes followed your movements). Occasionally they made forays to the window to monitor the multiple football matches that took place in fits and starts throughout the day in the open ground across the street. When not so occupied, they spent hours just lying around on their stomachs, without exchanging a word; once Geetha had found that they had both fallen asleep mid-conversation. Or then they talked incessantly about cricket, drawing up Fantasy XIs of world players she had to pretend she had heard of and debating heatedly the merits and demerits of their chosen teams. And they wasted entire days playing Book Cricket, which for all they tried to explain it to her, had to be the world's most arcane and tedious game. The only advantage of mingling with them was the opportunity to learn a few swear words, which they let slip despite their efforts to edit themselves in front of Geetha – while they refused to explain the meanings or elaborate, all Geetha had to do was go to Apoopan's room and look the words up in the Oxford dictionary as she had been taught to in school that year. Geetha would have much preferred to hang around with Divya and Mini, but they always seemed otherwise occupied, and not particularly enthusiastic about her presence. They still carried around with them, as though it was their newborn child, the book she had thought was a Star Romance. Except, on closer look, it wasn't a Star Romance, it was leather-bound with gold-edged pages. Once when she had gone into a room unannounced, Divya and Mini had been scribbling furiously in the book and Geetha had caught sight of blank pages and dates. Realization had dawned – it was a diary! Unnikuttan kept one and it was filled with juicy rants about his colleagues and acquaintances: *Bhatia's*

*an ass! Who made him MD anyway? And he can go easy on the ghee – his pants button is near bursting point!*

... and, enigmatically ...

*Ha! I knew it! They were all so enamoured with Dileep – so successful, so handsome, such a good husband. Lalitha is so lucky! Who's the good husband now? Bet Ambika feels more lucky!*

'Is that a diary? Are you writing about the eerkillu fight with Vikki and Raju?' she had asked the girls eagerly.

'Just mind your own business!' Mini had snarled, snapping the diary shut at once. 'Must you be such a leech? Why don't you stop following us around and go play with somebody your own age? Do you think we have nothing better to do than listen to your hundred questions?'

'Ya, go play with Suji and Rema,' Divya had said, taking courage from Mini's rant.

Aggravatingly Geetha had felt tears welling up, as they often did when she was angry or indignant. She wished that a smart retort would spring forth as easily.

'Cry-baby,' Mini had taunted.

Geetha had turned on her heel and walked out of the room with as much dignity as she could muster. Once she was out of sight, the tears had rolled down her cheeks freely. How could they be so mean? Rema and Suji? They were stupid and dumb – and *kids!!* They were the ones that the three of *them* got together and taunted and ignored and left out of games. Why were Divya and Mini doing this to her?

And now Divya and Mini had become even more distant, sometimes just downright cruel, as though punishing her for asking about their diary. Apart from ignoring her completely, three days ago they had told Rema and Suji that Geetha wanted to play hide-and-seek with them and the sisters had come looking for her. Geetha had tried wriggling out of it but Rema had gone complaining to Renjini Ammayi, and Ambika had taken Geetha aside and given her a lecture about the pitfalls of selfishness and the virtues of cousinly cooperation. Geetha had had to spend an entire morning pretending not to have seen Suji crouching obtusely under the sofa and feigning interest in where Rema was. Finally, a bright idea had struck her and she had dispatched the irksome twosome to hide, and then, refusing to seek, she had curled up with a Nancy Drew. When Rema had eventually realized that she had been hiding for far too long, she had come in search of Geetha with a petulant

scowl. Geetha had fibbed that she'd looked for them for an hour and then given up trying. The fact that they had won the game had seemed to mollify Rema and Suji.

But now the sisters expected Geetha to be at their beck and call; thanks to Renjini Ammayi's fond indulgence, they were children who were used to getting their own way most of the time. Yesterday, they had demanded that Geetha play hopscotch with them, and when Suji had tripped and fallen, it had been her turn to go bawling to Renjini Ammayi.

'What is this Geetha?' Renjini Ammayi had scolded, her nose scrunched up in disgust at the sight of blood on her daughter's knee. 'You should know better than to make a small child hop – that too in the sun. Look at her, already tanned. She'll become so dark!' Ambika had given Geetha a sympathetic look but Geetha had just glowered back at her mother – it was all her fault in the first place anyway.

Now there was talk about one of their tedious skits with Geetha in a supporting role. How was she going to get out of this? Geetha traced a gloomy circle in the sandy patch behind the hibiscus bush, using her heel and big toe as points of a compass.

'Why the long face, G?' asked Vikki, suddenly materializing from the other side of the garden and making her jump. He had been observing her from afar. 'What's up?'

Geetha looked at Vikki mournfully. Even the fact that he was wearing a multicoloured, vertically striped shirt that resembled the Doordarshan screen before the transmission began – Vikki had a flamboyant sense of style, or was possibly colour-blind – could not cheer her up.

Raju, who had been practising spin bowling against the compound wall on the far side, also drew up next to Vikki and was now looking at her closely. 'What happened, Geetha?' he asked.

'Oh nothing,' Geetha said tiredly.

'Where are the other two musketeers?' asked Vikki, because between daytime naps and Book Cricket he had somehow noticed Geetha dawdling around listlessly on her own like a lost puppy.

Geetha shrugged irritably. 'I don't know. Probably writing in their stupid diary.'

Vikki's ears pricked up like Goldie's did when he heard Apoopan's car approaching from a distance. He stole a quick meaningful glance at Raju. 'Diary?' he asked, keeping his tone as casual as he could. 'What diary?'

‘Oh, I don’t know. They don’t let me read it,’ said Geetha. She drew another circle in the sand, overlapping the first, as though solving a statistical problem. ‘Who cares anyway?’

‘Ya, who cares?’ Vikki agreed.

‘Must be some stupid stuff about that guy Divya likes.’

‘Guy? What guy?’ squeaked Vikki. Much as he tried to control it, Vikki’s voice cracked in moments of great emotion.

Geetha, lost in despondent thoughts till then, looked up at this betrayal of interest. She felt the first stirring of misgiving. Raju, who had been briefly distracted by a squirrel on the hibiscus bush and had been carrying on a conversation with it in high-pitched peeps and squeaks, had apparently turned to stone in mid-pucker. Vikki’s cheeks were wobbling gently, a sure sign of extreme excitement.

Shit, she shouldn’t have said that. She started moving away under the pretext of picking up a baby coconut that had fallen from the tree nearby.

Vikki and Raju hurried after her. Raju grabbed her elbow. ‘What guy?’ he asked.

Geetha snatched her hand away. ‘No, nothing. There’s no guy,’ she snapped. She could feel her ears burning and her heart racing.

‘Don’t lie,’ said Raju, looming threateningly over her.

‘Please tell us,’ wheedled Vikki, his head popping up over Raju’s shoulder. ‘We won’t tell them you told us.’

Geetha took one look at his eager face, then turned on her heel and ran.

Raju looked after her thoughtfully. Vikki stroked the ghost of a moustache that haunted his upper lip. They looked at each other. They smiled. A plan was beginning to take shape. They were well acquainted with the concept of Divide and Rule; perhaps the boys would prevail after all.

## Eight

Madhavan Nair was sitting on the front veranda of Devaki Nilayam with Keshavan and a group of unfamiliar men; probably clients from Trivandrum. There were always visitors at Devaki Nilayam; how she had toiled, Sundarikutty thought resentfully, making endless rounds of tea and serving an incessant stream of guests! He smiled at Sundarikutty distractedly as she skirted the side of the house on her way to the kitchen, Bindu and Babu trailing behind her. She had always liked him, Nair saar; if only she could have dealt with him and not that fat old sow. The Nair grandchildren, Divya and Meenakshi, were crushed together on the swing on the mango tree. They too smiled at her, but looked away hurriedly before she could come up and give them one of her inhaling kisses. Ah, too big for their boots they had become, Sundarikutty told Bindu in a low whisper, even though it had been she who had looked after them when they were little, reading out jokes from the cartoon strip *Bobanum Moliyum* to amuse them, and teaching them bhajans and those beautiful evergreen songs from *Chemmeen*.

As the trio walked past the dining room, a familiar voice hailed her. ‘Aha! Sundarikutty! So! Finally decided to show your face here, hah?’

Sundarikutty gritted her teeth. She rearranged her spontaneous scowl into an insincere smile and looked in the direction of the disembodied voice. Devaki Amma was seeping from the sturdy easy chair, her habitual perch, for it allowed her to closely approximate her favourite position, the horizontal one. Her elder daughter Lalitha was reading the *Mathrubhoomi* by the dining table, while the other one, Ambika, was clearing away the debris of a late lunch.

Sundarikutty sidled up to the dining room and stood in the doorway uncertainly. ‘What, too important to come and meet me now, are you?’ Devaki Amma persisted. Lalitha seemed to sink deeper into her paper, while Ambika looked up sharply at her mother.

Sundarikutty’s smile slipped a fraction. It was obvious that Devaki Amma had forgotten about the previous year’s Vishu incident. As usual, Kannan had prevailed on Sundarikutty to go and wish her former employers on the occasion of the New Year, taking with her some homemade payasam as a gift. It was an annual custom, and usually Devaki Amma would press some

money into her hand in reciprocation. But this time, along with the usual token amount of money (no increase to account for inflation or her former maid's elevated status, Sundarikutty had noted), the old bandicoot had given Sundarikutty an old sari as well. The temerity of the hag! Sundarikutty had eyed the fall and the stitched edges pointedly and then returned it to Devaki Amma, saying that she had plenty of saris. Although Babu and Bindu had been admiring of their mother's audacity, Kannan had shaken his head disapprovingly when he'd heard the story. But Sundarikutty had argued that it was all she had done – it was not like she had said what she had wanted to say: that *she*, Sundarikutty, could buy *her*, Devaki Amma, a sari or three and didn't need a ratty old sari as a Vishu gift. But Devaki Amma had nevertheless exploded. 'What, too big to take a sari now, heh? You want me to buy you a gold chain perhaps? Or maybe a house? What about a car – will that be enough for you?' Instead of protesting her humility Sundarikutty had kept stubbornly silent, which had only wound up the old virago even more, and at the end of her diatribe, Devaki Amma had taken back not just the sari but also the money she had given Sundarikutty.

Sundarikutty had been loath to return to Devaki Nilayam after this, but Kannan had insisted that she visit the Nairs personally with the good news about Bindu's engagement. 'Don't forget that it was saar and amma who got me the job in Koovait,' he said.

'Oh, don't go on about that! That was so many years ago! How long can we keep kowtowing to that arrogant woman just because of that? We did her a favour too! What would her friend have done if you had not dropped everything and taken up that job immediately?'

Finally Sundarikutty had agreed grudgingly, not least because she was looking forward to throwing Bindu's eligible groom in the face of Kamala, who was not just the cook at the Nair household but also Bindu's peer and long-time rival. But she had insisted that Bindu and Babu accompany her, for surely Devaki Amma would hold her tongue in the children's presence?

There didn't seem much hope of that now, but at least Devaki Amma was not going to rake up the Vishu episode. 'Come, come, sit down,' she was commanding now, adding sarcastically, 'That is if you are not too busy to sit.'

'Amma!' Ambika hissed, but Devaki Amma pretended not to hear her.

Sundarikutty hesitated a moment, and then, in a fit of pique, drew up a chair from the dining table and scraped it across to where Devaki Amma was

slumped. Devaki's wintry smile froze into a glacial glare. Lalitha and Ambika exchanged tense glances. Bindu and Babu shifted uneasily behind their mother.

Sundarikutty looked from her former employer to the chair and weighed her options. Devaki Amma obviously expected Sundarikutty to squat by her feet like she used to do when she was working at the house. But that had been a different time, a different set of circumstances. Before Koovait, before Wilhelm Keller had invited Kannan to eat with his family and taken photos of Kannan with Keller's arm around him. If the white man could do that, why did this stupid old elephant think that she was any better than Sundarikutty?

Nevertheless, Sundarikutty knew Devaki Amma would not let the perceived infraction pass without comment. Why add to the friction? After all, she had come to talk about an auspicious event, and Bindu would be distraught if Devaki Amma created a scene. And if she indulged the hippo, probably that kind old Madhavan saar would give Bindu a generous present on the occasion of her marriage. It was well known that he had gifted gold bangles to his assistant's daughter on her wedding. Not that Bindu needed their charity, but considering how much Sundarikutty had slaved for the fat dictator for so many years, and for a pittance, it was the least that the Nairs could do.

So instead of sitting down on the chair, Sundarikutty leaned heavily against it, at the same time placing her right palm at the base of her spine. 'Lot of backache Amma, all this running around for the engagement and all.'

There was a taut pause as Devaki digested the compromise. Finally the glacier melted a little. 'Yes, I heard about the good news. Kamala told me,' she said, but her tone was still frosty.

Relieved at avoiding a scene, Sundarikutty started gushing. 'You must come for the wedding Amma. We will come and give you the invitation as soon as it is ready.'

'Hmmm . . . yes, we will see.'

'Ambika kunjay, Lalitha kunjay, so nice to see you. Sundarikutty remembered that the Nair grandchildren always found it amusing to hear the maids calling their parents kunjay as though they were still infants. Even Kamala, who was not yet out of her teens, would call middle-aged Unnikuttan 'Unni kunjay'. 'You all must come to the wedding. With your families. I saw the two darlings in the front – Divyamol and Meenakshimol – looking so pretty! Where is the little one? And the boys?'



‘Oh they’ll be around somewhere,’ replied Ambika. ‘We’ll certainly come.’

Devaki intervened, looking at Ambika coldly to indicate displeasure at her daughter’s unnecessary warmth towards Sundarikutty. ‘Constable Venu, no? Ration Raaman’s son? Good match eh?’

‘Oh excellent boy, Amma. Good job, handsome, no vices. At least ten thousand rupees salary plus bonuses.’

‘Good, good,’ said Devaki, trying to keep the scepticism out of her voice. Ten thousand rupees indeed!

‘Of course,’ Sundarikutty continued, ‘Bindu has been getting so many proposals. All good boys, but I turned them all down. What was the hurry anyway? I really didn’t want to get her married so early, but Venu’s was too good a proposal to turn down. And Ration Raaman was so keen on the match.’

‘Hmmm,’ said Devaki noncommittally. She had heard from Kamala about the auto-driver with the mistress and Bindu’s other ineligible suitors.

‘See, the children have got used to a certain standard. Bindu, now she only uses Dove soap brought by my husband from Koovait, and Babu here only wants to wear pant-shirt and first-class Bata slippers – no mundus, no roadside sandals for him. So we need someone who will be able to give her all that.’

Devaki didn’t respond. There was a time when Sundarikutty gladly accepted the hand-me-downs from the Nair household, even tut-tutting when Devaki threw out old underwear, saying that ‘one of her poorer friends’ could use it. But as Kannan’s fortunes had turned around – and Devaki was happy for him, she really was – Sundarikutty had become far more choosy. It was natural, Ambika and Lalitha and Keshavan said, but Devaki found it hard to swallow this change in attitude. And suddenly, she remembered the Vishu skirmish. She simmered visibly, inviting a warning look across the room from Ambika.

‘Of course we can well afford to give her all that even after marriage, but a proud husband will never accept such things, no?’ Sundarikutty continued. ‘Venu is such a nice boy, the perfect gentleman. And well settled. He wants Bindu to stop working after marriage.’

‘Yes, that is best for girls,’ said Devaki in a strangled voice. She congratulated herself on her commendable self-control. She didn’t want a lecture from Ambika later; she had a rule, often broken, that she wouldn’t fight with her children when they came home on vacation – she was trying

really hard to follow it this year. Changing the topic so that she wouldn't be tempted to say something caustic, she asked, 'And Babu? How are you doing, boy? Not seen you around for years. Are you studying properly now?'

Babu, who had been scratching at a piece of flaking paint on the wall, stiffened. Ever since Devaki Amma had caught him sneaking off with two coconuts that Sundarikutty had slipped him from the Nair larder when she was working there, Babu had had an uneasy relationship with the woman. And now here she was raking up the last subject on earth he wanted to talk about.

Fully expecting his mother to go into her usual rant about his lack of focus and application, Babu braced himself for another discourse on the value of education. But Sundarikutty had no intention of admitting any weaknesses to Devaki Amma. She cut in dutifully, 'He's doing well Amma, just passed the seventh standard with first class!'

'Seventh standard?' Devaki frowned as she did some mental arithmetic.

'Yes, yes,' Sundarikutty said hurriedly. 'Eighth next year. Within no time, he will finish school and I am sure Venu can get him a good job.'

'Hmmm.' Devaki gave Babu one last puzzled look before turning to Bindu. 'So, our little tailor girl is going to get married eh? To a police constable, no less! Are you going to be arresting all of us soon?'

'No, no, Amma,' Bindu simpered coyly, and Babu heaved a sigh of relief to be out of the spotlight. All he had to do was get out of there fast, a skill he had perfected over the years. He backed quietly out of the dining room and edged towards the kitchen door.

## Nine

It had been a disturbing few days, although, ever since she had made that horrible blunder by the hibiscus bush, Vikki and Raju had been fawning over her as though she was Ravi Shastri after hitting that sixth six. Firstly, Vikki had insisted on lending her a *Sportstar* and a *Biggles* and while neither held much interest for her, Geetha knew that it was a rare and special gesture. And when she had asked him to climb the jambeka tree in the garden and pick the tart-sour, white-pink fruit, he had done so uncomplainingly, even sitting with her on the red-oxide floor of the veranda as she ate it, pretending not to notice when the juice squirted on to his camouflage shirt from time to time. Both boys had spent an entire evening with her building a seven-storey house of cards, not giving up even when the structure had collapsed twice, at the third-floor level and then at the fifth storey. When it was finally complete, even Unnikuttan had been impressed. It had been fun to watch Divya and Mini feigning indifference as they had passed by the fragile high-rise.

Of course, it had been super-obvious to Geetha that this star treatment was motivated by the hope that she would lead them to the diary. Now, Geetha had seen Mini and Divya going into the storeroom with the diary and watched as they tiptoed out empty-handed, but she had no intentions of telling Vikki and Raju where it was. The consequences were too frightful – as it was, Divya and Mini were looking upon her newfound proximity to the boys with obvious disapproval. Nevertheless, after days of being endlessly ignored and occasionally baited by the girls, it had been nice to have some attention from anyone, even the boys, however insincere.

They had shown considerable restraint in not bringing up the subject for a while, and Geetha had been almost caught off-guard when they had casually mentioned the topic as they were playing Donkey one day. She had won the third game in a row and had not caught them cheating even once. Did they think she was born yesterday?

‘What’s eating Mini and Divya ya? Why don’t they want to play cards anymore? And are they ignoring you?’ Vikki had asked, shuffling the cards expertly between his thumbs and palms.

She had shrugged but kept silent even when Raju had chimed in with a ‘That’s really mean, no? And what’s the whole deal with their top-secret

diary?’

Though she had seen it coming, Geetha had felt herself tensing up.

‘What’s the big secret I wonder? I hope they’re not up to something,’ Vikki had said as he dealt another hand. ‘Maybe we should make sure – any idea where that thing is?’

‘You know I can’t tell you,’ Geetha had said as she picked up her hand.

‘So you do know!’ Raju had exclaimed.

‘No, I don’t,’ Geetha had corrected herself hurriedly, kicking herself for the slip.

‘What’s the big deal? It’s not like we’re going to tell them you told us.’

‘But they’ll guess,’ Geetha had blurted out, and then given herself another mental boot in the backside.

‘But why do you even care? They’re so mean to you! They’ve hardly talked to you for days!’ Vikki had said, arranging his cards swiftly in a fan.

But Geetha had just shaken her head stubbornly. ‘No I can’t tell you. They’ll kill me.’ And then she had pretended to be fiercely interested in her cards.

She had seen the frustration on their faces, the internal struggle as they had wondered whether to push the matter or not, but they had let it go at the time. But as she was practising gilli-danda in the garden later that day, Vikki had come up to her again. ‘Not that way, hold the danda at right angles to the gilli, like this,’ he had demonstrated.

As she had swished ineffectually in the air, he had tried another tack. ‘You know, I’ve been thinking . . . as her brother, I should know if Divya is carrying on with some boy. What if something bad happens to her?’

Geetha had squinted up at him. ‘There’s no boy,’ she had mumbled unconvincingly. ‘Nothing will happen.’

‘But you said there was!’

‘No, no there’s no boy. It’s just . . .’

‘Just what?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Come on, Geetha. I’m really worried. She’s a young girl and Delhi is an unsafe place,’ Vikki had looked genuinely anxious. ‘You know about the Billa-Ranga case, don’t you?’

She did, if vaguely. The country had been hysterical at the time the duo had kidnapped and murdered a couple of kids in Delhi. And although the two murderers were long dead, Ambika still used it as an excuse whenever she wanted to refuse the children permission for attending parties or picnics or

going anywhere alone. Geetha had retorted as she always did to her mother, 'That was years ago!'

'Yes, but there may be another Billa-Ranga out there somewhere!' Apparently Vikki had been taking tips on lame excuses from Ambika.

'Just believe me when I say you have nothing to worry about,' Geetha had said, swinging at the gilli again. This time she'd hit it, but the danda had gone flying from her hand and somersaulted in the air towards Vikki.

'What do you know?' Vikki had asked, dodging adroitly. 'You're just a kid – what are you, ten?'

'Eleven! Plus!' Geetha had exclaimed indignantly. 'And for your information, it's only that stupid friend of yours, Sunil!'

Vikki's eyes had lit up. 'Sunil? Divya likes him?'

Oh God, why did she have to go and say that? 'Yah, sort of,' she'd mumbled. 'But the point is, see, it's nothing you have to be worried about.'

'What do you mean?' Vikki had cried theatrically. 'Of course, I have to be worried! He visits us every other day! What if they are carrying on behind our backs – you have to tell us where the diary is.'

Geetha had looked at him miserably. Shit! She had walked into that one.

Vikki had taken her silence for dissent. 'Okay, then I guess I'll just have to tell my mother.'

Geetha had gaped at him, horrified. 'You wouldn't!'

'You leave me no choice,' Vikki had said in a pained tone.

He was bluffing! He had to be! Vikki wouldn't tell Lalitha Valliamma, would he? Geetha had worked herself up into a dither by the time the boys barged in on her as she was brushing her teeth that morning. 'I'll tell you what,' Raju offered, 'If you tell us where the diary is, Vikki will give you his Walkman. For good.'

Geetha wavered. She was still sleepy and her defences were weak. 'Do you really mean that?' she asked Vikki's visibly unhappy reflection in the mirror. Vikki looked sullenly at Raju but on a desperate eye-roll from his cousin, he nodded unenthusiastically. 'I promise.'

'But why would you do that?' she asked, spitting out a mouthful of Binaca.

'Because that's how worried I am,' Vikki muttered, in a suspiciously rehearsed manner.

Foamy-mouthed, Geetha looked at him thoughtfully, considered, hesitated, then said, 'No, but I can't!'

Vikki threw up his hands in exasperation, but the relief was writ large on his

face and he hustled Raju out of the bathroom with patent haste.

But after lunch, when everybody had slithered off like replete pythons for their afternoon siesta, Raju tracked Geetha down to the new hidey hole she had found among the stacks of old newspapers under the staircase. It was the only place that she could avoid Rema and Suji – Renjini Ammayi had by now decided that their skit was going to be on the exploits of a young Krishna, and the kids were hunting for extras and helpers.

‘Okay, do one thing – I’ll try to guess where it is – you just nod yes or no. Okay?’ Raju asked.

Geetha wriggled out of her niche. ‘No!’

‘Any of our suitcases?’ he persisted, following her as she started walking away. ‘The bedroom?’

Geetha broke into a run, up the wooden stairs and down the corridor. She had a plan.

Raju loped behind her. ‘The meat safe in the dining room? The bookcase in the Library Room?’

She came to a stop outside the Delivery Room. The door was shut but chainsaw-like snores announced that Damodaran Maama was inside. Raju slowed to a stop behind her. He had been terrified of Damodaran Maama ever since his uncle had tried to teach him physics two years ago and thrown a book across the room in frustration at Raju’s slow-wittedness.

Geetha shot Raju a challenging look.

‘Apooan’s desk?’ In defiance, Raju continued his cross-examination, although in barely a whisper. ‘Ammooma’s cupboard? Their bedroom? Any of the bedrooms?’

A loud hacking sound emanated from the innards of the Delivery Room as though the chainsaw had just encountered a troublesome knot in a log of wood. Damodaran Maama had awoken.

‘Who’s there?’ Damodaran Maama’s peeved voice floated out into the corridor.

‘Just tell me where it is!’ Raju hissed.

‘No!’

By then Damodaran Maama’s footsteps were approaching the door. Raju gave her a filthy look and retreated down the stairs.

Geetha smiled brightly as Damodaran Maama opened the door. ‘Oh, it’s you,’ he said, straightening his combed-over hair and peering through his thick spectacles. ‘What do you want?’

‘Nothing Damodaran Maama,’ she replied. ‘I was just exploring.’

‘Okay, okay,’ he said testily, rearranging his mundu. ‘Go explore somewhere else. I’m busy.’

After all this, Geetha really shouldn’t have agreed to go with the boys to the Milma booth, but the offer of free ice cream had been too tempting to resist. She was just getting through one of those tiny cups of shocking-pink strawberry ice cream and had not even finished licking the wooden spoon, when the green pista cone manifested itself before her like a physical embodiment of her deepest desires. But Raju held it back, just out of her reach. ‘It isn’t in the Delivery Room, is it?’ he asked her.

Vikki snorted. ‘No, it can’t be, Damodaran Maama won’t allow them,’ he said.

‘And Divya’s scared of him anyway,’ Raju reasoned.

‘Not half as scared as you are!’ Geetha retorted. She snatched the cone from his hand and lapped at it greedily.

‘The Room on the Terrace?’ tried Raju, ignoring the barb.

‘Yah, right!’ said Vikki sarcastically.

‘The Portrait Room?’

Geetha bit into the crunchy cone.

‘The living room?’

‘The kitchen?’ asked Vikki.

Geetha stiffened and scrutinized her ice cream intently. The slightest flush stole across her cheek.

Raju read the signs instantly. ‘Oh we’re getting warm!’ he cried.

Geetha stood frozen in helplessness.

‘The kitchen? It’s in the kitchen?’ squeaked Vikki.

‘No!’ she yelled, finding her voice. But it was too late.

Vikki and Raju were looking at each other jubilantly. ‘The sly foxes! They think we won’t look in the kitchen!’ And with that, they hastily paid the Milma boy and scooted towards the house. Geetha tried to run after them but it was of no use. Raju was already out of sight and Vikki, though huffing and puffing, was several paces ahead of her. Should she warn the girls? Did they deserve it? Maybe the diary wouldn’t be in the storeroom? Perhaps they had changed the hiding place? Would she be able to stop the boys somehow? She gave up. The ice cream cone was now one melting, leaking, sticky mess, just like her insides. She glumly licked off the milky liquid from her palm. She knew it was a lost cause.

By the time she reached the house, the boys had vanished. She didn't dare go to the kitchen, not least because that old maid of Ammooma's, Sundarikutty, was hovering around in the dining room. Geetha would have to pass her to get to the kitchen and would no doubt be forced to proffer her cheek for one of Sundarikutty's sloppy kisses – Divya had nicknamed her The Vicks Inhaler a few summers ago because she would breathe in deeply as she kissed you. Worse still, Geetha would have to summon up all her scarce reserves of Malayalam to answer the maid's well-meaning questions about her health, education and other such things. She didn't feel up to it. She hoped that Raju and Vikki too had been so deterred.

No such luck. Within an hour they emerged, brandishing the diary. It had been hidden on the top shelf of the storeroom behind the ceramic bharanis holding the dals and tamarind and pickles, they told her. Oversmart Alecs, that Divya and Mini!

'But you know what's the best thing?' asked Vikki. 'It's not a diary, it's a manuscript!'

Geetha looked at him blankly.

'A book that Divya and Mini are writing! In an old diary!'

'A soppy, horrible romance like an Indian Mills and Boon novel,' exclaimed Raju. 'Listen to this,' he chortled. *"Dheeraj Kumar Singh was a man of the world. He travelled all over the globe, and he had a woman in almost every important metropolis around the globe. And yet he had never been in love, not until the moment he lay his eyes on Anamika Sharma. She was just the right height, not too tall, not too small, slim but not too thin, curvaceous but not voluptuous, and pretty with an innocence that few women boasted of these days. The moment he set his eyes on her, he felt a sharp stab of longing coursing through his body."* Oh my God, what is this crap? And Mini wants to do literature? God help us all!

'You think that's bad? Vikki giggled. He snatched the book from Raju. 'Get this: *"Anamika sighed. Of course, a man like Dheeraj Kumar Singh would never be interested in her. He was more likely to be attracted to her boss, the beautiful princess, Tamara Devi, scion of the Gaekwad clan, once monarchs of the Basta region in the remote salt pans of Kutch. Tamara had everything, heart-breakingly good looks, a fat bank account, a sensational body which she flaunted in figure-hugging Western clothes – why would he ever look at Anamika in her bandhini salwar kameez?"*'

Geetha wrung her hands.



Raju hooted and retrieved the book from Vikki. ‘No, no this takes the cake: *“Anamika’s Kolhapuri chappal got caught in the rich Persian rug and she tripped. She came dangerously close to falling and breaking a leg, but a strong hand steadied her at the last moment. She turned and found herself looking into the green cat-like eyes of Dheeraj Kumar Singh. He looked at her intensely and a muscle twitched in his jaw. Anamika felt faint with passion.”*’

Vikki was holding his sides in pain. ‘Ouch, that’s so bad!’

Raju flipped a few pages. ‘Not as bad as this: *“A spark of anger flared to life in Dheeraj Kumar Singh’s eyes. ‘She is twice the woman you’ll ever be Tamara.’ Tamara gasped. How dare he talk to her like that! She spun around and marched up to him and lifted her hand to slap him. He held her hand in a vice-like grip, and when she had stopped struggling, he let it go. Tamara’s breath quickened, her heart pounded as she looked up into his furious face, just inches away from hers. But without another word, he turned and left, and even though his leopard-like prowl barely made a sound on the thick Persian carpet, Tamara knew he was furious. Had she lost her chance? And that too because of that two-bit secretary of hers, Anamika?”*’

Vikki guffawed. ‘Oh we love you, Geetha, thanks!’

‘No, no, don’t thank me, I didn’t tell you anything!’ Geetha said. Panic was rising in her like milk coming to a boil.

‘No you didn’t, did you?’ Raju winked.

‘I mean it, don’t tell Mini and Divya that I told you – I didn’t.’

‘Oh, they’re going to rue the day they took panga with us!’ said Vikki. ‘Rue the day!’

‘No, please you can’t tell them you know – they’ll know I told you.’

‘But you didn’t, did you?’ Vikki said. ‘So what’s the problem?’

‘Please Vikki, please don’t . . .’

‘Oh, ho, ho,’ said Raju. ‘Oh, ho, ho, ho, ho.’

## Ten

Babu stepped silently out of the dining room, backing through the doorway into the once familiar territory of the Devaki Nilayam kitchen. He congratulated himself; he seemed to have escaped unseen.

Almost.

As he slipped through the door, he bumped into something soft and yielding, like a perfectly stuffed mattress. A hand reached out to steady him, with an ‘Aiiyyo, be careful!’

He turned around and looked into a vaguely familiar face. Smooth skin glistened with a thin sheen of sweat, strands of curling hair formed a halo around luscious round cheeks, big eyes were tipped with long lashes, plump lips were now parting into a big white smile.

‘Babu!’ cried this apparition.

Babu started. For one thing, he was not used to being in such close proximity of so much feminine allure. For another, this disturbing young woman seemed to know him. He looked at her again, more closely this time.

‘Eda, don’t you recognize me?’ she slapped him playfully on the arm. ‘It’s me, Kamala!’

Babu gaped. Kamala? His former neighbour, Kamala? The scruffy young girl who used to play with Bindu at the back of his house? He had known that she was working here – Sundarikutty took full credit for having recommended her to Devaki Amma when a vacancy for a cook had arisen a few years ago. In fact, Babu knew that part of the reason for their visit to the Nair household was to invite Kamala for the engagement and wedding, because Kamala was not only a former neighbour but also the unmarried daughter of a cousin of Kannan’s and therefore, so Sundarikutty said, a must on the ashtamangalyam, the procession of lamp-carrying girls who would precede Bindu on her wedding day.

Babu had been reluctant to come to Devaki Nilayam with Sundarikutty and had acquiesced only after threats and curses, but now he was glad he had. He stole a look at Kamala again. My, but she was unrecognizable! She had filled out beautifully, with distracting curves in all the right places. The formerly dull skin was glowing. And he had never noticed the dimple in her cheek before.

‘What happened? Somebody cut out your tongue?’ Kamala laughed. The dimple made a reappearance. Babu smiled back nervously.

‘Aiyyo, it’s so nice to see you after so long,’ she squealed and Babu’s heart fluttered like a flag at an Independence Day parade.

‘And you’ve become so tall! Quite a thokkan now, aren’t you?’ she exclaimed.

Whatever was left of Babu’s resistance crumbled like a newly-tarred Ambalakunnu road after a thundershower. You see, Babu was more about height than width, about length than breadth. While he had inherited Sundarikutty’s giraffe-like stature he had also been bequeathed her lack of girth, and was consequently often compared to lamp posts, coconut trees and once even a tongue cleaner. As a result he had a certain modesty about his physique, perhaps even a little discomfiture, especially now that the well-endowed Venu was in their midst, flexing his muscles and jiggling his belly.

So the gorgeous Kamala calling him a thokkan, a giant, was all it took for Babu’s infatuation-at-first-sight to turn to love. And she was gorgeous, Babu thought as he sat by the hearth and watched her cook and chatter; her cheeks as rounded and delicious as a Malgovala mango hanging from the tree, the oiled plait that hung to her waist as thick as the rope that Meen Mommad used to tie his fishing boats. Her eyes sparkled like the sea on a sunlit morn. And her voice . . .

But before Babu could think of a befitting metaphor for her voice, Sundarikutty, with typically contrary timing, strode into the kitchen, Bindu close behind her. And the undescribed voice trailed off and a shadow of displeasure flitted across the mango face.

Now, Bindu and Kamala had once been friends, in the way that girls of about the same age who stay next door to each other are. They had walked to school together, or at least, they had as long as Kamala had stayed in school. Occasionally, they had plaited each other’s hair; or rather Bindu had plaited Kamala’s, for Bindu’s own hair was so sparse that it never grew beyond a certain length, and all she could do was pull it away from her face and secure it with a tiny rubber band. They had collected water for their respective houses together, engrossed in girlish gossip as they had hauled the bright plastic kodams of water home from the communal tap; together they had foraged in the undergrowth behind their houses for firewood for the kitchen and green chillies and curry leaves growing wild.

And so it would have remained, an easy if shallow friendship, if

Sundarikutty had let things be. But Sundarikutty rarely let things be. And Kamala's mother, Parvathi, now sadly departed, had been one of Sundarikutty's many pet hates. Parvathi had been Kannan's cousin and had often been after him to arrange a job for her as a housemaid in Koovait. As though jobs grew on trees! And then, on more than one occasion, she had wangled a loan (never repaid) from Kannan when Sundarikutty wasn't around to discourage him. Kannan had sworn it was out of a sense of cousinly duty, but it hadn't helped that Parvathi was more than a little attractive.

And Kamala had inherited all of Parvathi's charms. When Sundarikutty saw Kamala's clear skin and long, curly hair she couldn't help but berate Bindu for not using enough green gram flour on her face and coconut oil on her scalp. And she couldn't help but compare Kamala's easy, boisterous way with Bindu's lacklustre personality. 'Must you always sit slumped up in a corner like a pile of unwashed clothes? Can't you show some initiative? You're just like your father!' she would rebuke her daughter.

Inevitably, Bindu too started looking on her childhood friend with more than a little envy. As they grew, so did their unspoken rivalry. If Kamala bought a certain shade or design of pavada-blouse, Bindu would have a grander version the next day. When Kamala expressed a wish to study more and become a nurse, Bindu had immediately usurped that ambition; to Kamala's delight, when Bindu had finally appeared for the exam she had failed dramatically. When Kamala had let slip that she was going to apply for a job in the garment factory, Sundarikutty had hustled Bindu along to the supervisor and seized the only vacancy available. And the only reason Sundarikutty had recommended Kamala to Devaki Amma as a cook was because she looked forward to Kamala becoming the butt of Devaki Amma's ire. Kamala had won that battle, because she had not only fitted comfortably into the Nair household but also seemed to get along quite amicably with that insufferable woman.

But now Sundarikutty and Bindu had scored the ultimate victory; even though she was two full years younger, Bindu was going to get married first! And not just to anyone, but to the most eligible bachelor in Kuttipuram! Sundarikutty laid it on like ghee on a dosa.

'Very handsome boy. Had his heart set on our Bindu. Had one sip of Bindu's jackfruit payasam and made up his mind!'

Babu watched as Kamala maintained an uncaring air, but he could see the

incandescence in her eyes. He wished his mother would shut up. But Sundarikutty was milking it for all it was worth. ‘Never mind, never mind, you will also find a husband soon. After all, you are a good cook, good job – oh thank the Lord, Devaki Amma acted on my recommendation. If only you had parents to give you away . . . people hesitate to marry orphans, you know. Doesn’t matter, doesn’t matter – somebody will turn up. Don’t worry, I will keep my eyes open for a suitable match.’

Then, ‘You will be part of the ashtamangalyam, won’t you? Of course, if it’s too difficult for you, I understand . . .,’ and of course Kamala had to accept.

After an hour of such pleasantries, all Kamala had managed in riposte was a cheap, if satisfying shot. ‘Oh, your hair has grown so thick, Bindu!’ she said sweetly, swinging her plump plait over her shoulder. And then as Bindu’s eyes darted shiftily away, ‘Oh it’s that false hair you wear, isn’t it? I forgot. Venu doesn’t mind, does he?’

As Bindu flushed a pretty shade of pomegranate, clearly indicating that Venu had no idea, Babu looked at Kamala admiringly. He remembered now that she had always had spunk – she had often been the first to shimmy up trees to pick the ripe mangoes and jackfruit, her pavada hitched into her waistband, the neighbourhood boys still hanging perilously on to the lower branches. Once she had joined a football game on a dare and had even kicked one past goalkeeper Ganeshan, who had never lived it down. And Chacko, now a clerk in the post office but then a smug teenager a good three years older than her, was often teased about the time Kamala had made him cry when she had twisted his ear vigorously for hogging the municipal tap for too long.

Sundarikutty finally made a move to leave with the exhortation that Kamala attend the engagement as well. Babu knew that his mother was looking forward to flaunting their wealth in Kamala’s face – wait till she saw the banquet and decorations and all the gold they had bought over the years for Bindu, she had gloated that very morning, I can just see her turning green. Babu watched as Kamala struggled for an excuse to refuse without losing face or accepting defeat. A nerve throbbed in the succulent left cheek, making it wobble divertingly, and then she gave up the fight and nodded curtly.

Sundarikutty beamed. ‘I’ll send Babu to pick you up,’ she said, and Babu grinned happily. Kamala gave him a feeble, distracted smile, and Babu’s heart turned cartwheels in his chest.

## Eleven

Of course, Mini and Divya discovered the missing diary the very same day and immediately suspected Geetha and the boys.

Geetha avoided them all evening, even going and sitting by Renjini Ammayi as she related to Keshavan Maama at great length the details of her recent holiday with Sukumaran Maama in 'Bang Kong'. Both seemed bemused by Geetha's dogged interest, and Renjini Ammayi even tried to shoo her away so as to bask uninterrupted in Keshavan Maama's palpable admiration. But Geetha clung tenaciously to her side. Mini and Divya looked in many times, but Geetha remained steadfastly fascinated by Renjini Ammayi's sojourns.

But as they sat down to dinner, she knew it would not be long before all hell broke loose. Raju and Vikki were nudging each other in the most obvious way, and bursting into insinuating chuckles every now and then. She avoided the usual seating on the dining room steps and drew up a moda to sit at the dining table, by Apoopan's side. From the corner of her eye, she saw the boys sidle up to where Mini and Divya were sitting and for a while the two blocs sat chewing their meal diligently, each apparently oblivious to the other. Until Vikki, in a carrying voice, said, 'You know, Raju, the next time we come to Ambalakunnu, I think I'll invite my friend Tamara. She's heart-breakingly beautiful!'

Mini and Divya's heads whipped around. Raju and Vikki smirked at them. 'Do you think I should call Sunil too, Divya?' asked Vikki.

From her safe perch next to Apoopan, Geetha saw the sniggering and knew the game was up. As Mini and Divya turned to glare at her, she looked studiously down at her mutton stew. The bread from George's bakery, soft as Suji's toddler cheeks, scrumptiously buttery and ideal for mopping up the stew, may as well have been a piece of Thermacol in her mouth.

After dinner, Geetha tried to convince Ambika that she wanted to sleep in their room, as she was sure she was falling ill. 'Oh, stop fussing!' Ambika said irritably and she was summarily despatched to the Sewing Room where Mini and Divya were sitting up on the four-poster bed and waiting for her.

'Oh, there's the snitch,' said Mini, as Geetha appeared, head bowed.

'Snitchy-snatch!' spat Divya.

'Please,' Geetha said, her eyes welling up immediately with those

exasperating tears. 'I swear I didn't tell them anything.'

'Oh, spare us the cry-baby routine!' said Mini. 'How the hell did they find our book?'

'I swear I didn't tell them anything!'

'Oh ya? And how did they find it then?'

'They just guessed! I'm sorry – they just kept asking – "Is it here? Is it there? Is it in the kitchen?" And somehow they guessed.'

'But how did they know about the book in the first place?' Divya cross-questioned relentlessly. She was a great fan of Perry Mason.

Geetha's eyes slid to the floor.

'A-ha! I knew it!' said Mini. 'You told them, didn't you?'

'Will you girls keep it down?' It was Unnikuttan, silhouetted in the doorway. 'Chattering all the time! Go to sleep!' Mini and Divya ducked under the sheets and Geetha climbed hurriedly onto the bed. They waited till he retreated, then Divya whispered menacingly, 'Did you tell them?'

Geetha buried her face in the pillow. 'I didn't mean to, it slipped out,' she murmured.

Divya and Mini gasped.

'And you told them about Sunil too, didn't you?'

Geetha didn't dare to even lift her head, much less reply, but behind her she heard a ferocious fluffing of pillows and the thumping of the mattress as Divya and Mini did the reclining version of stalking off. Geetha kept her head immersed in the pillow, and felt it become wet beneath her skin. Finally she had to come up for air, so she slowly turned her head and rested her cheek on the damp pillow cover, but for a long time sleep eluded her.

Things deteriorated fast. Divya and Mini refused to talk to her, averting their face when they passed her, sometimes even getting up and walking out when she entered the room. They had even taken to courting Rema and Suji, and the two brats were ignoring her too. Well that was a relief anyway; she hoped that they would rope in Divya and Mini for their dumb Balakrishna skit. And while Vikki and Raju were friendly enough in an offhand sort of way, they no longer needed to butter her up, it was clear. When Geetha asked Vikki to at least live up to his promise of giving her his Walkman now that they had found the book, he said, 'Why? You never told us where it was, remember?'

To make things worse, Lalitha Valliamma noticed Geetha sitting on her own at mealtimes for a few days, not on the steps of the dining room with the girls or on the chairs at the side by Vikki and Raju, but on a stool by the fridge (or

Frigidaire, as Apoopan insisted on calling it). She questioned Divya and Mini about it and despite their denials and protests of innocence, she told them off roundly. 'Some cousins you are, leaving the poor child out of everything. Shame on you!' She then ordered them to take Geetha with them for a Malayalam film in Trivandrum the next day.

It was the most god-awful morning. Divya and Mini were convinced that Geetha had complained to Lalitha Valliamma, and they ignored her the entire day. Vikki and Raju had also been sent as chaperones and Geetha had to sit like an electric fence between the warring factions. 'Want popcorn, Mini?' Raju asked at the snack counter. 'Oh sorry, what I meant to say was – do you feel a stab of desire for popcorn coursing through your body?' Geetha could feel the heat of Mini's glare on the back of her neck. She pleaded with the boys to knock it off and Vikki bought her a chocobar as a peace offering, which she ate mechanically, barely enjoying it. She didn't even dare crack a smile when Divya and Mini giggled as a beefy villain in a mundu flashed his underwear while he attempted a high kick to fell the hero. And when finally the hirsute young protagonist declared to the puffy-cheeked heroine, 'I love you . . .' and a red heart filled the screen announcing The End, she breathed a long sigh of relief.

'Perhaps you girls can get some inspiration for your book from that last scene, Mini,' Raju said when they reached home and Vikki guffawed merrily. Divya and Mini walked off stiff-backed.

And now Apoopan was planning a day at the beach. Geetha buried her head in her hands at the thought. Oh well, there was only a little over a month or so more of this vacation to endure.

Shit! How would she survive?

She shifted uncomfortably among the newspapers. It had become her refuge now, this messy little corner under the stairs. It was the only place she could get away from all the hostility. Goldie waddled up to her, rotated a couple of times by her leg like a top and sat heavily down at her feet. He smelled pleasantly of flea powder; Thankappan had brushed him down that morning. Geetha ran her hand through his shiny coat and he wagged his tail madly and looked up at her with an open-mouthed, long-tongued grin. She had to smile in spite of herself.

'What kunjay, why are you sitting all alone like this?' It was Kamala, the cook, who had come to pick up an old newspaper to line a shelf. She had hunched over to look under the stairs and was displaying an embarrassing



amount of cleavage. Her face shone with sweat.

She peered at Geetha curiously. 'What's the matter, kunjay?' Geetha, having bitten her tongue in surprise at the intrusion, was rendered momentarily speechless and shook her head to indicate that all was well. That's all she needed now, Mini and Divya thinking that she had snitched to Kamala as well.

Kamala scrutinized Geetha intently. 'Oh, this won't do at all, my little gold nugget,' she said. 'Moping all by yourself among a pile of newspapers. I know what happened, you fought with Mini kunju and Divya kunju, didn't you?'

Geetha remained resolutely silent.

'Never mind, never mind,' said Kamala. 'Who needs them? Come, come with Kamala chechi. Let's go into the kitchen and see who has come!'

Geetha tried to protest but Kamala was having none of it. She held out her hand, and at that moment, Geetha spotted a big ugly house lizard on the underside of the tread board right above her head. There was something about the house lizards, with their dead-eyed stares, that made her skin creep. She happily chased the shy garden lizards that darted frantically away from her, but whenever she spotted a house lizard, a revolted, mesmerized paralysis overcame her, like a rat under the spell of a snake. The house lizards never darted away; in fact, some years ago, one had fallen with a splat from the ceiling into her lap and lain there dazed and unmoving while she screamed in terror, until Unnikuttan had finally flicked it off with a laugh. The repulsive things were everywhere; they lay in wait in packs around the tubelight in the dining room at night for the distracted moths that flocked to the light, they hid behind every picture frame, in every crevice. And under the stairs apparently. She wriggled out of the corner in a hurry, into Kamala's consoling hug. Goldie gave her a reproachful look for deserting him, but didn't bother to heave himself up and follow her.

'Oh, he's too full of payasam,' Kamala prattled, in her thick, almost incomprehensible Malayalam. 'Made his favourite ari payasam today and he haunted the kitchen all morning! But if it's vermicelli or jackfruit payasam, he's nowhere to be seen, only likes ari payasam, our fastidious fellow!'

'So who's come?' Geetha asked Kamala haltingly, after framing the words in Malayalam in her head.

'Ah, you wait and see, you'll never guess!' Kamala replied.

Geetha trailed behind her into the dining room, down the long, dingy,

narrow corridor flanked by multiple ante-rooms – one for storing coconuts, a vegetable storeroom, a toiletries and miscellany storeroom, a tiny room dominated by a huge stone grinder on which all the chutneys and masalas were ground, and the one freshly painted room which housed the Sumeet mixer and the gas stove – never, ever to be touched by the maids. Finally they emerged into the main kitchen – a huge, dim room dominated by the wood-fire hearth against one wall and, against the other, a stone counter heaped with vegetables, a cutting board and a large vessel of chukku vellam, the drinking water that had been boiled with some herbs. Open shelves made from unfinished wood were tacked haphazardly against the wall and laden with untidy piles of vessels. Murals of soot adorned the walls, fading slightly as they rose to the ceiling – all the better to showcase the cobwebs that hung from the corners like swags of an ornate curtain. Vegetable peels and coconut shells and splashes of curry were dotted across the oily floor. It was as though the house, tired of being made to toe the line and play nice in the rest of Devaki Nilayam, had finally decided to rebel here in the kitchen.

But everybody knew that this aura of chaos belied the intense productivity of the kitchen. For dozens of dishes were made here every day, piles of vegetables were cleaned and chopped, kilos of meat and fish prepared. So it was the one place in the house to which Ammooma turned a blind eye, knowing well that she would have to hire two more cooks and two more helpers if she were to worry about the oil solidified in the cracks of the counter and floor or the jumble of vessels. In any case, it was out of sight to all but the closest of family.

A blast of heat from the wood fire that was blazing in the hearth assaulted Geetha as she entered, and much-loved smells of burning wood and roasting masalas invaded her nostrils. A colossal blackened pot sat on the fire spitting steam from time to time; Geetha knew it was the red rice for lunch. Gaurikutty, the girl in plaits who she had seen on the first day and who had indeed turned out to be the vacation helper, was sitting cross-legged on the rough cement floor, cutting chunks of pumpkin into a bowl. She gave Geetha a bright smile. Through the door to the kitchen veranda, Geetha could see the old cleaning lady Valsamma sipping her mid-morning tea, made from the leftover leaves from breakfast.

And then, as Kamala called out, a stringy lad appeared around the wooden door. He looked faintly familiar.

He smiled, displaying a formidable set of braces that could have doubled up

as a wire fence. At the same time, Kamala asked, ‘Don’t you remember Babu?’

Yes, of course Geetha remembered Babu. Not this Babu, however, but Sundarikutty’s puny little son who used to hang around the kitchen often when his mother worked at Devaki Nilayam. She remembered his knock knees staring out from an outgrown pair of shorts, a white shirt tinged a faint blue due to the generous use of Robin Blue (for Sundarikutty used to covertly wash her whole family’s clothes using the Devaki Nilayam supplies and water; at least until somebody tattled to Ammooma and all hell broke loose).

This Babu was skinny, but no longer puny – he would be a whole head above Vikki. If he was still knock-kneed one couldn’t tell, because his knees were covered in a pair of grey terrycot trousers that flared like angry nostrils at the bottom – ‘so Seventies,’ Mini would have probably sniffed. His T-shirt was red, slightly satiny, slightly shiny. And perched atop his head, tamping down his mop of springy hair, was a pair of sunglasses.

‘Hello kunjay, how are you?’ he asked now and Geetha noticed with surprise that his voice had gone deep in the intervening years.

Suddenly overcome with shyness, she found she couldn’t speak. Instead she bobbed her head sideways in the universal sign of well-being and Babu gave her another metallic smile.

‘So tall you’ve become!’ he said, and Geetha beamed back at him, still unable to conjure up the Malayalam words needed to sustain the conversation.

Babu left soon after that but Valsamma, always on the lookout for a receptive audience, cornered Geetha. Since Valsamma was as deaf as a post, Geetha didn’t have to wrack her brains to speak in Malayalam; all she had to do was sit on the floor beside her and listen as the old lady moaned about her ailments – the chronic ache in her back, the stiffness of her joints, the agonizing attacks of flatulence she got when she ate her favourite jackfruit uperi.

‘Yes, yes, that we know,’ Gaurikutty said at the last-named affliction, ‘We’ve all had first-hand experience.’ Kamala broke out into a loud guffaw, but Geetha muffled her giggles into her drawn-up knees.

‘Podi!’ Valsamma said affectionately and launched into a description of the boil on her leg that had grown from an insignificant little blister into a putrescent abscess; here, she hoisted her mundu above her knee to show Geetha the offending sore.

When Valsamma finally pulled herself up to go sweep the veranda, Kamala beckoned Geetha over and allowed her to turn over the frying fish and even season the parippu.

‘Where were you all morning?’ Lalitha Valliamma asked Geetha, with a squeeze of the shoulder, as she finally emerged at lunchtime.

‘Oh, here and there,’ she mumbled, deriving a measure of satisfaction from the fleetingly curious looks on Mini and Divya’s faces. From the corner of her eye, she registered with glee that Rema was clinging resolutely on to Mini’s hand despite all Mini’s efforts to shake free.

After gulping down her lunch, Geetha vanished into the kitchen again and sat on the lopsided wooden bench in the kitchen veranda as Kamala, Thankappan, Valsamma and Gaurikutty sat cross-legged on the floor and ate their lunch; she watched fascinated as each of them demolished massive mounds of rice. On previous holidays, she used to sit with Mini and Divya on the shaky bench and sway side to side, pretending they were in a train, and singing songs like *Jiya ho, jiya ho jiya, kuch bol do* and *Gaadi bula rahi hain*. But of course Mini and Divya were too snooty to do that anymore. To hell with them though. It was far more entertaining to watch Thankappan scooping up curd-rice with clockwise swirls of his hand and shovelling it into his mouth in one easy motion, like the temple elephants in Guruvayur picking up their bushels of coconut leaves and grass. He raised his eyebrows and smacked his lips appreciatively at Kamala, as though to indicate that the rice was perfectly cooked and the curds not sour at all, and Kamala laughed and punched him on the side of the arm.

Later, Geetha assisted Kamala as she ground the idli batter for the next morning in the stone aattu kallu. Ambika had progressed to the boring old Sumeet mixer, so it was only in Ambalakunnu that Geetha could play with the aattu kallu. Kamala took charge of the top revolving stone of the aattu kallu, rotating it with a vigour that shook her entire body, so that the rice and urad dal in the cup-shaped depression of the base stone were ground to a pulp. Geetha was entrusted with pushing the half-ground batter that kept spilling over the sides back towards the hollow in the base stone. It was a delicate operation which had to be timed perfectly; you had to push the batter into the hollow just as the revolving top stone had passed by so that your hand wouldn’t get jammed between the stone and the walls of the hole. Of course, at the speed at which Kamala worked, the revolving stone was upon Geetha before she knew it and her fingers got jammed a couple of times, but

Kamala didn't notice, and Geetha was too scared to even wince in case Kamala made a fuss and didn't allow her to help any more. In fact, she was quite sure that she was slowing Kamala down; usually Kamala did the whole thing herself, rotating the top stone with her left hand and pushing the batter back into the hollow with the right, with a rhythm and ease born of years of practice.

In the evening, Geetha plucked flowers from the jasmine bush with Valsamma and tried to thread it into a string for Ammooma's bun as Valsamma demonstrated, but the flowers tore or the string gave way each time she thought she was making progress.

'Never mind,' said Ammooma, who had come into the kitchen to distribute rations and supervise preparations for dinner, 'It takes a lot of practice.'

Presently, Kamala appeared, wearing a fresh pavada-blouse and smelling faintly of Hamam soap, indicating that Ammooma had prevailed on her to take a bath that day. Geetha trotted behind her as she went to round up the hens into the coop for the night. 'You remember Srividya and Jayabharathi, don't you?' Kamala asked as she swooped down on the two fat hens and scooped them up expertly under her arms. Geetha couldn't even get close to them – they scooted off with alarmed clucks as soon as she drew up. 'Our Nedumudi died last year, so that one there is a new one – Mohanlal!' she announced grandly, pointing to the proud rooster perched on top of the coop. Geetha giggled. Kamala was in charge of naming the hens, so it wasn't surprising that a series of Malayalam film stars occupied the coop. It was far more interesting than when that Vicks Inhaler Sundarikutty used to christen them; something boring like Indu and Sindu.

Finally Ambika dragged her out of the kitchen and insisted she go and spend some time with Apoopan who was apparently all dejected about how his little Geetha was all grown up now and didn't want to spend any time with him. Geetha didn't mind; Apoopan always had some funny stories or silly jokes to keep her entertained.

As she passed Mini and Divya in the corridor, she felt emboldened enough to whistle a happy tune. Their cold looks slipped into surprise; after all, Geetha had been properly contrite and mournful till now. Geetha smiled a little smile to herself.

## Twelve

Ever since Babu had met Kamala that day in the Devaki Nilayam kitchen, he hadn't been able to get her out of his mind – the soft give of her bosom as he had bumped into her, the one canine missing from her wide welcoming smile, the little beads of sweat on her neck, the damp circles under her armpits, the flush of labour on her cheeks. He felt giddy-headed with happiness at the thought that his mother had allotted him the task of picking up Kamala for the engagement, and even when his father had nagged him for the hundred and fifteenth time about shaping up and taking inspiration from the successful Venu, he had only smiled back at him in a strange, imbecilic way, much to Kannan's irritation.

But if Kannan had been oblivious, Satyen had cottoned on immediately. They had been sitting as they often did with Jolly at the edge of the stream that flowed behind Jolly's house, working through a stack of beedis that Satyen had managed to filch from his father. Jolly had been lying back on the grass and contemplating the clouds above, conjecturing that perhaps the monsoons would come early this year; he was often given to saying such things for he considered himself something of an intellectual – and it was true that unlike most of his friends he had not failed a single class. Satyen had been smoking a ruminative beedi and watching the women on the other bank washing their lunch vessels. He had been deep into an evaluation of the relative merits and demerits of the ripe woman with the generous hips versus the lissom young thing with the flawless skin, when he had noticed a lack of response from the usually attentive Babu. He had turned and found his friend looking dreamily into the distance with a foolish grin on his face, his beedi hanging unsmoked from his fingers.

'Eda patti, who is it?'

Babu had started. 'Eh? Who is what?'

'That girl who's making you smile like the village idiot, you son of a whore seller!'

'Poda, I'm not smiling!'

'For the last half hour – have you heard anything I've been telling you, you useless fool?'

Satyen had got it out of him in under ten minutes. After the initial ribbing, he had taken it upon himself to counsel Babu about the best course of action,

for Satyen was considered as something of an expert on women, not least by himself. For instance, two years ago, he had made much of the fact that he had been arrested during a periodic raid at the brothel located tactlessly behind the Vedungalserry jail. The rest of his class had been awe-struck, even if Satyen was older than most of them, having rarely spent less than two years in each class. His father was just waiting till he could get Satyen a job in the trucking firm he worked for; till then it seemed like a good idea to keep Satyen in school. His father thought it would keep him out of trouble; if only he knew.

Anyway, despite Satyen's advanced years, his friends had been impressed. Satyen was known to stand outside the women's college and whistle at the girls, and once had even been hit over the head with an umbrella by an irate nun from the convent school who had not appreciated his comparison of her to Silk Smitha. But visiting the brothel? That was in another league altogether. 'How was it?' they asked, 'What all did she do?' But Satyen had only smiled enigmatically and they had whispered that it was probably too X-rated to even recount. What Satyen had never told anybody, not even Babu or Jolly, was that he had been arrested before anything could transpire and had received such a hiding from his father post-arrest that he had never again entertained the idea of returning to investigate further.

Nevertheless he was clearly more experienced than the hapless Babu, who only stood by him and smirked bashfully when Satyen sang ribald Malayalam songs at the dancing girls who loitered outside the Blue Moon bar every evening. Why, Babu had even pulled Satyen away when he had tried to chat up the prostitute who frequented the inter-city bus station at MG Road. Clearly Babu needed tutoring; Satyen had taken it upon himself to act as Babu's mentor and guide.

'Eda, idiot, if you like this girl so much, what are you doing hanging around here like a pair of testicles? Go meet her!'

Babu had stared back at him. It was true that he would like nothing more than to see Kamala again, but the thought of being so bold as to actually go and meet her was terrifying. As it is, it had struck him that he had not uttered a single word during his conversation with Kamala in the Devaki Nilayam kitchen, not beyond a monosyllabic Yes or No reply to her queries. All he had been planning to do was daydream about her some more and then admire her from afar at Bindu's engagement and wedding.

'I can't do that!'

‘Why not, shit-eater? Are you scared?’

‘Poda, frog-lover! Of course not! But . . . but she’s working in the Nair house. As it is, that Hidimbi Devaki Amma glares at me whenever she sees me. I can’t hang around there! She’ll probably kick me out if she catches me!’

‘Hmm,’ Satyen had said, blowing a thoughtful smoke ring. ‘I’m sure that fatso sleeps in the afternoon?’

‘That’s true . . .’

‘Aha! So just sneak in then on some pretext. Hang around your beautiful Kamala as much as you can. Otherwise, what’s the use?’

‘But what do I say? I was all tongue-tied in front of her.’

‘Aiiyyo, you are smitten even more than I thought. This speechlessness, a classic sign of true love.’

‘Poda!’ Babu had exclaimed, but had simpered nonetheless.

‘Ah, then this calls for a careful approach,’ Satyen had said as he stubbed out the butt of his beedi on the grass. Jolly had nodded intelligently. ‘It’s quite simple really. Women are easy to please. And they like to talk! You might find your attention wandering, but just listen to everything she has to say. Or pretend to, at least. Compliment her frequently. Take her little presents. Pretend to like whoever or whatever she likes. Rubbish whoever or whatever she dislikes. Understood?’

Babu had understood.

Before he could lose courage, he had skulked into Devaki Nilayam the very next afternoon. Devaki Nilayam had always filled him with open-mouthed awe, with its front garden as large as a maidan, its ceilings that rose like a temple gopuram, its cavernous rooms, each as large as Ration Raaman’s entire BTN Nagar house. That day, given his intentions, the house had made him decidedly jittery, and he had hesitated by the gate for a while. He would have probably bolted if he had seen anyone, but the whole house had seemed to be hibernating, including the two mutts on the front porch. The rabid one, what was he called, Pooch or Mooch or something, had raised his head and growled a little bit, but had seemed far too sapped by the afternoon heat to break out into a full-throated bark or an all-out assault. Babu had darted quickly around the side, but had almost turned back when he had seen Keshavan Nair and his sister-in-law Renjini sitting on the veranda that ran by the side of the house. But they had been deep in conversation and hadn’t seemed to notice him so he had scooted on, past the well outside the



storerooms and towards the kitchen.

From the corner of the rice granary, he had caught a glimpse of Kamala at lunch – she had been sitting in the kitchen veranda before a huge heap of red rice and had been sucking heartily on a fish bone. Sensing his gaze, she had looked up and given him a dimpled, if half-hearted, smile. His heart had gone into a familiar callisthenic routine and he had smiled back timorously and advanced towards her. But damn, as he had neared, he had seen that the scoundrel Thankappan was also sitting beside her, his lungi improperly askew, slurping up a pond of curds noisily.

Babu was more than familiar with the rogue Thankappan, whose second wife lived two doors away from Satyen. There was little to suggest that Thankappan could be irresistible to women but somehow he had managed to amass three wives and a slew of children, and what's more, managed to retain all of them without contributing a paisa to any of the three households. Satyen speculated that it was his luxuriant moustache which he oiled and turned up at the ends to resemble a buffalo's horns. Or perhaps the strength he derived from the bottle or two of toddy he tossed back every evening. Or the kilos of beef he was rumoured to eat; his first wife was the butcher's daughter.

Babu had given him a mirthless smile and Thankappan had nodded impassively.

'Enda, what brings you here?' Kamala had asked, as Babu had drawn close. 'Did your mother send you to give me some more news about the great wedding?' Her voice had been thick with sarcasm but Babu had come prepared with Satyen's advice: Pretend to like whoever or whatever she likes. *Rubbish whoever she dislikes.*

'Oh my mother's a catty witch,' he had said warmly, slouching against the veranda pillar. 'I was just passing by and came to say hello. And,' he had added in what he later considered as nothing less than a stroke of genius, 'sorry for my mother's horrible behaviour.'

Babu had felt relief wash over him as Kamala's resentful scowl had turned to surprise and then a hesitant amusement. She had rewarded him with one of her high-voltage smiles and Babu had felt his legs wobble like those pieces of multicoloured halva Ambika kunju used to bring from Bombay.

Kamala had motioned him to come sit by her side. She had drawn up a plate for him, ladled out some of the gravy from the fish curry and transferred a small mound of rice from her plate. He had already eaten, but the promise of

getting even a grain of rice that had been touched by those beloved hands had been irresistible. Babu had gulped the food down, and complimented Kamala about the deliciousness of the fish curry, even though his grandmother's curry was actually more fiery, more tangy, more satisfying. Thankappan had sat watching them expressionlessly for a while and then had slowly heaved himself up. Babu knew that he would take a siesta under the shade of a tree, smoke a leisurely beedi and do about half an hour of desultory gardening before coming back for his evening tea. That gave Babu plenty of time alone with Kamala – in any case he had to leave before Devaki Amma woke up.

Of course after lunch and a brief sit-down, Kamala had been busy with chores – grinding the batter for the next day's breakfast idlis, pounding rice for puttu, collecting firewood from the mound that Thankappan kept in the far corner of the overgrown backyard. But Babu had been content to trail behind her, watching her breasts heave as she worked the pound and her arms jiggle as she rotated the stone to grind the idli batter.

Kamala hadn't seemed to mind, so Babu had sneaked in the next afternoon as well and then the afternoon after that, and then, plucking up courage, had looked in a couple of mornings as well. In a fortunate turn of events, one morning the Nair girl Geetha had chanced upon his cycle leaned up against the wall. He had caught her looking wistfully at it and had offered to let her ride it. And when she had revealed self-consciously that she didn't know how to ride, he had offered to teach her. In retrospect, it had been an inspired move, for it had turned out to be the perfect cover.

Now he had become quite the regular at Devaki Nilayam. Usually after about an hour of pushing the Nair girl around, she tired of practice and suggested they continue the next day, leaving Babu free to hang around the kitchen for a few hours to admire Kamala as she went about her work. To prevent Valsamma, the old cleaning and helper lady, from raising an eyebrow, he often carted buckets of water upstairs for her for mopping the floors, and even helped her clear the cobwebs from the living room ceiling with a long broom, all the while listening to the retinue of ailments she claimed to have.

He had been worried about the temporary odd-job girl, but she turned out to be good old Gaurikutty. Gaurikutty was not only another Kuttipuram neighbour, but also in his school and although she was a couple of years younger than him, Babu had failed enough classes to have finally caught up with her. Last year she had sat right in front of him, giggling at the piece of

chalk Satyen had thrown at Manikandan the maths teacher, and passing an occasional Glucose biscuit or banana from her tiffin back to them during recess. She was even more happy to see him: 'Aiyyo, finally somebody to cry to! You don't know what all I've had to listen to over here from that fat she-devil!' She would not pose any threat, he could see. Thankappan gave him an appraising look now and then, but remained stonily silent.

If Devaki Amma or Ambika kunju or Lalitha kunju came into the kitchen he vaporized into the back garden and pretended to be deeply absorbed in dusting the mud off his cycle tyres or polishing his head lamp. Devaki Amma would purse her lips and give him a flinty look, but till now she had not voiced an objection.

As for Kamala, if he wasn't mistaken, she was warming up to him quite nicely. She had taken to keeping aside a little lunch for him, even sharing a precious piece of chicken or fish on more than one occasion. In return he fed her tasty bits of gossip about Bindu and Sundarikutty.

'You know how my mother always brags that Bindu is an expert seamstress?' he confided once. 'I promise you, the only thing she knows to stitch is collars and zips – that's what she's been in charge of all these years at the garment factory. And she's too dumb to have picked up anything on her own!'

'The only thing that glutton Venu was interested in when he came to see Bindu was the jackfruit payasam my grandmother made,' he revealed to an agog Kamala another time. 'My mother lied that Bindu had made it and he was very impressed – Venu should be marrying my grandmother actually!' And Kamala clapped her hands together and doubled over with gleeful laughter, even leaning over to hold on to his shoulder for support.

Yes, she was definitely warming up, he could tell.

## Thirteen

Geetha quickly brushed her teeth and washed her face, then slipped past her still sleeping sister and cousin, and hurried downstairs. She bade quick good mornings as she passed the adults who were gossiping around the dining table over tea, then slipped into the corridor to the kitchen.

This had become her routine now. As usual a cheery chorus of greetings welcomed her. Gaurikutty was winnowing rice in the straw moram. Valsamma was blowing her nose deafeningly into the towel draped over her blouse; she had contracted a raging cold during the hottest time of the year. 'I think it's TB, I have all the symptoms,' she was telling Gaurikutty, who was smiling cheerfully at the news. Kamala was already by the hearth, and by the aromas that wafted over to her, Geetha knew it was going to be puttlu and kadala curry for breakfast that day.

'How do you want your egg today, kunjay?' Kamala asked, and Geetha placed an order for a boiled egg as she perched herself on the counter and reached for the glass of hot Horlicks that was waiting for her. She blew away the skin that had formed on the surface and gulped the Horlicks down as soon as she could. She then filled a huge plate with milk and went out into the kitchen veranda where the cats were all waiting expectantly, tails high and waving languidly in anticipation. The cats at Devaki Nilayam were opportunistic nomads who came and went as they liked, and as they rarely stayed long enough to warrant a name, they were never christened. This summer there was a tabby with a litter of four scrawny kittens, and a mangy black and white cat, which only dared to venture in once the tabby had left with her litter. The kittens wrestled with each other and gambolled around their mother as she drank thirstily.

Then Geetha filled two enamel bowls with more milk and took them to the dining room for Goldie and Pooch. Goldie waddled up immediately, but Pooch was acting pricey as usual. Apoopan dragged the bowl towards him, dipped his wrinkled finger in the bowl and held his milk-coated digit to Pooch. Pooch sniffed at it suspiciously, as though he had never seen milk in his life, and gave it a tentative lick. This little game went on for some time, as it did every day, till finally Pooch deigned to get up and drink from the bowl. 'Spoiling him silly,' Ammooma muttered. Geetha had tried feeding him the

same way, but Pooch had only growled at her, and she had retreated hastily.

After breakfast, she was back in the kitchen. Some days, Babu would come by in the morning itself and she would hop onto his cycle immediately. She had jumped at the opportunity to learn how to cycle. She had been nagging Raju and Unnikuttan for years, but Unnikuttan had fobbed her off on to Raju and after one futile lesson, Raju had got impatient and tired of running behind her on the cycle. She knew that once they were back in Bombay Ambika would refuse to let her learn, quoting recent accident statistics, which she always seemed to have at her fingertips, and citing the case of a friend of a friend who had just been run over by a bus while cycling home from work. But in Ambalakunnu, with a whole traffic-less compound to learn in, Ambika would have no objections.

Nevertheless it had been embarrassing at first, pedalling laboriously by the side of the house, with Babu jogging behind her, his right hand keeping the cycle steady. A couple of times, when he had loosened his grip so that she could try to balance on her own, she had fallen heavily, and despite Babu's straight face, she was sure that he was laughing inwardly. Sometimes, Vikki and Raju, or worse, Mini and Divya, would be watching sardonically from a window – and that was sure to bring her down in an ungraceful heap. But one magical morning she had not only stayed up, but pedalled at least fifteen feet on her own, before she came to the sharp turn at the centrepiece of potted plants in the garden and had had to put her feet down to stop. Now she could negotiate the turns, control the brakes and the pedals; all that remained was to learn how to jump on to the cycle and pedal away in one easy motion like Babu did.

She registered with satisfaction that Mini and Divya no longer watched her cycle, and if she required further proof of their envy, she got it when green-eyed little Rema tossed her head and said, 'Huh! I learnt cycling *last year!*' Geetha maintained a stately silence, but she knew that the training wheels had never been taken off Rema's junior cycle, and inside she glowed with triumph.

When she was finally winded and dripping with sweat, she would rest the cycle against the wall and duck into the dark recesses of the kitchen. Despite the wood fire and all the cooking, the far corners of the kitchen were always cool, just like the rest of the house; it was the high ceilings, Unnikuttan said, and the tiled roof. She would sit fanning herself while Kamala went about her work and Babu sat around chatting. Chat she could too now, for Malayalam

was rolling off her tongue like a pebble down a slope; the amount of time she spent in the kitchen, she had had plenty of practice.

On the days that Babu was late, or didn't come at all, there was enough to observe or do in the kitchen. Watch Valsamma starch all the saris with the kanji water left over after the rice was drained. Hold one end of each sari as Valsamma held the other, and pull, pull, tug, tug till the starched saris were straight enough to fold and throw over the line in the backyard to dry. Stand guard on the kitchen veranda when Meen Mommad came calling, koo-oo, koo-oo, so that the cats didn't run away with the fish, and Kamala could choose the best of the lot from his basket and go in to get Ammooma's approval. Observe Thankappan produce a small box from a fold in his mundu, remove a bright green betel leaf, smear it with a pink paste of chunambu and cram it with broken areca nuts, fold the leaf and stuff it into his mouth, and watch him eat it slowly like a cow chewing its cud, till finally his lips were stained a startling red. Cringe but be mesmerized as Gaurikutty casually squashed with her thumbnail the bright green worms that hid in the payaru she was shelling. Help Thankappan light a bonfire to get rid of the kitchen waste and watch it simmer down into a heap of fragrant ashes.

Occasionally she would venture into the dining room to raid the meat safe for the laddus and jalebis and bolis and murukkus that were always stocked there for the children inside a big aluminium tin. And in the kitchen, there were goodies that she had first right to: tender coconut water, forever on tap from the coconuts in the storeroom, and kattan kaapi, black coffee sweetened with jaggery, best had from a small little tumbler when it was raining outside, Kamala said. Ammooma grimaced a bit when she saw Geetha drinking from the tumbler reserved for Kamala; Ammooma had feudal notions about such things.

Ammooma was apparently not pleased about her budding friendship with Babu either. Once she had come in when they were both sitting on the kitchen floor bent over some coconut palm leaves, which Babu was teaching Geetha how to intertwine to make into a box; he had already fashioned a giant pair of spectacles for her with another set of leaves, much to her delight.

'Don't you have anything else to do?' Ammooma had asked Babu brusquely, and he had got to his feet in a hurry.

'See Ammooma, see what Babu made,' Geetha had exclaimed, brandishing the giant spectacles in front of her eyes.

'Very nice,' Ammooma had said, but in a tepid way, and Geetha had felt as

though a bucket of cold water had been poured over her enthusiasm.

Ammooma had turned to leave, just in time to catch Kamala smiling reassuringly at Babu, and that had pushed her over the edge. ‘What about you?’ she had ranted. ‘Do you think I’ve hired you just to show your teeth and flaunt your chest? Go and do your work! And at least put a towel over that blouse!’ Geetha had almost fainted with embarrassment, but Kamala had just grinned insouciantly back at Ammooma; apparently, she was quite inured to Ammooma’s sharp tongue. There had been a brief uncomfortable silence after Ammooma had left, and then, to Geetha’s relief, Kamala and Babu had dissolved into chuckles.

Later as she sat in the Library Room (a single bookcase qualified the room to be named so) flipping over old albums, giggling at Keshavan Maama’s changing hairstyles over the years and Sukumaran Maama’s adolescent moustache, she had overheard Ammooma and Ambika talking in the room next door. Ammooma was telling Ambika that it was not right for Geetha to be spending so much time with the maids, especially when there was a young boy around. ‘I don’t know why he’s hanging around here all the time, I think he’s taken a shine to that Kamala!’

‘Oh stop it Amma, he’s just a boy! And he’s been teaching Geetha how to cycle.’

‘No he’s not just a boy, he’s a teenager – fifteen years if he’s a day! Have you seen him, all dressed up, in pants and T-shirts, as though he’s some big shot? And those sunglasses on his head all the time? Who does he think he is? Failed many times also, from what Valsamma told me, and hanging around with all kinds of company too!’

‘For God’s sake Amma, fifteen years is a boy! He’s just a year older than Raju and Vikki . . . and why shouldn’t he dress well if he wants to? I don’t see you complaining about Vikki and Raju’s clothes!’

‘That’s different . . . they are from good families, used to such things from birth . . . not some newly rich from the servant class.’

‘Amma! That’s a horrible thing to say!’

‘What horrible? You and your communist notions! They may think they’re like us because they suddenly dress to the nines and have some money to spare, but they aren’t, you know. I’m telling you, we are all experienced in these things. It’s not appropriate for Geetha to be hanging around with him, people will talk.’

Geetha had abandoned the albums and scampered off, embarrassed and

disturbed. It had not even occurred to her that her time in the kitchen, her friendship with Babu and Kamala and the rest, could be considered inappropriate. She had avoided Ammooma's eye for a couple of days, and had stayed away from the kitchen, but then when she thought about it, Ammooma had always had archaic views about such things; it was common knowledge. Her stormy wrangles with the domestic help were a source of acute embarrassment – and intense amusement – for her children and grandchildren. 'They're going to cut off your head when the revolution comes you know,' Keshavan Maama often said, to which Ammooma's stock reply was, 'Poda! You go marry Valsamma if you want!'

So Geetha had shrugged off what she had overheard and returned to the entertainment in the kitchen, and neither Ambika nor Ammooma had brought the subject up with her.

Then it came up that Babu knew how to swim. 'Like a fish,' Kamala confirmed. Geetha gazed at him open-mouthed. She had always equated swimming with membership to some swanky club and a large amount of enterprise; the only girls in her school who knew how to swim were the adventurous ones who wore their uniforms at mid-thigh length and whose parents were members of Radio Club or the CCI. Vikki and Divya had the good fortune of a pool at their home in Delhi, and yet Divya had never bothered to learn and Vikki could just about stay afloat.

'Where did you learn?' she asked Babu, wonder-struck.

'Oh in the river, in the pond, in the sea,' he shrugged. Geetha's eyes widened even more – he could swim in the sea?

'You want me to teach you?' Babu asked, and of course she did, but what would Ammooma say? She tried to broach the topic with Ambika, but her mother quashed the notion immediately with a 'Don't even think about it!'

Oh, well.

Geetha put the thought out of her head; truth be told, the thought of donning a swimsuit and being tutored by a half-dressed Babu was even more daunting than the idea of learning swimming in the sea. She was half-relieved that she could blame her mother for refusing permission.

She contented herself with flying by Mini and Divya on the cycle whenever she got an opportunity, and taking satisfaction from their pointedly averted faces. She gleefully noticed that it was they who seemed bored and aimless now, loitering around the front garden, kicking at the sand, slouching on the chairs in the veranda, pretending to be immersed in their novels. After days



of ribbing from Vikki and Raju, and endless jokes about green cat eyes and leopard-like prowling, the hubbub around their budding romance novel appeared to have died a natural death; either the boys had finally tired of the subject or had been dampened by the girls' steely silence. The manuscript itself had mysteriously disappeared after the girls had managed to snatch it back from Vikki and Raju, but a couple of days later Thankappan was asking Kamala about the remains of a book jacket lying at the bottom of the pile of kitchen scraps that had been burnt in the backyard.

## Fourteen

‘It’s going to rain,’ Jolly said. It was one of those days that had started at a slow simmer and had worked itself up to a blistering broil. Even under the shade of a tree, Babu’s shirt stuck to his back, and Satyen’s singlet was ringed wet under the armpits.

Jolly wiped his face and neck with a midnight-blue handkerchief. ‘I’m telling you, you priceless fools, I can smell it in the air.’

Satyen and Babu looked doubtfully at the cloudless sky but didn’t contradict him; Jolly had an uncanny way of being right about such things. And Babu had more interesting information to impart.

Things were coming together quite nicely, he told them. Just the other day, when he had confided to Kamala that Bindu’s engagement sari was of a hideous cow-dung hue which didn’t suit her at all, she had patted him on the hand, sending a bolt of electricity right up to his head, like the time he had stuck a screw in a socket when he was seven. And when he had not turned up at Devaki Nilayam for two days (his blasted mother had kept him busy cycling around Ambalakunnu hand-delivering wedding invitations), she had told him she’d missed him.

‘Patted your hand, hanh? Told you she missed you, hmm? First-class, monay,’ Satyen said acerbically. Jolly sniggered. ‘If it was me, I’d have had my way with her in the bushes long ago!’

‘Chee, chee! Filthy swine!’ Babu twittered. ‘She’s not that kind of girl.’

‘What do you mean she’s not that kind of girl? Do you know that her mother, Parvathi Chechi, was the biggest slut in Kuttipuram? Yes, that’s right! Uma, the drunkard’s wife, could have taken lessons from her.’

‘Poda thendi! I don’t believe you!’

‘It’s true,’ Jolly affirmed gloomily.

‘I’m telling you,’ Satyen continued. ‘She was my mother’s cousin’s husband’s cousin, and I swear, after her husband died, she was looser than the elastic on an old chaddi!’

Jolly snorted, and Babu looked at him malevolently.

‘And do you know how she died? She was found floating in the sea off Trivandrum. They said it was some boat mishap, but everybody knows that she was killed by some jealous wife.’

‘Shut up!’

‘How do you not know this, sister-kisser? Some neighbour you are!’

Babu chewed his lip thoughtfully and looked at Satyen with distaste. ‘Anyway, even if that was true, which it isn’t, just because her mother was like that, doesn’t mean she is.’

‘Okay, if you say so, you spineless faggot. You just keep ogling her silently while our randy old Thankappan makes a woman out of her in the storeroom!’

Satyen laughed as Babu aimed a blow at his shoulder and missed. Between giggles, Jolly tried to say something reassuring but Babu was already stalking off.

He jumped on to his bicycle and pedalled furiously away, away from the now guffawing Satyen and Jolly. The bastards! Should he take them seriously? Were they just pulling his leg? Or was there some truth in what they said?

Just then there was a loud, guttural rumble, and Babu looked up to find a huge sullen cloud directly overhead. Damn that Jolly! It was the first thunderstorm of that summer, and Babu knew it would be fierce but brief, offering a few deceptive hours of relief from the heat before leaving behind a pall of humidity. Luckily he found he had arrived quite unthinkingly at the Mahadeva Temple and just as he fled inside, leaving his cycle in a heap by the steps, the cloud burst forth in a torrent of fat, warm raindrops.

Babu blinked in the sudden darkness of the temple. He was surprised to find that the nada was open. It was not yet evening and the priest was fond of his afternoon naps. But there it was, the door to the sanctum open and the priest standing by the lingam as though waiting for him.

It must be a sign. Babu realized with a start of guilt that he had quite forgotten to come to the temple and complete his offerings. Before his examinations he had come here praying for divine intervention, promising to offer milk and honey if the good Lord would somehow, by some miracle, help him finally pass the seventh standard. And when the good Lord had sent the miracle – in the form of Jolly sitting right next to him within cheating distance – Babu had clean forgotten to uphold his end of the deal.

After righting the wrong, Babu strolled around the temple feeling calmer. He completed three circumambulations of the shrine, prostrated one last time before the lingam and rang the temple bell in farewell.

Outside, the rain had abated and the smell of wet mud hung sweet in the air. It was quiet but for the sound of water dripping intermittently from the trees

and rain gutters. He looked at his cycle, then decided to take a detour. He squelched through the mud till he reached the temple pond. Nobody was around, so he slipped quietly out of his clothes, climbed down the steps and dove into the green water, startling a contemplative frog, which paddled off with a frightened croak. If the priest saw him, he would be in trouble; you were only supposed to submerge yourself enough to wash away your sins, not lark around as though it was a public beach. He had been rebuked before, when he had been showing off high dives from the steps to Satyen and Jolly, but he didn't care now; he needed to think, and the cool, green water always quietened his mind. He resurfaced and crawled around aimlessly for a while before flipping onto his back and closing his eyes against the sun, which was now shining vengefully. As the water lapped around his ears and a school of tiny fish nibbled agreeably on his submerged heels, he felt at peace. He knew what he had to do.

Of course the calmness and certainty had left him by the next day. Somehow he managed to drag himself to Devaki Nilayam, his stomach fluttering with anxiety like hens at a coop when you went to seize their eggs. When he saw Kamala in the kitchen veranda vigorously grating a coconut he almost turned around and fled. But at that moment she lifted her gaze and called out to him and there was no turning back.

Babu sat on the creaking wooden bench and as Kamala prattled on about a fight she had had with Valsamma that morning, he looked beyond the top of her head, to the cleft of her breasts, clearly visible from his vantage point. This was the time to act. He had no excuse – nobody was around, not even Valsamma or Gaurikutty. Even Thankappan was out front, potting a ficus. Should he? Shouldn't he? How would she react? Would she take offence? Would she get up and slap him across the face? Or worse, go running to Devaki Amma and complain? Or would . . .

Kamala looked up from the fluffy white pile of freshly grated coconut. 'I told that Valsamma, she should be . . . ay, what's the matter, my dear Babu?'

Babu blushed, and without allowing himself to think anymore, he blurted out, 'No nothing's the matter . . . At least . . . at least, not now, when I can just sit here and look at you.'

There, he had said it. He waited tensely for her reaction.

Kamala's eyebrows rose in surprise. And then, miraculously, a smile lit up her face. And before Babu could let out a grateful breath, she had lifted herself up from the coconut grater and leaned over and pinched his cheek.

At that moment, Valsamma came into the kitchen, so Babu had to be content with the pinch on his cheek. Nevertheless it was more than he had ever hoped for. He floated on a cloud of bliss for the rest of the day, and at night, he dreamed explicit dreams of Kamala. Satyen had been right after all, he had to pump up the stove a bit, so to speak. Kamala was clearly receptive; it was all up to him.

Babu mustered up enough courage to compliment Kamala on the colour of her pavada the next day and the thickness of her hair the day after. She dimpled and thanked him, so on his next visit, he plucked a rose for her from the bush in the garden. ‘Aiyyo, Devaki Amma will break your fingers if she knows you plucked her roses,’ she said, but inhaled deeply, making her bosom rise like the sea at high tide. She prudently refrained from putting it in her hair but Babu saw her placing it carefully with her clothes and other belongings in the aluminium trunk in the corridor. Encouraged, he bought her a kadala muttai and a *Vanitha* magazine the day after. She was so pleased, popping the muttai into her mouth and flipping through the magazine greedily, that he ventured as far as brushing against her back on the pretext of squeezing past her in the narrow corridor to the storeroom. Every nerve, every pore tingled at the touch, but he didn’t dare to even look at her face to gauge her reaction. But later that evening, she ruffled his hair as she passed him on her way to the bathroom in the backyard to have her bath. His knees almost buckled in excitement and he had to prop himself up against the wall for a good ten minutes before he could compose himself.

Unfortunately he was cornered by his mother for the next few days and kept busy with engagement chores – cleaning the house, shifting the furniture, helping Kannan put up the pandal that stretched across the street from their house leaving only a tiny path for cyclists and pedestrians to pass. The neighbours next door didn’t mind; they had all been invited to what was going to be the biggest engagement in a long time. Kannan and Sundarikutty had decided that the increased head count was a small price to pay compared to the cost they would have had to incur on a party hall.

The engagement was now almost upon them, and the wedding had been fixed, as decided, for a couple of weeks later. Among other things Sundarikutty had been giving some thought to all the girls that were going to be in Bindu’s ashtamangalyam at the wedding, all young unmarried girls as protocol dictated. There was Sundarikutty’s niece, Indulekha, who she wasn’t much bothered about, for Indulekha was cross-eyed and had inherited the

family buck teeth. But then there was Kannan's niece Malathi, the daughter of that troublemaker Omanakutty, and Kannan's cousins' daughters Usha and Hema, who would not have turned many heads, but in Sundarikutty's mind, they were all still more arresting than Bindu. And she knew for a fact that their parents were looking out for grooms for them, so they would be wearing their best saris and the finest ornaments. Surely enough to turn attention away from Bindu? And then of course there was Kamala, who didn't have any ornaments to boast of, but managed, wherever she went, to distract attention with a lift of her bosom or a high-pitched tinkling laugh. What if the assembled guests barely looked at Bindu and turned their attention to one of these girls? Or worse, just as the thaali was about to be tied around Bindu's neck and the nadaswaram was building to a crescendo, what if Nalini or Raaman or – oh, the thought was almost too much to bear, Mahadeva! – Venu felt a pang of regret at having netted only plain old Bindu?

The ornaments she could do nothing about, nor Kamala's intoxicating charm, but she could blunt their force just a little bit. So Sundarikutty declared grandly that as a token of appreciation to the ashtamangalyam girls she was going to buy them all saris not only for the wedding but for the engagement as well. The announcement was met with great excitement, and Sundarikutty had already bought the cheapest, dowdiest, ugliest saris in preparation.

Now Bindu and she were fretting over how they could keep from revealing the saris before the big days; there was always the danger that one of the girls would speak up, saying she didn't like her sari, and that was all it would take to spark a premature rebellion. But blouses had to be stitched, petticoats had to be bought.

'So offer to get the blouses and petticoats for them too,' Babu said, and they both looked at him as though he was Birbal spouting words of wisdom to Akbar.

'Yes, that's it!' Sundarikutty cried. 'Yes, it means a little extra cost but it's worth it, no?'

'Completely,' he agreed.

'Okay, we'll need old blouses and petticoats for measurements. Should be easy, but Kamala?'

Babu's heart pounded at the mention of the lady love's name.

'Tcheh!' Sundarikutty ejaculated. 'I really didn't want to go to that old whale's house right now, before the engagement. Otherwise who knows, she

may expect me to invite the whole damn Nair family to the engagement too! Frankly, I don't want them at the wedding either, but that your father won't allow me – somehow he agreed to not invite them for the engagement.'

Babu sat up. 'I'll go!' he volunteered. 'I need to go to Devaki Nilayam anyway . . . the girl Geetha . . . she wants to practise on my cycle.'

Sundarikutty looked at him lovingly.

So here he was, back in the kitchen of Devaki Nilayam where he belonged. Kamala was frowning over a cauldron of mixed vegetables, her face soaked in sweat, her hair in slight disarray. She had never looked more beautiful, he thought.

'What, does she think I can't buy my own blouse?' she asked belligerently.

'No, no,' Babu comforted. 'She's buying it for everybody, all the girls in the ashtamangalyam.'

'How come she's being so generous? It's not her style. Phoooh, phoooh,' she blew at the fire through the hollow iron pipe so that the flames shot up directly under the pan.

'Oh, I don't know, I think she's just relieved to get Bindu married – who would have thought that ugly little thing would find a groom?'

Kamala gave him a sidelong glance. 'Oh, don't try to butter me up!'

'No, it's true!'

'Or . . . I know! . . . She's going to buy some ugly old saris for us, so that we won't show up Bindu! Am I right?'

Babu remained silent.

'Am I right?' Kamala persisted menacingly.

'Oh, who cares?' Babu asked. 'You can only look beautiful, even in the ugliest of saris.'

Kamala relented. 'You know what? I don't care. But the truth is, I can give you an old petticoat but I don't have a sari blouse for measurements. When I work I wear only pavada-blouse – or a nightie – the last sari I wore was years ago, and the blouse is tight.'

'I'm not surprised,' Babu said bravely, allowing his gaze to fall to her chest and bracing himself for an earful for his insolence.

But Kamala laughed in spite of herself. 'Poda!' she said, in a softer tone.

Sensing her change of mood, Babu edged up to her. 'I'll be happy to take your measurements.'

Kamala was giggling now. He sidled even closer and placed a tentative hand on her shoulder to turn her towards him.

Laughing, Kamala turned to slap his hand away – and froze.

Babu whirled around. For a split second, he had thought it was Devaki Amma, but it was only the girl Geetha standing uncertainly in the doorway. He backed away from Kamala as casually as he could.

‘Come here kunjay,’ Kamala called Geetha in. ‘Here, I’ll show you how avial is made.’

Geetha came in, and although she didn’t really meet his eye, Babu was quite sure that she hadn’t seen or heard much. Soon he made an excuse to leave and when Geetha’s back was turned, he mouthed, ‘I’ll just tell them to make the blouse EXTRA large’ at Kamala. He could see a giggle bubbling up within her and with a grin and a final wink, he made for the door.



## Fifteen

Kamala ran the small red comb down her thick hair. There was no need for Sundarikutty to have invited her for the engagement – she was after all, only Bindu’s fourth cousin. Gaurikutty had not been invited, nor Valsamma or Thankappan, even though they all lived in Kuttipuram. It was pure malice, she knew.

Who had such a lavish ceremony for an engagement anyway? Even rich people like the Nairs never had more than a simple exchange of rings at home before a lighted lamp and a photo of God, and witnessed only by the closest of family – even that ritual was considered optional at best, ostentatious at worst. But Gaurikutty had told her that Sundarikutty had pulled out all the stops – there would be over a hundred guests, a pandal to accommodate them all, a full-scale catered sadya, music and all. ‘Ration Raaman and Nalini insisted, and Sundarikutty was not happy at first,’ Valsamma revealed, ‘but now she acts as though it was all her idea! “Oh, the engagement will be as grand as the wedding – no problem! I have only one daughter, who else will I spend on?” she keeps telling anyone who will listen.’

Kamala wished she didn’t have to go. It would have probably been easy to make some excuse about not being able to get leave with all the guests in the house. But she didn’t put it past Sundarikutty to check with Devaki Amma. She could just imagine the old bat crowing: *Poor Kamala, I invited her for the engagement, but it was too much for her. Made some excuse about not getting leave but I know for a fact that’s not true. What to do? She always had a jealous streak when it came to Bindu . . .*

No, she would have to just grit her teeth, set her jaw and go. She ran a handful of coconut oil down her hair, pulled it back, wound it into a thick bun, and secured it with four bobby pins. Then she took the fragrant garland of jasmine that had just been strung with fresh flowers plucked from the bush by the dining room, and encircled the bun prettily.

As she dug some kohl eyeliner out of its small round box with her middle finger and checked her reflection in the oil-coated mirror in the kitchen, she wondered what Sundarikutty thought about Babu being in Devaki Nilayam all the time. She lined her lower lids generously. Perhaps the musty old witch didn’t know?

A shiver of excitement ran through her. Of course she didn’t know!

Sundarikutty would have been livid if she had known of Babu's silly infatuation.

Silly, that's what it was, of course, for Babu was just a boy. A boy with a crush obviously, but a boy nevertheless. What was he, fourteen, fifteen? His attempts at flirtation had been laughably clumsy, although flattering. On the other hand, by his own admission, he was friends with that Satyen fellow who Kamala had heard was quite a cad . . . hmmm. How much of a boy, Kamala wondered . . . Perhaps she would have to find out.

With renewed zest, Kamala wound the sari around her waist and threw it across her shoulder. Babu had brought it over the evening before, and as expected it was designed to excite as little comment as possible, command no attention whatsoever. It was a strange blend of mud-brown and bhasmam-grey with not even a hint of a pattern to relieve the monotony, or a smidgen of zari. And it felt like it was made from a mixture of sackcloth and coconut fibre, so rough it was. Well, there were other ways to spice up the sambar, weren't there? Kamala hiked up the pallu so that it just revealed the curve of her bosom and the nip of her waist. Then she put on the fourteen-carat gold chain – the only thing her mother hadn't been able to pawn before she died – and the glass bangles she kept for such occasions. She could picture Sundarikutty eyeing her jewellery scornfully, maybe making a disparaging comment or two. Somehow it didn't bother her anymore.

'Aha! Looking like Srividya today, molay,' Thankappan said, as she threw open the bolt and emerged from the kitchen into the veranda. He was husking coconuts with hearty abandon.

She smiled. Thankappan knew that Srividya was her favourite actress. 'Oh, only like her? Not better?' she asked archly. She and Thankappan often exchanged such meaningless pleasantries in the course of their work.

'You have better curves, I will admit.'

'Poda! Three wives not enough for you?' she laughed.

'Not if I can have a fourth!'

'Yes, yes, you just keep plotting on!'

'Oh, come, come, don't think I didn't see you looking up my mundu when I was climbing the coconut tree in the morning!'

'Yes, yes. Only to check if you had something there!'

Thankappan laughed appreciatively at this display of spirit. Kamala giggled and then caught sight of Babu standing diffidently by the well. 'Aha! There is my escort for the morning. All right, Thankappa, my dear! I will see you

later!’

Devaki Amma was sitting on the front veranda, and as they passed, she gave them an appraising look. Kamala noticed her staring disapprovingly at her hiked-up pallu, and she could almost feel her pursing her lips as she got on to the back seat of Babu’s cycle.

It was obvious that Babu had overheard her banter with Thankappan, for he lapsed into a glum silence all the way to Kuttipuram, not cheering up even when she complimented him on his engagement attire of embroidered cream shirt, mundu and a new pair of Rexene chappals. And when she threw a hand around him, ostensibly to steady herself on the back of his cycle, he didn’t respond, even though she felt the heat from his body, and the trembling of his muscles.

A melancholy fell over her as they navigated the narrow streets between the rows of houses in Kuttipuram. It was all so familiar, yet so strange . . . like a childhood friend who had grown unrecognizable over the years. She had played on these very streets, but it seemed like a lifetime ago. She rarely came visiting nowadays. She wondered why; perhaps she should come down more often.

Kannan’s house had been dressed to the nines with marigolds and mango leaves, and a massive white tent had been thrown across the road to form a pandal. A small dining pandal had been set up next to this main pandal and Diwakaran of Krishna Canteen and Mess was flitting between cauldrons of food that were being stirred with huge ladles by his troop of helper boys. An appetizing fragrance of sambar mixed with the delicious aroma of pal payasam drifted over to her and Kamala’s stomach growled with hunger.

The main pandal was already full of guests. Two big chairs upholstered in red velvet sat on a makeshift stage in the front. On a blue satin curtain behind the chairs, Bindu and Venu’s names were written in yellow chart-paper cut-outs, separated only by a red floral heart with an arrow through it. Malayalam film songs boomed from the loudspeakers set up at the side of the stage. Two columns of foldable metal chairs separated by a central aisle faced the stage. One column was dominated by a sea of chaste white mundus and shirts of staid hues. The other was ablaze with silk saris in orange and red and green and blue – only an occasional older lady had opted for the traditional white mundu-veshti. Kamala looked down at her own ash-mud atrocity and felt suddenly self-conscious.

Kannan came up to greet her. Kamala smiled. She liked him; he had always

been ready with an endearment and a coin or two when she was little. If only he hadn't been married to Sundarikutty, she'd have been more happy about his good fortune.

'Molay, welcome! Did Babu pick you up? Come, come sit! Have you had juice?' He ushered her to the ladies' section and was then wafted away by a group of incoming guests.

Kamala found herself with a glass of sarsaparilla sherbet in her hand and squeezed between Kannan's sister-in-law Omanakutty and his mother Ponamma.

'Enda, if it isn't Kamala mol! Where have you been all these years? Don't come to Kuttipuram any more?' Ponamma peered at her through cataract-curtained eyes.

'No Valliamma, not very often, not since Amma died.'

'Don't you want to come and see your old aunty sometime? Forgotten your relatives now that you have gone uptown eh?' Ponamma slipped a rough, dry palm into Kamala's and held on with surprising strength.

'No, no Valliamma, it is not like that . . .' Kamala took a long draught of the sarsaparilla sherbet – ah, so sweet, so refreshing. She clicked her tongue three times in appreciation.

'And why are you not married? Aren't you older than Bindu?'

'Two years!' said Omanakutty, who had a knack of keeping track of things that were none of her business.

'And, I know she's my granddaughter, but I will admit you are much better looking!'

Kamala smiled gratefully but searched desperately for an escape route. But all the chairs in their row had filled up and she would have to step on many toes to get out. Moreover, a couple of old acquaintances who were far worse gossips than Omanakutty and Ponamma were now lodged in the seats closest to the aisle and would undoubtedly accost her as she tried to make a break for it.

Babu was standing at the other end of the hall and looking at her dolefully, but as she tried to catch his eye and plead for a rescue operation, he looked away.

'Of course, it is obvious that they are not marrying Bindu for her looks. That Ration Raaman's wife must have had one look at the house, the jewellery and poof! What to do, kutty, your mother just wasted all her money and left you with nothing! I do hope that at least your good looks will find you

a man!’

‘Oh, who wants looks nowadays?’ Omanakutty mourned. ‘No, no, you have to have money, gold, enough for dowry. You just keep saving up your money as much as you can kunjay, that is the only way.’

Kamala felt a blanket of gloom settle around her shoulders. Now she remembered why she didn’t come to Kuttipuram more often, why she didn’t take more leave despite the heavy workload at Devaki Nilayam. How was she ever going to save enough for a dowry on the modest salary that she earned? It was true . . . all those men in the room whose eyes were on her at this very moment were either already married or would wed only for a tidy pile of money and a house and a vehicle.

She gave herself a little shake. Of course she shouldn’t listen to these stupid old women who had nothing better to do. If that mousy Bindu, who looked like an underfed mynah and had a brain to match, could find a groom, why couldn’t she? She was young still . . . someone would turn up. Things always sorted themselves out, didn’t they?

A murmur went through the hall, heralding the arrival of the groom’s party, a humongous horde led by Nalini, pasty-faced with powder, and Venu, looking handsome and commanding in his police uniform. ‘He has to go to work immediately after the ceremony,’ Ponamma explained, but Kamala suspected that he just wanted to flaunt his clout. Show-off! The groom’s party was ushered into the VIP seats at the front and Venu was settled on his throne. Kamala kept the smile glued on to her face as the women around her marvelled at Bindu’s good fortune in snagging such a catch. She didn’t let the smile slip even when Bindu arrived in her cow-dung-coloured, but full of zari, sari, bangles up to her elbows, chains down to her flat chest, earrings grazing her bony shoulders and an oddiyanam cinching her waist. Omanakutty remarked on how dramatic the transformation was from plain little rat to bride-to-be.

As the film songs were briefly replaced with a burst of the more appropriate *Seetha kalyanam*, the customary exchange of rings and horoscopes was conducted and blessings were given. Then, just as suddenly, the film songs resumed and there was a mini stampede as guests rushed to the dining pandal where the more fleet-footed of the lot were already sitting cross-legged on jute mats in four long rows and waiting for the boys from Krishna Canteen and Mess to place banana leaves in front of them. Lunch was about to be served.

As she was being swept along with the crowd, Kamala felt a hand on her shoulder, holding her back. It was Sundarikutty, in a glittering polyester sari, looking like one of those street monkeys dressed up for a performance, Kamala thought uncharitably. ‘Good, good Kamala, so you came. I was wondering if you would find it too difficult . . .’ she trailed off, as she appraised Kamala from head to toe. And as expected, ‘Oh nice chain, real?’

Kamala refused to answer.

‘Never mind, never mind . . . not all of us can afford real gold. I am so fortunate to have a husband like Kannan who is responsible enough to make arrangements for his daughter . . . not everybody is like that no? Did you see Venu? Everybody was saying we are so lucky . . .’

Thankfully somebody interrupted Sundarikutty to compliment her on the arrangements and Kamala stole away. She turned away from the dining pandal for she had lost her appetite; she couldn’t face one more inquisition by the two undoubtedly gossipy women whom she would be sandwiched between for lunch. She would make a quiet exit, she decided. That stupid Babu was nowhere to be seen but perhaps she could hitch a lift from the main road – else she would walk all the way back. Anything was better than having to tolerate this stifling atmosphere for even a minute longer.

She trudged up the mud path towards the main road, glad that everybody was too engrossed with lunch to notice her leave. She cursed herself for letting Sundarikutty irritate her like a rash, cursed Sundarikutty for being Sundarikutty, cursed Kannan for his affluence, cursed Bindu for her luck, cursed Omanakutty and Ponamma for their well-meaning words, cursed Venu for his shiny, fair face and police uniform.

‘Ay, where are you going?’ It was Babu, emerging from the grove of coconut trees by the side of the main road where he had been relieving himself. His mundu was hitched up for convenience and he unfurled it respectfully as he saw her, but his voice was gruff.

‘And where have you been?’ she asked crossly. ‘Abandoned me with those old hags and disappeared!’

Babu scowled. ‘Why all this interest in me suddenly? You didn’t even notice that I had come when you were so busy flirting with that bloody Thankappan!’

Kamala laughed and slapped his hand. ‘What? You jealous of Thankappan?’

Babu folded his mundu up again and leaned defiantly against a coconut tree. ‘So what if I am?’

‘Oh you stupid boy! I was just stringing him along so he would carry in some firewood for me in the evening!’ Cheered by his envy, and suddenly remembering her master plan from the morning, she edged closer to him and put on an arch expression. ‘You know that I only have eyes for you!’

Babu straightened up. She was now so close that he could smell the coconut oil and jasmine in her hair. She leaned against the tree and ran one juicy finger down the side of his arm. He shivered. The finger travelled down to his hand and she held it gently. Then ever so slowly, she ran a thumb over the back of his palm, and Babu felt as though he had been set on fire. He knew he should seize the moment, but somehow a terrible torpor had taken him hostage. He just stood there breathing noisily like an octogenarian with a cold. He needn’t have worried. Kamala took another step towards him and now he could feel her warm breath on his face. Then she leaned over and before he knew it, she grazed his cheek quite unabashedly with her soft lips. Then slowly, deliberately, she turned her head and planted a soft, leisurely, delectable kiss on his lips. As her lips parted and he felt her soft tongue in his mouth, motion returned to his limbs, and he grabbed her waist and pulled her clumsily into a tight clinch, quite uncaring of who was watching.

As luck would have it, everybody was immersed in lunch and nobody was watching this scandalous scene unfold not a hundred yards from them. They were partially obscured from the house by the trees and the fixings of the pandal, but if somebody knew where to look . . . Over his shoulder, Kamala could see Sundarikutty flitting among the guests, appraising a bangle here, letting herself break out into a cackle there. Kamala willed her to turn and look over the swarm of guests to the end of the road, to the coconut tree beside which her son was committing acts of treason. But while Sundarikutty seemed to sense somebody’s eye on her and scanned the engagement throng with a slightly bemused look, her gaze stayed in the near distance and she missed all the action.

Now Babu, with a resourcefulness he had never shown before, was pulling Kamala urgently into the grove, away from prying eyes. Was she crossing the line, Kamala thought, but only for a fleeting moment. Then she glanced over once again at Sundarikutty and saw her planting a slobbering kiss on a simpering Bindu. She allowed herself to be drawn into the undergrowth.

## Sixteen

If only the telegram hadn't come, Sundarikutty would lament irrationally after the fact, as though the non-arrival of the telegram would have maintained the status quo. Polio Pathros limped all the way to their front door to deliver it and sat on the front veranda/living/dining/visitor's room, dipping Glucose biscuits in his tea for an agonizingly long time before reading it out to Kannan and Sundarikutty in his halting English.

CALL IMMEDIATELY. STOP. URGENT. STOP. WILHELM KELLER. STOP.

Kannan and Sundarikutty went into a tizzy, wondering why Keller wanted to speak to Kannan so urgently. As agreed, Kannan had sent an estimate of all the costs of the engagement and the wedding to his employer as soon as the match was fixed. They had an understanding that money would be transferred to Kannan's account on the strength of that estimate as soon as Keller received it. Yes, Kannan had padded the estimates, but only a little. And they had made sure that the costs of the dowry had not been specified but had been worked into the other heads. Would Keller want bills for all the expenses? Well, that could be arranged, with a little tact and discretion.

Within an hour Kannan boarded the bus to Trivandrum, for Ambalakunnu had no facilities for international calls. Sundarikutty insisted on accompanying him so that she could coach him as he spoke to his employer, and ensure that Kannan did not let slip any truths. All the way, they fretted about the implications of the telegram.

At Trivandrum they found a phone booth close to the bus stand, booked the call and sat on the wooden bench below the sign that said 'Please Give Exact Change, This is Not a Bank' and bit their nails and chewed their lips for a couple of hours until their call was put through.

'Tell him you need at least half the money to be transferred immediately,' Sundarikutty instructed and Kannan nodded. The transfer was long overdue; they had expected it to arrive before the engagement.

Finally the owner of the booth, a man with the girth and lugubrious air of a buffalo immersed in a stream, waved them over. As Kannan plugged his right ear with one hand and shouted into the telephone in the other, Sundarikutty stood by his side ready to dive in with suggestions. Not that there was much shouting into the phone after the initial pleasantries, just a lot of deafening



‘Yus saar’s, ‘Okay saar’s and ‘Thank you saar’s, before Kannan put the phone down thoughtfully, apparently oblivious to Sundarikutty’s frantic waving and gesticulating by his side.

‘Why didn’t you tell him to transfer half the money?’ she asked, pulling furiously at his sleeve.

Kannan was silent.

‘Are you deaf?’ she asked, her voice rising. Then she saw his expression, and her voice fell. She asked fearfully, ‘What’s the matter?’

Kannan sank back on to the wooden bench and buried his face in his hands. ‘Keller saar has lost his job.’

‘What?’ Sundarikutty asked, pulling his hands away from his face and hoping she had misheard.

‘He lost his job! Sacked! Fired! Kicked out!’

‘What?!’ Sundarikutty sank down on the bench next to him.

‘Ay, aren’t you going to pay your bill?’ asked the booth owner irritably. ‘Go talk somewhere else – this isn’t a coffee house.’

They returned numbly to the bus stand and sat on their haunches by the road discussing the turn of events while waiting for the return bus to Ambalakunnu. Kannan narrated the particulars of the fateful conversation: Wilhelm Keller had been sacked, summarily by all accounts, and was leaving Koovait in a hurry. Given the uncertainties in his own life, he would not be able to bear the costs of Bindu’s engagement and wedding. He would try to wire some money over, but that would be only a fraction of what he had originally promised, and certainly not immediately.

‘Aiyyo, ente Mahadeva,’ Sundarikutty lamented, banging her palm against her forehead with alarming force. ‘I knew it, that white man cannot be trusted!’

‘Don’t say that!’ Kannan reprimanded. ‘He is a good man . . . he promised to recommend me to his company for a job with his successor.’

‘Yes, yes, a whole lot of good that is going to do! I’m sure the company will listen to the recommendation of the person they are sacking!’

Kannan felt the last embers of hope fizzling out. Getting another job would be difficult enough, but more importantly, what was he going to do now? The wedding was just around the corner. Most of his savings had already been depleted with the costs of the engagement – they had been extravagant with the arrangements, nonchalant about the mounting expenses, fully expecting Keller’s transfer to be already sitting in the account. He had somehow

managed to get the wedding hall booked without paying a paisa, only on the strength of the promise that he would pay not the regular twenty-five per cent, but a fifty per cent advance for the hall, if he could pay it a little later than the customary one month in advance. 'Chit fund maturing,' he had explained to Eashwaran, the manager of the hall. 'Why to break unnecessarily just a few days before?' The chit fund was, in actual fact, the money that Wilhelm Keller had promised to send him before the engagement. Eashwaran had of course heard of the legendary Koovait Kannan and had no reason to doubt that he would renege on his word, but he had already reminded Kannan a couple of times that the advance was due. 'Yes, yes,' Kannan had said hastily. 'Sorry I have been so busy with the engagement, no time to go and finish paperwork for getting the chit fund maturity amount. In a couple of days, surely, God promise.'

He could fob Eashwaran off for perhaps another day or two at the most. What was he going to do after that? He had to think fast.

'Maybe I can borrow some money from my brothers,' Kannan ventured as they sat squashed on the bus next to a fishwife with a basketful of fetid fish.

'Are you mad? Do you want it to be all over town that you have lost your job just days before your daughter's wedding? Do you think Ration Raaman will hesitate to break off the wedding? You think that Venu is marrying Bindu for her superstar looks?'

'No, no, I will naturally ask them to keep it quiet.'

'Oh ho! You think that your dear sister-in-law Omanakutty will not go and blabber to the whole world? She'll be only too happy to see the wedding cancelled, so that her daughter will be the first to marry! She was so jealous when Bindu's wedding was fixed.'

'Hmm. Then . . . then why don't we pawn a little bit of the jewellery – it will at least tide us over for the advances till we find some other way.'

'What? And what do I tell Nalini when she comes to inspect Bindu's jewellery? No, no – that lady can judge the weight of gold just by looking at it, I tell you! If she thinks we're cheating them out of dowry she won't hesitate to put a stop to the whole thing. As it is, it is a miracle that she's allowing Venu to marry so early! And I don't trust that pawnbroker's assistant either. He is sure to gossip as well.'

By the time they disembarked at Ambalakunnu, Sundarikutty had convinced Kannan to not tell even his mother, who Kannan had to admit leaked like a poorly thatched roof in a storm. 'Not now, not until the thaali is around your

daughter's neck. Otherwise we may as well just broadcast it on the television!' Kannan wondered how he was going to skirt the old lady's probing questions for over a week.

At home they found that Ponamma had gone over to visit an ailing friend two streets away, so they had a quick family meeting with the children. If Sundarikutty had been hysterical, Bindu was inconsolable, sobbing till snot came out of her nose.

'Don't worry, molay, I will see that everything is sorted out,' Kannan assured her, patting her head, but she continued to blubber. Babu seemed to take the news calmly, continuing to smile in that fatuous way that he had adopted of late. Kannan wondered whether his son was a little shorter of intellect than he had imagined; it was just another thing to add to his long list of worries.

'What is wrong with you?' Sundarikutty shrieked at Babu. 'Don't you care about what happens in this family?'

Babu seemed to come out of a reverie. 'No, no, Amma, of course I do. But what is the point in me also getting hysterical? Calm down, and decide what should be done now.'

Kannan tactlessly suggested confiding in Ration Raaman and cajoling him to postpone the wedding, sending Bindu into another paroxysm of sobbing and Sundarikutty into near delirium.

Finally Sundarikutty decided that there was only one thing to do. There was only one person they could trust enough to help them out while keeping the whole messy business confidential.

'That nice Madhavan saar,' she announced.

Kannan stared at her open-mouthed. 'What? After you threw that sari back at Devaki Amma? And have you even invited her to the wedding yet?'

'I was going to! You know how busy I've been with the engagement and all! And I did not throw the sari back at her! I just said . . . oh let's not get into all that now! You don't know that woman! When I see her all hoity-toity, I just want to take her down a peg or two!'

'And now you want to borrow from her?'

'Not from her, from Madhavan saar.'

'I see! And you think she will not have a say in all of this?'

'Do you have any better ideas?'

Nobody did. It was decided that while Kannan tackled Madhavan saar at his office, the rest of them would go en masse to Devaki Nilayam to soften up

Devaki Amma – the two-pronged approach would surely resolve the problem. Bindu would accompany Sundarikutty to evoke sympathy with her pathetic demeanour and copious tears. There was some discussion as to whether Babu's presence was required. That grin that never seemed to leave his face these days would not help matters; on the other hand, he could keep the rest of the servants occupied so that they would not eavesdrop while Sundarikutty and Bindu were talking to Devaki Amma.

'Don't let them come anywhere near us, you hear?' Sundarikutty commanded. Babu was sitting with his knees drawn to his chest and was playing with his toes and smiling. 'Do you hear, you stupid oaf?'

'Eh?' Babu straightened up.

'Are you deaf? I said, keep Kamala and all occupied while we talk to saar and Amma!'

Babu jumped up and nodded brightly. He would keep Kamala occupied all right! He beamed at Sundarikutty.

Sundarikutty gave him a hard stare and then turned to Kannan. 'Do you think if we return those braces, we can get a refund? They cost the earth!'

Before Kannan could reply, a loud groan announced that Ponamma was back from her visit. They scattered like marbles. By the time Ponamma dragged herself up the front steps and stood at the threshold holding her back melodramatically, Kannan was sitting in the corner pretending to look over some cost estimates for the wedding, Sundarikutty was banging around vessels in the kitchen, Babu was slouched on the floor covering his mouth protectively and Bindu was sitting red-nosed but composed on the brown velvet sofa.

Ponamma gave them a suspicious look, but they all avoided her eye.

## Seventeen

Babu watched as his mother bent to touch the hippo's feet. Devaki Amma stiffened in surprise, then raised her hand in involuntary blessing. Bindu and Babu followed suit as instructed. Sundarikutty had cut a kilo of onions before they had left their house and her face was tear-stained and her eyes still red. Bindu, who had been lachrymose ever since the news had been broken to her, didn't need any such aids. Her face was puffy and her eyes swollen. Babu had been asked to wipe the silly smile off his face and try to at least look as though he cared about what was going on around him. Sundarikutty bemoaned why he couldn't summon up even a crumb of anxiety about his father's sudden unemployment and what it meant for the family, but to Babu it seemed ridiculous to worry when clearly all was bound to turn out well. Everything would be all right – he could feel it in his gut.

He assumed a solemn expression but it took a tremendous amount of self-control to put a lid on the sheer joy welling up inside. He was looking forward to meeting Kamala again. He had been replaying that tryst in the coconut grove in his mind ever since it had happened, as though it was a scene from a Malayalam film instead of an episode of his life. As soon as they were out of sight of the engagement party, he had pushed her up against a coconut tree and pressed his lips fiercely on hers. She had clasped her arms around his neck and responded with a passion that surpassed even his greatest expectations. There had been a brief moment of awkwardness as her tongue had got entangled in his braces but she had expertly broken free and continued without a pause. Encouraged, he had let his hands roam down her body. As one hand clutched at a plump breast and another squeezed desperately at her bountiful behind, she had fallen back against the coconut tree and thrown a leg around his waist. While her fingers dug into his back and pulled at his hair, he had gnawed at her ears and neck, all the while plucking ineffectually at the buttons of her blouse under the scratchy brown-grey sari. And then with a background score of Malayalam film songs mixed with chatter and laughter drifting across from the pandal, she had reached into his mundu and played a little symphony all her own.

He had just been thanking his lucky stars that his mother had talked him into the mundu (he had wanted to wear something more trendy; perhaps the jeans-pant that his father had brought him the year before from Koovait or the

maroon pants that shimmered when he walked), when the symphony had come to a premature conclusion.

She had wiped her hand on a leaf and laughed teasingly before starting to straighten her clothes, tidy her hair.

‘Wait, wait,’ he had said, furious with himself. ‘It doesn’t have to stop. Just give me some time.’

‘Aiyyo!’ she had laughed, pulling a twig out of her petticoat. ‘You are a little dog in heat, aren’t you? No, no, not here, not now.’

Despite his pleading, she had started making for the road, and he had been forced to follow her in a hurry. He had offered to drop her back to Devaki Nilayam on his cycle but she had shaken her head and said she’d catch a bus. He had been torn, wanting a few more moments with her, her breasts pressed against his back, her hot breath in his ear. After all she had only said *not here, not now* – which meant that there would be another place, another time! Maybe he would be able to convince her to take a detour into a quiet lane or behind a cowshed. But Sundarikutty had spotted him and had been waving him over and Kamala had already been halfway up the main road to the bus stop. He couldn’t ignore his mother and follow Kamala. Sundarikutty would immediately put two and two together . . . and make twenty-two.

‘What were you saying to Kamala?’ Sundarikutty had asked suspiciously. ‘I don’t think she even had lunch.’

‘Er, no, nothing, I was just offering to drop her home. She wanted to leave now, she’s not well.’

‘Not well!’ Sundarikutty had brayed like a tickled donkey. ‘I know what’s wrong with her – she’s been bitten by the jealousy mosquito!’

That evening he had related to Satyen and Jolly how he had led Kamala into the grove. ‘And then . . .?’ Jolly had asked lasciviously.

‘Tcheh, you want the details do you? Let’s just say I went in a boy and came out a man!’

This had been followed by much congratulatory back-slapping and shoulder-squeezing until Babu had sheepishly confessed that it had all ended a little earlier than he had hoped. Satyen had assumed a superior air and given him a long and vivid lecture about how to avoid such embarrassments in future, with practical tips and homework exercises, all of which Babu had optimistically revised at home this very morning before leaving for Devaki Nilayam. It was unlikely that he would be able to spirit Kamala away from

the kitchen, but after the engagement incident he had decided that he would always be prepared for any eventuality.

Sundarikutty was now sniffing theatrically and Devaki Amma was looking at her askance. Bindu wiped a by-now-customary tear from her eye.

‘So! I see you’ve brought the invitation finally! Why didn’t you wait till the day of the wedding?’ Devaki Amma asked caustically and Sundarikutty burst out into a dry but noisy sob.

Devaki Amma started. ‘Aiiyyo! What is the matter?’

Sundarikutty wiped her eyes with the edge of her pallu. ‘Who knows if there will even be a wedding Amma? The worst disaster has befallen us. That is why it took me so long to come and invite you!’

On an ever so slight nod from Bindu, Babu slipped out of the dining room and into the corridor leading to the kitchen. It was his job to ensure that nobody strayed within earshot of Sundarikutty confiding in Devaki Amma. Sundarikutty had chosen her timing strategically – the half-hour just before teatime when most of the house was still sleeping or lolling around and only Devaki Amma would be downstairs to unlock the storeroom and distribute the evening supplies. Sundarikutty didn’t foresee Devaki Amma’s children or grandchildren interrupting the meeting, and it wasn’t really them that she was worried about in any case, it was her neighbours from Kuttipuram who were always hovering around in the kitchen and were in constant danger of wandering into the dining room.

They had already passed by Thankappan who was way out in front, weeding the garden. A quick investigation revealed Valsamma in the masala grinding room occupied in her weekly task of thoroughly washing down the grinding stones and coconut scrapers, but in any case she was so deaf that she posed no threat. Gaurikutty, Valsamma revealed when Babu mimed out the question to her, had gone to the market to buy some vegetables and would take a while to return. As for Kamala . . . she should have been rustling up some vadas or bondas or some such thing for tea, but she was nowhere to be seen. As Babu craned his neck to see if she was in the kitchen veranda, Valsamma nodded towards the backyard.

‘Kamala’s gone for an early bath – nothing to make for tea today. Saar said he would bring puffs from George’s bakery. And they’re all going out to Trivandrum for dinner in the night. So Kamala said she’ll have a nice long oil bath.’

Babu stiffened at the thought of Kamala so close by, wet and naked and oily,

and caressing her own body with green gram flour and a coconut-fibre scrub.

‘Come here, monay,’ Valsamma said. ‘Here, help me lift the grinding stone so that I can clean underneath.’

Babu heaved the stone up, but as he looked into the backyard through the tiny slatted window, he wondered if he could somehow escape from Valsamma and discreetly make his way to the bathroom. It was at the very end of the backyard, beyond the chicken coop and the empty cowshed where Kamadhenu the cow once lived, by the clearing where the banana plants grew. And out of view of the kitchen. So tantalizingly close, so conveniently out of sight.

‘Okay, now pull the dosa grinder aside, kutty,’ Valsamma directed.

Babu absently pulled at the dosa stone, revealing dried-up batter, an army of ants and a couple of small dead cockroaches underneath. Valsamma uttered some oaths and crouched down to scrape off the mess.

Babu saw his opening and tiptoed out of the grinding room, past the kitchen, into the kitchen veranda and then the backyard. He went round the back of the house and his pulse quickened as he walked by the open drain and saw the oily water flowing in it from the outdoor bathroom towards the covered sewage canals on the main road. He hurried past the empty cowshed and the coop and picked his way through the last stretch of undergrowth to the bathroom by the back wall of the house.

As he approached, a lusty if unmelodious rendition of *Vaa kuruvi inappoom kuruvi* drifted to him from over the open roof of the bathroom. A red pavada, yellow blouse, two towels and a bra and panties of impressive proportions hung over the top of the door.

He knocked but Kamala was just bursting into the chorus – *vaa, vaa, vaa kuruvi!* – and didn’t respond. He knocked again, louder this time, and the song ebbed and then stopped.

‘Anyone there?’ Kamala called, but Babu kept impishly quiet.

‘Oy! Who’s there? Valsamma?’

Babu didn’t stir.

‘Gaurikutty?’

Babu kept mum. Presently, a low humming suggested that Kamala had gone back to her ablutions.

Babu knocked again.

‘Ay! Who’s that? Stop playing pranks. Gaurikutty, I know it’s you!’

Babu adopted a falsetto and mumbled, ‘Hmmm . . .?’



‘Who’s that? That’s not Gaurikutty.’

‘Guess!’ trilled Babu.

‘Thankappa?’

Babu grabbed the top of the door and pulled himself up. ‘Oh-ho, you can only think of Thankappan, can’t you?’

Kamala shrieked as Babu’s head appeared over the door. As Babu’s eyes travelled pruriently over the vast acreage of naked flesh, she tried to preserve her modesty with the completely inadequate coconut-fibre scrub.

‘Open the door,’ he said huskily and Kamala laughed and threw some water at him. As he tried to dodge, he lost his grip on the top of the door and fell backwards into the weeds. He could hear Kamala laughing throatily inside and as he tried to get to his feet he realized that the bottom of the door was two feet from the ground and he could see right inside to the steel bucket and the frog in the drain and the beautiful plump ankles and the smooth oily shins. He tried to reach inside and one of the plump feet stamped on his probing hand. He moaned with pain and longing and scrambled to his feet, determined this time to scale the door and drop down inside. But before he could, the door opened and Kamala stood before him only half hidden by the door. Her body shone with oil, her hair fell loose and wet, moulding itself to the curve of her shoulders and coming to a gentle rest over the huge pendulous breasts. Babu’s gaze travelled further to the turn of her waist, the hint of the soft roundness of her tummy, the swell of her hips, the fleshiness of her thighs and the delicious promise of delights that lay just out of sight.

And then she slammed the door shut.

Babu leaned on the door and banged with all his might. ‘Ay! Open the door!’

‘Poda! You want oil all over yourself?’

‘I don’t care,’ Babu sighed, crumpling heavily on the door.

‘Yes, and what will Devaki Amma say? She must have come down by now.’ Kamala opened the tap and resumed the bathing that had been interrupted.

Babu grunted and slumped his shoulders in defeat. He gave the door two thwacks in frustration. ‘It isn’t just that cow. My mother’s here too. And Bindu.’

The sound of running water stopped abruptly.

‘What’s that? Your mother’s here too?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Come to give the wedding invitation finally?’

‘Err . . . yes.’

‘Hmm.’ The water started running again, then there was silence. One of the towels hanging over the door was pulled down from the other side. Then the door opened again and Kamala stood before him again, bathed and almost dry, the towel held loosely around the front of her body. She seemed to be wrestling with something in her head, then without a word, she let the towel slip, ever so slightly, but quite enough. As Babu gaped like a dying fish, she reached out and pulled him inside, shutting the door behind them.

## Eighteen

**I**t was late afternoon and the whole house was quiet. Soon Ammooma would be down to distribute rations, and generally natter with the maids. Kamala and Gaurikutty were nowhere to be found; only Valsamma was in the kitchen. Geetha quickened her step; she did not want to hear about Valsamma's latest ailment. She had seen Valsamma showing Thankappan her hand and asking if the yellowish hue meant she had jaundice. Thankappan had pointed out evenly that it was just the effect of the sun reflecting through the amber-coloured glass of the ventilator in the storeroom, but Valsamma had seemed sceptical, and no doubt she had investigated all the symptoms of the malady and convinced herself of her imminent death by now.

Geetha slipped into the dining room, stole up to the Kelvinator fridge and reached for the Amul butter at the back. She broke off a small piece, placed it in her palm and replaced the dish. She opened the freezer, scraped off some of the frost that had formed along its walls and popped it into her mouth, enjoying the cold crispy feeling against her tongue.

By the time she reached the veranda off the Library Room, the butter had softened from the warmth of her hand. She coated her fingers generously and approached Pooch who was lying in the shadiest corner of the veranda, by the antique hat stand which was used to hang umbrellas upon. He lifted his head as she approached and instead of growling as he did with anybody other than Apoopan, he watched her advance intently. One ear twitched. The wet black nose quivered. Geetha lowered herself into one of the wicker chairs just out of his reach and waved her fingers tantalizingly.

Mini and Divya were loitering by the gate and pretending not to watch. But as Pooch sat up, then lifted himself up, then eagerly came to her proffered hand and started to lick each finger slowly, lovingly, she knew they were watching incredulously.

'Arrey, look at that!' It was Vikki, who had just come around the side of the house with Raju. 'Our ferocious Pooch has been tamed!'

Geetha pretended that she hadn't heard, but it had been a deliberate performance, much like the parades of cycling prowess that she put on from time to time. Vikki gushed admiringly at all her little achievements; Geetha could tell that he was feeling a little guilty about the whole diary/manuscript

affair and the girls' subsequent embargo on her. Mini and Divya, on the other hand, pretended indifference and continued to ignore her, but there was a lack of conviction about their hostility, a sense of hesitation. She could tell they were rattled, even if they tried their best not to show it. After all, they had always been used to the subservient Geetha, the one who orbited around them like an adoring satellite, tagged along wherever they went and looked up to them and did as they instructed; the one who needed them to entertain and inform her. They had thought that by isolating her they would break her back; and yes, they had succeeded in reducing her to a cringing, sniffing mess at first. But they had not accounted for the new Geetha who revelled in her isolation, who had new friends and new activities and didn't need them anymore, who could ride a cycle and feed the cats and even befriend the hostile Pooch.

Seeing that ignoring her was not working they had tried to get under her skin by resorting to snide remarks. 'There comes Geetha's boyfriend,' Divya had said loudly once, when Babu had turned up at the gate. 'Go close the gyaaat,' Mini had urged nobody in particular on another occasion, imitating Kamala's pronunciation of 'gate'. But if the old Geetha would have been mortified by their words, the new Geetha merely accepted it as a sign of their frustration and paid no heed. And it had been super-fun to be in the audience for Rema and Suji's grand production based on the life and times of Balakrishna, with Divya starring as a cowherd and Mini in the prize role of a cow – Rema was Krishna of course and Suji was Yashoda. As Geetha had giggled into Unnikuttan's shoulder, Renjini Ammayi had looked on lovingly and instructed Keshavan Maama on the best angles to take photographs from – she later prevailed on Keshavan Maama to develop the film and frame the photos, not just for her but also for Apoopan and Ammooma, Ambika and Lalitha Valliamma. Mini's star turn as the cow was preserved for eternity.

Geetha knew Mini and Divya were wondering how she had managed to befriend Pooch – he had almost bitten Divya once, and barked rabidly whenever Mini passed within fifteen feet of him. It was Babu who had given her the Amul butter idea. Now the butter was almost completely licked off, so before Pooch could lose interest and wander away, Geetha gave him a final pat and ducked into the house. Once in, she wiped her hands on her skirt, and Pooch, who was trailing her hopefully, gave it up as a lost cause and wandered off to investigate an interesting smell behind a sofa. She passed through the half-size swing doors, reminiscent of something out of a saloon

in a Western and a relic of Apoopan's youthful passions. Finding nothing to amuse her in the hallway below the stairs, she went upstairs, her fingers stroking the dust off the wooden banister as she went, and probably depositing some Amul butter instead. Her parents were asleep in the first bedroom off the landing; Ambika's one arm and leg was thrown over Unnikuttan, who was snoring rhythmically. In the next room, Lalitha Valliamma's form was visible under a bedsheet that covered her from head to toe. In the middle room, Renjini Ammayi was laughing at some joke that Keshavan Maama had made – Keshavan Maama had taken to staying home for a couple of hours after lunch to chit-chat with Renjini Ammayi before joining Apoopan at work in the late afternoon, a routine he continued despite Apoopan's biting comments about long lunches and afternoon siestas. Geetha wondered if she should join them. Sometimes Keshavan Maama could be entertaining; he had been known to flex his biceps to amuse Geetha, challenging her to press down as hard as she could on the rock-like muscle, inflict as much pain as she liked. 'Stronger than Dara Singh,' he would declare. If he was in a really good mood, he would take off his shirt and flex his chest muscles alternately like some bodybuilding champion, making her laugh as right and left breast rose and fell comically. But she sensed that he would not do so in Renjini Ammayi's presence, for with Renjini Ammayi he was a different Keshavan Maama, grave and reserved, and certainly not given to amusing nieces.

Ammooma's room, the Sewing Room and the Portrait Room where the boys bedded were empty, and Damodaran Maama's door was shut as usual. She would have to amuse herself. Sigh.

That was when she saw the door ajar at the very end of the corridor. The door that was always kept shut, that was never to be opened, and under no circumstances to be passed through.

The old Geetha would never have dared to even contemplate going where she was forbidden, but the old Geetha was history. The new Geetha, she reminded herself, tamed child-eating dogs, mastered cycles, fed cats, lit bonfires, ignored the slings and arrows of bitter siblings . . . and went where no woman had gone before.

Nevertheless, it was timorously that the new Geetha crept up to the door, fearfully that she creaked it fully open, with a pounding heart that she slowly ascended the rickety wooden stairs leading to the Room on the Terrace. The steps groaned under her unaccustomed weight but the sun beat down brightly

and cheerfully, quashing any feelings of dread.

At the top of the stairs, Geetha looked around. She was partly relieved, partly disappointed. It was a boring old terrace, with the water tank at the side and a lot of pipes running hither and thither, a pile of old junk in one corner and the tin-roofed room in the middle, bolted shut and wearing a fat padlock like some crass pendant. In the bright daylight, it looked mundane and inoffensive, and Apoopan's tall yarn seemed silly and improbable.

She walked around the edge of the wall and admired the 360-degree panorama. She had never had such an unhindered view of the neighbourhood. On one side, past the front gate and the road, were miles of green, green paddy fields. Little toy men were bent over in knee-deep water, probably planting. On the east side, the gopuram of the Mahadeva Temple could be seen in the distance, behind the fronds of a huge coconut grove. To the west lay the vacant ground which could also be seen from the Portrait Room, and as usual a group of boys were bandying around a football in a corner – the muffled dham-dham thuds reached her even at this distance. To the south, beyond the kitchens and backyard, was the tharavad house of the Injivila family, Ammooma and Apoopan's closest neighbours. She had never seen it from this vantage point and she craned to look in voyeuristically – beyond the trees she could just about make out white geese in a pond and the living quarters for the maids.

Down below, a movement caught her eye. Somebody was walking stealthily through the backyard. At first she wondered if it was one of the thieves Ammooma used to talk about – the ones who nicked clothes hanging on the line while the whole house was sleeping, and Vim soap from near the tap and bananas and jackfruit from the backyard and anything else that was lying around. But the set of the shoulders and the loping, slouching walk was familiar, and she realized it was Babu. She felt a little thrill of pleasure. If Babu was here, she didn't have to kill time any more. He had promised to teach her how to swing on to the cycle and take off in one go. She would go down and drink kattan kaapi with him and maybe nip his cycle for half an hour. And then it would be time for puffs from George's bakery! Yay!

Something about the way he was walking made her linger, curious to see what he was going to do. At first she thought he had been sent by Kamala to check if the hens had laid eggs. But he hurried past the chicken coop, and the old cowshed and beyond towards the far compound wall. Perhaps Valsamma had sent him to the banana plants at the back to cut banana leaves for

tomorrow's lunch?

Sure enough, he paused by the banana plant, but instead of walking up to it, he turned to the servant's bathroom. What was he doing? The toilets were on the other side of the backyard by the tomato plants. Surely he wasn't going to be taking a bath. Of course he wasn't . . . he was banging on the door, he was obviously calling for somebody . . . it had to be Kamala who must have gone for an early bath. Now that she squinted through the coconut tree that obscured most of her view, she could see some clothes hanging over the door. The door that Babu was scaling and hanging from! What on earth? Was somebody stuck inside?

Babu fell back to the ground and seemed to be crawling around on the ground. Whatever he had done seemed to have worked for the door opened from the inside. He was saying something and she could hear Kamala replying. Then the door shut again, and Babu was banging on the door and leaning on it and saying something. Then he stood around kicking at the mud and Geetha wondered if she should stand and watch or go down and investigate. Something told her to wait, and before long, the door opened again. She saw a flash of flesh as Kamala's hand reached out and pulled Babu into the bathroom. Then the door closed.

Geetha stood still, watching. Disturbing thoughts flitted at the entrance of her mind, willing her to open the door, but for the moment, she was a churlish hostess, refusing to entertain their unwanted presence. A fly buzzed around her ear. She swatted it away irritably.

Finally – what was it, ten, fifteen minutes later – the door opened. Kamala tumbled out, and her laughter skipped over the backyard, frolicked up to the roof and pounced on Geetha's ears. Babu followed close behind, too close, too happy, too smiling. In that moment Geetha knew, without a sliver of doubt, what her mind had been refusing to acknowledge minutes before.

The blood coursed raucously through her head. Of course, she had known earlier – she had felt a quiver of embarrassment every time Babu and Kamala had exchanged a certain look. And a few days ago when Babu had been hovering over Kamala by the hearth when she had walked in on them? Something had told her to turn and leave, but she had ignored her misgivings, tamped down her foreboding.

She turned away, feeling sick. How could they? Pretending to be all goody-two-shoes – yes kunjay, no kunjay, come I'll show you how to cycle, kutty, and all the while . . . up to no good under everybody's noses! Her breath

came in little gasps, as though she was drowning. What was he – going to the eighth standard he'd said – that would make him what, thirteen? Ugh! He was younger than Raju and Vikki, for God's sake! And with Kamala – fat, sweaty, loud Kamala! Who must be, what, ten years older than him? And weren't they related or something?

Ammooma had been right, after all. It had always been inappropriate to hang around with them as though they were her classmates. Of course they were different! Poor Raju couldn't even look at dried-up old Valsamma without blushing! But Babu! Quiet, deferential Babu! And Kamala! Cheerful, consoling Kamala! Geetha was feeling dizzy now. Stupid, stupid! She stumbled down the terrace stairs, wanting to get as far away from the scene of the crime as she could. She shot through the door and rushed back on to the landing – and bumped headlong into Divya and Mini.

'Hey watch where you're going!' Mini snapped, clutching her arm.

Divya looked at her, her eyebrows rising into her bangs. Geetha realized that tears were streaming down her face. She loathed herself.

'What's the matter, cry-baby?' Mini asked but Divya looked concerned.

'Stop it Mini! What's the matter, Geetha?' Divya asked.

Geetha shook her head but words failed her.

Divya looked beyond her to the door, which was still swinging on its hinge. 'Did you go upstairs?'

Geetha nodded mutely. Divya gasped, half admiring, half admonishing.

'Scared yourself, did you?' Mini sneered. 'Scaredy-cat!'

Geetha couldn't even conjure up a rejoinder. She gulped down the breathless sob that was threatening to give vent.

Divya stared at her. 'My God, what happened?'

Geetha's eyes welled up with a fresh gallon of tears.

'Awww,' said Divya, pulling her into a hug. 'What happened? Come on, tell us! You look like you saw a ghost!' Then she froze, her eyes wide as saucers. 'Oh my God, is that it? Did you see the little-boy ghost?'

Perhaps it was the comforting warmth of Divya's hug. Or her need to get as far away as possible from the persona of the new Geetha; the Geetha who had strange treacherous friends, who hobnobbed with The Wrong Kind. Or relief at the breaking of ice, the lifting of the embargo at the crucial time that she needed it most. Or the excitement sparkling in Divya's eyes and the sudden admiring wonder on Mini's face. Perhaps it was just the easy way out of answering questions about what she saw, of thinking about Babu and Kamala



and the bathroom. Whatever it was, in that moment, head buried in Divya's bony shoulder, Geetha allowed herself a small nod. Mini and Divya gasped in awe.

## Nineteen

Devaki often wondered whether it would ever end. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. Nobody told you that about children, that they would keep you tossing and turning at night well into your dotage. Teething and teens paled in comparison to the challenges of fully grown, adults-in-their-own-right, should-know-better-by-now children.

It had started with her first-born, Damodaran. Even though most people were too intimidated by Devaki to bring up the subject directly, she knew that Ambalakunnu had been abuzz at the time it all happened: class topper, gold medal winner, scientist with a future, throwing up everything to sit at home. They had probably gloated that Devaki had been taught a lesson for her arrogance. Devaki did not consider herself arrogant, merely self-confident, and she staunchly believed in always putting up a brave front and pretending that nothing was amiss. But with Damodaran plainly unemployed and shamelessly reclusive, it had been difficult to pretend, and it had required a stern and brittle façade to pre-empt questions from nosy neighbours.

Like all scandals, it had been replaced by a new one when the girl from the Palapazhani house had eloped with her classmate. Devaki had been just about heaving a sigh of relief when the whole sordid business with Lalitha's husband Dileep and his secretary had blown up in their faces. 'Secretary? How predictable,' Ambika had said, as though that was the crux of the matter. Thankfully Madhavettan had not found out about that – on Lalitha's insistence and general consensus among the rest of her children, it was decided that there were some things that it was better their father didn't know. Dileep had always been the apple of Madhavettan's eye, not least for keeping his daughter in the lap of luxury with foreign holidays and a car and driver to herself and all the servants she could possibly want. If Lalitha sometimes complained that Dileep was always away travelling, Madhavettan would admonish her for being too spoilt, too demanding and would tell her to be thankful for all her blessings.

As for Devaki, while she had been indebted to Dileep for marrying the skinny dark daughter that the whole of Ambalakunnu had predicted would remain an eternal spinster, her appreciation had stopped a little short of unqualified devotion. She couldn't put her finger on it: perhaps it was his too-quick-to-please manner, the way he always said the tactful thing, how he

chose to sit on the fence during a family debate, the manner in which he publicly flattered Lalitha and blatantly held her hand and stroked her cheek, even when they were all sitting together and desperately trying to avert their gaze. Perhaps it was the soft manicured hands and exotic musky deodorant – no man she knew ever used anything other than simple nail-cutters and Tata's Eau de Cologne. Keshavan had laughed at her when she had voiced her concerns during a private moment, saying that it was because she was only accustomed to husbands like his father and Unnikuttan and Sukumaran who were merely cavemen masquerading as modern folk. But then Keshavan had always been star-struck by Dileep, not least because of the Marlboro cigarettes and Johnny Walker bottles that he brought Keshavan from the duty-free.

She had shaken off her doubts, and for once she would have been happy to have been wrong, but in the end, her instincts had proven accurate. That first summer after the revelation had been an awkward one, with long silences at the table and Ambika glowering at Dileep despite Lalitha's advance pleas and threats. Madhavettan had been oblivious, apart from commenting that Lalitha had lost weight and looked as though she was coming down with something, and Dileep appeared to have some worries, probably work-related. Dileep had found excuses not to join the rest of the family for the annual vacation in Ambalakunnu for many years now, but Madhavettan had still not cottoned on. He merely reminisced fondly about the days when Dileep used to come to Ambalakunnu and how they all played cards and watched Malayalam movies and went to the Trivandrum Club. Oh never mind, he would say, that's the only problem with these self-made men, if they were busy, they were busy, and there was nothing one could do about it. It was anyway better than the good-for-nothing in the Delivery Room and the too-good-for-anything in the office.

There had been talk about a split, even a dreaded divorce, but to Devaki's relief, somehow things had reached a fragile and unhappy impasse. Ambalakunnu would not need to know about Dileep's fall from grace.

And now this. This time there was no hiding it from Madhavettan for it was he who had discovered Keshavan and Renjini lying on the bed in the downstairs bedroom with their feet touching, their legs almost intertwined, when he had come home unexpectedly one day, after he had left for office after lunch and his car had broken down at the corner. 'Fully clothed, thankfully,' Madhavettan replied, when Devaki had inquired. 'But who

knows what would have happened if I hadn't interrupted?' Seeing Madhavettan, they had jumped up and straightened their clothes.

At that very moment, Lalitha had come into the room and seeing the scene before her had completely gone to pieces. 'What is wrong with you? Are all the men in our family mad? Isn't one cad in the family enough?' she had railed at Keshavan, throwing the nearest thing she could find, a wooden Kathakali mask, at his head, and missing. It had fallen to the floor and shattered spectacularly, disintegrating into little pieces just like Madhavettan's illusions were slowly beginning to at that moment. She had lunged towards Keshavan, sending Renjini scurrying away, tripping over her sari in haste. Madhavettan had had to come between the siblings to prevent a full-on brawl.

Later, as Madhavettan had hauled him back to office in the Standard 2000, Keshavan had laughed Madhavettan's concerns away, saying that they had just been talking, and what was so wrong in lying down after a heavy meal, it was only his sister-in-law for God's sake. 'That Lalitha was over-reacting – just because of what happened with Dileep and his secretary, it doesn't mean everybody's like that,' he had added desperately, breaking the vow of silence. As the full import of his son's words sank in, engulfing any last wishful delusion he might have clung to, Madhavettan had fallen into silence.

But the fact that Renjini had not turned up at Devaki Nilayam for the last few days, not even sent the children over, had confirmed their suspicions more than any confession from Keshavan could have.

'It's your fault,' Devaki had ranted at Madhavettan. 'You should have got him married off long ago!'

'And how do I do that, when he's rejected every proposal that I've suggested? The Menon girl – not educated enough – as though he's some Nobel Laureate! The proposal from Chennai – too educated! The nice young girl from the Virupath family? Not sophisticated enough for the muff! Pillai's daughter – too fat. Where am I supposed to produce a girl that will please the donkey?'

Devaki supposed that she should not have been surprised. Keshavan was just being true to form – an agreeable if slightly dull child, he had grown into a wayward young man, a result of too much looks and too little brain, Ambika said. There had been the time he had prevailed on Madhavettan to send him abroad to study engineering, not least because he had been unable to get into any self-respecting college in India. There he had set himself to the task of

finding himself an American wife, but apparently American women had had better sense. Thanks to his extra-curricular activities he had repeated three semesters in a row, and returned without a degree. Ambalakunnu had been admiring of the foreign-returned son and Devaki hadn't had to lie outright, because people only asked her what subject Keshavan had studied abroad, and she could reply to that truthfully. Then Keshavan joined the family business but complained bitterly if he had to travel into the interiors on work, or if Madhavettan tried to advise him on the virtues of frugality and keeping costs low. And when there had been the first sign of trouble in the Kottivakkam factory of Madhavan Textiles, Keshavan had urged his father to consider selling the forty-year-old business while the going was good, making clear that the shares should be distributed immediately, so that he and Sukumaran could try to eke out an alternative living.

Now of all the girls in the world, he had to strike up a flirtation with his brother's wife? She wished he had brought home a girl from America instead – anything would be better than this. What would Ambalakunnu say? Devaki groaned at the thought.

'Oh-ho, sorry Amma, too hard or what?' asked Kamala.

'Heh?' Devaki jumped at the interruption. She had almost forgotten that Kamala was at the foot of the bed, massaging her throbbing legs with a vigorous kneading action that the girl also employed to make atta and squeeze moosambis. Her massaging technique would have drawn tears in most but for Devaki's diabetes-deadened nerves, it was just the optimal amount of pressure.

'No, no, no, go on, go on,' she replied.

Kamala slapped on some more Dhanwantharam Kuzhambu, bought from the Ayurveda clinic just the day before, and set to her task with renewed verve. The girl was all right, Devaki thought, cheerful, eager to work, if having a tendency to loiter around with any passing male and a propensity to make chapattis that had the consistency of flattened rubber. Nevertheless when she thought of the alternative, namely Sundarikutty, with her sulky ways and sloppy work, she had to count her blessings.

Seeming to read her thoughts, Kamala asked, 'So Amma, that Sundarikutty finally came to invite you for the marriage, hah?'

Devaki snorted. 'Come to invite me for the wedding, my numb foot! Do you know what she really came for?'

Kamala looked up expectantly.

‘She wants a loan!’

Kamala’s eyebrows shot into her hairline. ‘Loan? But why, Amma? She’s the one who’s always going on about how much her husband earns and how much they’ve saved and all . . .’

‘Exactly! Do you know that she returned the sari I gave her for Vishu last year? And when Renjini gave her a blouse piece as a gift, she gave it back saying that she only wears two by two!’

‘No!’

‘Yes!’ Devaki was just getting started. She had had plenty of time to delve into the past and recall all of Sundarikutty’s misdemeanours, and she had been poaching like an egg in the heat of her anger. ‘And two years back when I gave her some fish heads to take home to make a curry, she told me that she doesn’t eat such things so she would give them to the stray dogs! This from the person who wouldn’t even allow me to give the blood and entrails to the cats when she was working here, saying they were full of nutrients. “Why you are wasting so much Amma,” she would ask, “I will make first-class rasam with it, you just see.”’ Devaki’s impersonation of Sundarikutty was high on exaggeration and low on authenticity, but it was an entertaining performance. ‘Awful it was also, the soup! Stank up the whole house! But now, now she’s too big for the fish heads!’

‘The woman’s nerve!’

‘Exactly! And now just see the ways of the Lord, her husband has gone and lost his job on the eve of the wedding.’

Kamala, whose kneading action had slowed down considerably, gave up all pretence of continuing with the massage.

‘What?’

‘Yes, that’s the truth. But don’t tell anybody – let us not cause any problem with Bindu’s wedding.’

Kamala lowered her eyes.

‘I mean it Kamala! If you let this go any further . . .’

‘No, of course not Amma, who am I going to tell?’

‘Nobody, you hear? Not Valsamma, not Thankappan, not Gaurikutty – nobody!’

‘Why should I tell, Amma?’

‘And don’t you go asking about it to your friend Babu, who’s after you always like a lovesick puppy. Ah, don’t think I’ve not noticed!’

Kamala giggled. ‘No, no Amma, it’s nothing like that.’ Then, to change the

subject, 'So . . . she doesn't have money to pay for the wedding?'

'No, not enough. And apparently, they have promised the boy's side a lot of things – cash, gold, a bike. If they don't come up with all that, you know what will happen.'

'And she told me that the boy's side had not asked for anything!'

'She says a lot of things!'

Kamala tut-tutted and resumed the massage. 'It is sad of course Amma, but if ever there was a person who had it coming to her . . .'

'Yes, I know. She was getting insufferable! Pride always goes before a fall.'

Kamala pulled each toe methodically, eliciting a crack or two. 'So now what are they going to do?'

Devaki lapsed into silence.

'I hope you didn't agree to give her the loan Amma!'

'No, I didn't. I said I would ask saar. But in the meanwhile that Kannan has gone behind my back and spoken to saar in his office – Sundarikutty didn't even mention it to me when she came! And saar has promised that . . . listen to this . . . he has promised that he will fund the entire wedding! That too not as a loan, as a gift!'

'Ai-ai-ai-yo! Why did he go and do that?'

'And he wants to give Bindu a present too, on top of all that!'

Kamala shook her head. 'That saar is too kind,' she lamented.

Devaki grunted grimly. It was always this way. Too kind! Too stupid, more like it. It wasn't as though she would not have extended the loan to Sundarikutty. But she would have made the woman wait, made her marinate in the error of her ways, made her stew in the juices of her past trespasses, given her enough time to contemplate the worst, forced her to grovel a little more before she finally relieved her of her misery. Only then would the woman be properly grateful.

'Tcheh!' Madhavettan had expostulated when she had said as much, 'Why do you want to play games with these poor people? Then how are you any better than them?'

Typical Madhavettan, with his head in the clouds. It wasn't he who had to manage the household budget when all the children and grandchildren descended every summer, it wasn't he who had had to cut back on little luxuries when the profits of the business dwindled or every time he got it into his head to extend a loan to some insincere mooch. She had felt a little ashamed as he said this, but mostly she was annoyed, with Madhavettan for

his holier-than-thou attitude, with Sundarikutty for manipulating her adroitly and with herself for being impotent in the situation. She would have given Madhavettan a piece of her mind, but she didn't have the heart to anymore, not since he had found out about Lalitha and Dileep. He maintained a bright exterior, but did he think that after over forty years of marriage, he could hide his feelings from her? She could see it in the sudden slowing of his walk, the times she walked into a room and found him staring vacantly into the distance, that instant she had caught that look of helpless pain on his face as he glanced across the table at Lalitha, the last couple of nights when she had woken up to find him wide-eyed and sleepless. She worried what it was doing to his feeble heart.

'Okay that's enough,' she said, suddenly tired and irrationally irritated with Kamala. 'Go finish your work. And don't tell anyone – not even Sundarikutty – that I mentioned all this to you.'

'Okay Amma,' Kamala said, as she gathered up the bottle of oil and the old rag she kept for wiping her hands, but as she left, a little smile gambolled across her face.

'If any word gets out, you're in trouble,' Devaki called after her.



## Twenty

In her rare and short-lived moments of clarity between drinking binges, her mother used to tell Kamala that the darkest hour was always before dawn. In her own uniquely crude way that is. 'If ever you are carried downstream, molay, and you see pieces of shit floating in the water, don't despair – it just means somebody's squatting nearby and you are about to get rescued,' she would counsel. 'What I mean to say is, keep your head held high, kutty. When things seem unbearable, they suddenly have a way of getting better. So when you think things are bad, remember that one day it will pass.'

Things had not passed for her mother, not till she was dead anyway, but things seemed to be passing for her. Kamala had been feeling oddly dissatisfied ever since that afternoon with Babu in the bathroom, and only part of that could be attributed to the boy's complete inexperience. No, it wasn't that, it was the impotence of knowing that she had put one over Sundarikutty that day, had paid her back in full measure for the years of barbed remarks and insinuations, but the old hag would probably never know, not now anyway. Babu would never tell because, for all his bravado, the boy was scared stiff of his mother. And she, Kamala, who could have made mincemeat of that crone, rolled her into little balls and made a Sundarikutty curry, she was forced to hold her tongue.

As she stood over the fire, sweating copiously into a stew – it was so hot now that she couldn't even be bothered to wipe her brow any more – she allowed herself to dream about how she could have broken the news to her. 'Babu is a talented boy, Sundarikutty Amma, good with his hands . . . so I've come to know.' Would the stupid old woman grasp her drift? Maybe she should not be that oblique. 'Oh, Amma, I have come to regard you very fondly . . . who knows, one day perhaps I'll be your daughter-in-law?' Perhaps that was too direct. What about: 'Oh Amma, of late, I have come to regard you as so much more than my old neighbour . . . more like . . . I don't know, not a mother, but maybe a mother-in-law?' And then she would look at the aghast Sundarikutty coyly so that her meaning was unmistakable.

Of course that would never happen. Pipe dreams, that's what they were, for Sundarikutty would surely go flying off to Devaki Amma and complain that Kamala had taken advantage of her son, right there in Devaki Nilayam, under

their very eyes. Devaki Amma would sack her immediately – Kamala had got dressing-downs for merely chit-chatting with Thankappan or Meen Mommad.

And while she sometimes wilted under the pressure of working in Devaki Nilayam – especially now, with a dozen extra people in the house, and the weather more oppressive than Devaki Amma herself – Kamala didn't want to be sacked. She liked her work; the repertoire of dishes she had learned to make under Devaki Amma's watchful, if sometimes impatient, eye, the simple contentment of being usefully occupied, the satisfying pile of notes pushed into her hand at the end of the month, the fringe benefits of unlimited meals complete with meat or fish, Sunday evenings in front of the television with Devaki Amma, and hand-me-downs every once in a while. She thanked her stars when she thought of the other option: staying back in Kuttipuram; the inquisitive looks, the prying questions, the uninvited advice.

Gaurikutty often asked her how she tolerated Devaki Amma's explosive rants, her sarcastic taunts, the woman's slave-driving insistence on perfection. 'Aiyyo, if I didn't know I have to go back to school at the end of the summer, I wouldn't last!' she had frequently sworn. But for the most part Devaki Amma didn't bother Kamala; the woman's remarks were far milder than Kamala's mother's toddy-infused tirades had been. And once it was all out of her system Devaki Amma was quick to forget, often sheepish and frequently eager to make amends. Kamala had been given many an extra ten-rupee note during these periods of atonement.

On the rare occasions that Devaki Amma managed to get under her skin, Kamala had her own discreet ways of exacting revenge – by covertly using the plates and cutlery kept aside for the sole use of the Nair family, or taking a sip from the family's vessel of chukku vellam instead of drinking from the taps as the maids were never told but always expected to do, or pretending, when guests were expected, that a prime ingredient for the day's lunch had not been available in the market. Not once did she pull a face or raise her voice or bang a sulky plate, and Devaki Amma had come to regard her as an obedient and nice young girl. Kamala couldn't afford to jeopardize that delusion.

But as far as Sundarikutty was concerned it seemed now that there was no need for Kamala to wreak vengeance; the good Lord Mahadeva had stepped in and executed his own divine reprisal. Her heart swelled with happiness at the thought of Sundarikutty running helter-skelter trying to scare up enough

money for the wedding, all the while having to keep the news of their misfortune under wraps. She couldn't help but smile at the thought of a hysterical Bindu, fearful of having another proposal come to nought. She broke into gleeful giggles when she visualized Sundarikutty having to fawn on Devaki Amma in order to get a loan. She felt a pang of regret for Kannan, but it was a passing moment of weakness and she quickly packed her sympathy away.

As for Babu, she should have been feeling sorry for him. After all, his father's unemployment would affect him too. But Kamala had been giving it some thought, and the fact that Babu had not told her that his father had lost his job, that Bindu's wedding was in jeopardy, that Sundarikutty had come to Devaki Nilayam that day to prostrate before her arch enemy for a loan, that he had denied her the pleasure of that forbidden knowledge, the satisfaction at justice having been served, was rankling. What, at the very moment that he had been squeezing her in the bathroom as though he was checking pumpkins for firmness, Sundarikutty had probably been enduring Devaki Amma's most humiliating comments, her most probing questions, her choicest insults. How much more pleasure that scene would have given Kamala! If only Babu had hinted to her that she should wander off to the dining room to catch a show!

But for all his rants against Sundarikutty, for all the chuckles they had shared about Bindu's cow-dung sari, when it came to it, his loyalty had lain with his mother and sister. What, even when she had asked him point-blank, on-his-face, he had not admitted that Sundarikutty's intentions were far from magnanimous in buying saris for the ashtamangalyam girls, although it had been so obvious when she had seen the ugly ash-mud monstrosity. All he had been interested in was cornering her in the bathroom. The more she thought about Babu's treachery, the more she fumed. They were all the same, these men, when it came down to it, she thought, scowling at a blameless Thankappan, all they wanted was to get under your pavada.

In fact, far from wasting any sympathy on him, Kamala hoped that Ration Raaman and Nalini would find out about the latest turn of events, and Bindu would be left standing at the mandapam and Babu would have to look after his spinster sister for the rest of his life! Aiyyo, if only she could tell somebody! It became almost too much to contain when Gaurikutty recounted a conversation where Bindu had claimed that Nalini had refused to accept any dowry – Kamala had almost caved in and told Gaurikutty everything. Just in time she remembered that Devaki Amma had forbidden her to breathe a word

to anyone, had warned her that any leaks would be traced swiftly back to her.

But the stress of keeping it all in was becoming too much. The day before when Thankappan had told her that her tea was like honey she had just grunted at him. And when Babu had come around to drop in the wedding sari, another mud-coloured concoction with not a speck of zari or a hint of silkiness, she had almost thrown it back on his face. She had to say something to somebody, otherwise she would burst!

But only Valsamma was around, engrossed in her bimonthly chore of polishing the brass lamps and urulis with tamarind and ash from the kitchen hearth. Deaf old Valsamma, thought Kamala. Very deaf old Valsamma, Kamala realized.

‘Aye, Valsammey!’

Valsamma’s back shook with the effort of scrubbing the tarnish off the brass but there was no reply.

‘Oy, do you want to hear a juicy story about that old dragon, Sundarikutty?’  
Silence.

‘Yes, yes I thought so.’ Kamala pulled herself up onto the kitchen counter unmindful of the years of grease in the cracks and crannies of the Cudappah stone. ‘Do you remember how she was strutting all over Ambalakunnu when Bindu got engaged to Venu? How she came here and was pretending to be concerned that I had still not found a match? How she went around telling everyone that Venu had fallen in love with Bindu the moment he saw her and that Ration Raaman and his wife had never asked for a paisa? As if! And do you remember I told you how she was preening around during the engagement?’

Valsamma rocked back on her haunches, wiped her forehead and paused to take a break.

‘Okay, okay, I am getting to the point . . . and the point is that Koovait Kannan has lost his job! On the eve of the wedding! And they haven’t told anybody about it! Anybody except Devaki Amma and Madhavan saar that is. And you know why they had to tell them?’

Valsamma resumed her scrubbing.

‘Because they had to come and beg Amma and saar for a loan so that they could meet the expenses of the wedding without that vulture Nalini and her husband knowing about all this. Because, of course, Ration Raaman would cancel the wedding the minute he came to know that Bindu’s father was out of a job. That Venu isn’t marrying Bindu for her looks, you can bet on that! It

seems they are asking for money, a bike, and this much gold.' Kamala spread her arms out wide to illustrate, upsetting the vessel of chukku water in the process, causing it to fall to the ground with a clatter.

Valsamma, sensing some vibration, turned, and jumped as she saw Kamala. 'Aye kutty! What are you doing sneaking up on an old woman like that? Almost gave me a heart attack.'

Kamala let out a short loud cackle and jumped down from the counter to clear up the mess. 'Aiyyo, ammey, as though I would sneak up on you! Go on, go on, get back to your work.' She patted the old woman fondly. Valsamma didn't know it, but she had just made Kamala feel a lot better.

As Valsamma hauled the scrubbed lamps to the outside tap to wash, Kamala called after her, 'And I'll be damned if I wear that eyesore that Sundarikutty sent me for the wedding! You can tell her that from me, yes you can!'

Gaurikutty gave her a quizzical look as she came in hauling three jackfruits that Thankappan had just cut from the tree, but Kamala merely smiled back at her mysteriously.

## Twenty-one

Geetha threw down her hand in exaggerated disgust, and Vikki whooped in delight. ‘Donkey! Donkey! Donkey!’ chanted Raju, Mini and Divya and she pretended to be crestfallen, but in truth, she wasn’t really bothered about losing the game; it was such a relief that things were back to normal again with the cousins. At least some good had come out of that afternoon on the terrace.

Of course Mini and Divya had flown downstairs immediately to break the big news. Unfortunately the whole house had been still comatose and Vikki and Raju had been the first sentient people they had run into. The girls had been momentarily torn between revealing the scoop and continuing the war. After dithering briefly, they had called a temporary truce and spilt the beans. ‘Shut up!’ Vikki was saying disbelievingly by the time Geetha had caught up with the girls.

‘Seriously?’ Raju had asked as she entered the room. She had looked away shiftily, in the process convincing Divya and Mini fully about the verity of the story.

By the next day she had invented a few details – the little boy had been just as Apoopan described, in mundu and necklace, like those kids in the Ravi Varma prints hanging in the living room. ‘Apoopan said he was in long shorts,’ Raju had murmured, but Geetha had continued undeterred: He had appeared out of nowhere and stood before her, not quite human, not quite flesh and bones, almost shimmering, like an oasis in a desert. Yes, the ghost had spoken to her, in a thin, high voice. He had seemed to know her name as well.

‘What did he say?’ Mini had asked, agog.

‘I . . . I . . . I don’t remember . . . something in Malayalam. I was too scared to even understand.’

‘Didn’t Apoopan say that he was deaf and dumb?’ Vikki had asked.

‘Er . . . no, just deaf I think.’

‘And then what did you do?’ Divya had asked.

‘Then you remember how Apoopan always says that if you hold on to iron, ghosts can’t harm you? So I rushed to a pipe and held on tight. And then he just vanished into thin air.’

‘I think the pipes are aluminium,’ Raju had said thoughtfully.

‘Whatever it is, it worked,’ Geetha had snapped irritably.

A little more of this fiction, and she had almost convinced herself that she had actually seen the ghost.

But Unnikuttan had just laughed when Mini informed him of the developments. ‘Podi! Go tell your stories to somebody else.’

‘Aiiyyo pavam,’ Lalitha Ammayi had lamented. ‘She’s been so upset that she’s seeing things. It’s all because of this Mini and Divya. I’m telling you Divya, if I see you ignoring or fighting with that poor girl any more, I will skin you alive!’

‘No, no it is their grandfather and all his tall stories,’ Ammooma had said. ‘I told him he’ll be giving the children nightmares but does anybody ever listen to me?’

But Mini and Divya were certain that Geetha had seen the ghost. ‘You should have seen her face!’ said Divya. Vikki and Raju were not entirely convinced but Geetha knew that they too were secretly relieved with the ceasefire and didn’t want to jeopardize it by questioning Mini and Divya’s story. There would be no probing questions, no uncomfortable objections from them.

But that evening, after she had lost happily at Donkey, Apoopan called her aside. ‘Come here,’ he said, patting his leg. Since nobody was around, she climbed on to his lap. He smelt of bhasmam and whisky, fragrant emblems of his morning and evening routines. The heat lay thick in the air but thunder rumbled from some distant place in the sky.

‘Can I, please?’ she asked, nodding to the glass at his side.

‘Ah, a little alcoholic, aren’t you? Just like your mother!’ But he let her have a sip of his whisky. She grabbed a handful of the peanuts that were lying in a bowl by his side. He waited till her mouth was full before broaching the topic.

‘What, molay, what is this I am hearing about you going up to the terrace?’

Geetha coughed, choking on a peanut. Apoopan thumped her on her back till she had recovered and administered another sip of whisky.

‘Is it true?’

Geetha nodded reluctantly. ‘But the door was open,’ she said.

‘Is that so? Perhaps Valsamma forgot to lock it after she cleaned it. But don’t you know that the stairs are all disintegrating? And the railings on the terrace will give way any day.’

Geetha nodded. ‘I know, I’m sorry Apoopaa, I don’t know, I was just

curious . . .’

‘I know . . . I would be too, in your place. But you know what happened to the curious cat, don’t you?’ Apoopan pulled her nose teasingly.

Geetha allowed herself a little smile.

‘And what happened to my little curious cat? Did you see something you shouldn’t have?’

Geetha looked up at him. At this close range she could see every line on his face, a million familiar streets in a beloved neighbourhood. Grey evening stubble, like a dusting of unseasonal snow, dotted the pathways. His bald pate shone under the naked bulb that hung low from the high ceiling of the veranda. The hair that had abandoned his head sprouted instead from his nose and ears. How could she lie? She longed to confide in him, tell him the truth. But she couldn’t do that either. In that split second, she weighed the consequences, the repercussions of Mini and Divya finding out she had made up the story. Unable to voice the dishonest words, she just lowered her head and nodded into her chest.

‘All right, here’s something I wanted to tell you, and only you. You have to promise not to tell anyone – not even Divya and Mini? Do you promise?’

Geetha nodded, intrigued.

‘You know that ghost I saw on the terrace a long time ago? The one I was telling you children about? Well, in all honesty, now that I’ve had so many years to think about it . . . Well, I think there was no ghost at all.’

Geetha smiled. ‘Really? So you were just making up the story to scare us?’

‘Tcheh, tcheh! Would your Apoopan do that? What I’m saying is . . . I was tired, the light was not so good, the wind in the trees on a dark night has a way of making one feel jumpy, doesn’t it?’

Geetha nodded.

‘And I can’t remember if I was awake or sleeping. The more I think about it, the more I feel I was actually asleep.’

‘So it was all a dream?’

‘I think that’s the most likely explanation.’

Geetha rested her head on his shoulder and gave him a hug. It was the days before people said things like ‘I love you’, so she just squeezed him tighter than usual.

Apoopan patted her head. ‘As for what you saw, I think much the same happened to you. The sun was hot, you dozed off, you were thinking about my story, you dreamed about the ghost. What do you think?’



Geetha pretended to consider. ‘You know, I think that might just be what happened.’

‘Good girl! So there’s nothing to be scared about, you understand? Now, let me see if you can get me another peg of whisky – you know where the measure is, don’t you?’

Geetha gave him a swift kiss and hopped down. As she left to find the whisky bottle, she turned. ‘Apooan?’

‘Yes?’

‘We don’t have to tell anybody that it was a dream, do we?’

‘What dream, kunjay?’

Geetha beamed and skipped out of the room.

The next day, seeing that the rain that had threatened the evening before had passed them by, Apooan drove them all down to the Trivandrum zoo, and Geetha felt almost giddy with relief and happiness as Divya held on to her hand tightly and Vikki spouted useless information about the animals: ‘Do you know that the hippo’s skin alone can weigh a ton?’ and ‘Elephants can recognize their own reflection in the mirror, can you believe it?’

When they returned, full of ice cream and peanuts, Geetha saw a familiar figure by the gate. Her heart sank. It was Babu, and as they approached, he was looking into the car and trying to smile at her.

Geetha looked away quickly, hoping he hadn’t noticed that she had seen him. She pretended to be very interested in Vikki and Raju’s heated debate about whether the monkeys they had seen were chimpanzees or baboons, and prayed that Babu wouldn’t call out to her. He didn’t.

She had not seen him since that day, no doubt because she had taken great pains to avoid the kitchen. When she had bumped into Kamala in the dining room once, she had almost turned around and fled.

‘Ay, kunjay! What happened? Not to be seen around at all?’ Kamala had called out.

She had stuttered something about being busy and made her escape as soon as she could, but had been filled with dread every time she had to go anywhere near the kitchen or dining room. When Mini and Divya had spotted a mongoose in the backyard and called her to come and see, she had pretended to be ill. And when Ammooma had asked her to go and fetch a glass of water from the kitchen, she had stolen into the bathroom and filled Ammooma’s glass from the tap there instead. What Ammooma didn’t know wouldn’t make her ill, she had consoled herself, but when Ammooma had

complained of feeling out of sorts that evening she had been wracked with guilt.

Anyway, it would be all over soon enough. In a week, they would be returning to Bombay. In the normal course, the week before the end of their vacation was a tearful one as they bade extended farewells and rued how they would see each other only after a whole year. This time, Geetha willed the days to fly by.

But before reaching that finishing line, there was another hurdle to jump over. Bindu's wedding was three days away and Apoopan was insisting that they all attend. 'Kannan and Sundarikutty will be offended if we don't,' he said. Geetha sweated at the very thought of the ordeal. She would surely come face to face with Babu, and Kamala would be travelling with them to the wedding! Oh, why couldn't the wedding have been a few days later when they were safely back in Bombay? Even Terrible Tasneem and her bra-snapping fingers were preferable.

Perhaps she could pretend to be sick? But she had already overused that excuse and Ambika was already berating her for behaving like a geriatric with hypochondria. She knew she would be dragged out, sick or not. Maybe, at the last moment, she could accidentally burn the new dress Ammooma had bought her for the occasion? But Ambika would not hesitate to push her out in a nightie.

Just as she was resigning herself to having to go through the ordeal, perhaps having to skulk between Mini and Divya and the boys to avoid eye contact with Kamala and Babu, it started raining. Heavily, thunderously, brutally. The wind whipped around the garden, bending the coconut palms as though they were rubber playthings, rattling the windowpanes, whisking off dry leaves. Thunder grumbled in the sky like an old woman, and flashes of lightning tore through the clouds. And the rain came down in torrents, pouring from the tiled roof in cascades, overflowing from the garden pots, leaking through the crevices in the windowpanes, invading the verandas, gurgling in the open drainage ditches, liquefying the sandy patches in the compound, filling up the bucket under the missing roof tile in a matter of minutes. Goldie retreated dolefully under the four-poster bed in the Sewing Room from where he emanated a peculiar perfume of wet dog mixed with fear, and Pooch, abandoning his façade of ferocity, crouched under Apoopan's chair, whining pitifully. Momentarily forgetting they were of mature college-going vintage, Divya and Mini ran squealing into the

downpour, retreating hastily when another spark of lightning rent the sky.

It was no passing thunderstorm, Unnikuttan said, the monsoon had broken, well and truly this time. That meant it could possibly rain for days! Geetha went upstairs to Apoopan's puja room and prayed to Guruvayurappan, Ayyappan, Shiva and Saraswati that it would, and that all the roads would get flooded and they wouldn't be able to go for the wedding after all.

## Twenty-two

**I**n a few hours, Sundarikutty announced, Bindu would be Mrs Venugopal, thank the Lord.

‘Thank Madhavan saar and Amma,’ Kannan said, and Sundarikutty bobbed her head and pulled a face that was sixty per cent sugar syrup and forty per cent sour curd.

‘Thank God it stopped raining,’ said Bindu, for it had been pouring non-stop for the last three days. Kannan had gone to the Mahadeva temple the day before and promised generous offerings in return for fair weather on the big day, and it appeared as though his prayers had been answered. The skies had cleared overnight, and the ground had already dried in the searing post-rain sunshine.

Babu had reason to be grateful too. He would no longer need to see his sister every day, which was cause enough for cheer, considering how insufferable she had been ever since she had got engaged. Moreover, he would be the brother-in-law of the feared Constable Venu, which was sure to bring its share of benefits; he was already being gifted free beedis at the newspaper stall off MG Road – ‘just like that,’ said the owner, One-Eyed Ouseph.

And then of course there was the thought of seeing Kamala again.

That heady, exhilarating, delirious afternoon in the bathroom had been the delicious fruit of the seeds he had been sowing the whole summer; a sweet culmination that had surpassed anything he had even hoped to dream of. He had floated around like a feather in a breeze for days after that, alternating obscene mental images of Kamala with chaste plans for the life they were going to lead together, the grand wedding they would have (grander than Bindu’s even), the clever, beautiful, obedient children they would produce, the long, happy life they would live.

As a bonus, Satyen and Jolly had been agog.

‘Son of a hog! Right there in the bathroom?’

‘With the frog hopping madly around our legs and the chickens in the coop clucking wildly as though they knew what was going on!’

Satyen had hooted. Jolly, ever the pragmatist, asked, ‘Weren’t you scared you’d get caught?’

‘Eda, I didn’t think of anything in that moment. I only realized that my slippers and edge of my pants were wet when my mother commented on it

later. There I was, making some dumb excuse about stepping into a puddle – on the hottest, driest day of the year! Thankfully she didn't cross-examine me like she usually does.'

'More importantly, how was it, my son?' Satyen asked.

'Aiiyyo, my grandfather, better than anything I could have ever imagined.'

But when he had finally got a chance to return to Devaki Nilayam, it had turned out to be a bit of an anticlimax, like one of those pretentious movies in which the hero dies and the girl has to marry the boring, if virtuous, character actor. Kamala had been preoccupied, lukewarm even, barely talking to him, let alone giving him the meaningful glances and suggestive smiles he had been hoping for. Much to his surprise, for he knew how eagerly she looked forward to seeing the Sunday movie on television (one of the few perquisites of working at Devaki Nilayam), and how annoyed she'd been that she had missed it many Sundays in a row because of the vacation rush of Nair offspring at the house, she had shrugged indifferently when he had suggested in a low voice that he would get two tickets for a movie if she could manage to slink out unnoticed. And when, deflated, he'd finally said he was leaving, she had just given him a dismissive wave over her shoulder, not even turning to bid him goodbye.

He had been looking forward to some time alone with her when he picked her up from the house for the wedding but she had said that she would be coming with the Nairs, along with Valsamma and Thankappan and Gaurikutty. 'But, but . . ., you're part of the ashtamangalyam,' he had said, desperately, hoping she would take the hint, 'don't you have to come early to practise?'

'Practise what? Holding a lamp?' Kamala had scoffed densely. 'I think I can manage that without practice, thank you!' And Gaurikutty had smirked.

He had tried to coax her, but she had brushed him off with a cross 'Tcheh! Poda!' Perhaps she had been forbidden to go with him by that she-buffalo. Now that he thought about it, Devaki Amma had shown blatant disapproval as she watched them leave on the cycle for the engagement.

Nevertheless, the more he thought of Kamala, the more he was niggled by a vague unease. Kamala had not been merely reserved – she had seemed almost irritable. He was quite sure he had put up a reasonable performance in the bathroom. She had been giggly and playful after, coy even. What had changed? Maybe it had been the unwanted but unavoidable presence of Gaurikutty. Or perhaps she was annoyed that he had not come to meet her for

some days – but he had explained that; he had been busy helping Kannan with caterers and furniture leasers and other wedding-related chores.

Then again, he had learnt that Kamala's mercurial moods were part of her charm. Maybe it had just been That Time of the Month – or perhaps she had got a tongue-lashing from Devaki Amma – God knows, his mother used to get any number of them. Or maybe she was just edgy as the time drew near for her childhood friend to get married to the most eligible bachelor in Kuttipuram.

Now, as he stood on the steps of the wedding hall with Satyen and Jolly, nodding at guests as they streamed in, he allowed himself to savour a quiver of anticipation. She would be here soon – and although he knew that it would be impossible to sneak Kamala away from the group, he hoped at least to have a quiet moment with her; make an appointment for a rendezvous on another day.

His mother had allowed him to wear the maroon pants with the shimmer today, in honour of the presence of the Nairs. He also sported the sunglasses and calculator-watch that Kannan had brought him from Koovait – he was certain that Kamala would be impressed.

Satyen nudged him. Two cars and two autos had drawn up. The Nair clan had arrived. Madhavan saar was striding ahead, the edge of his mundu held behind him in his right hand. His youngest son, son-in-law and two daughters followed, then the gaggle of grandchildren, then Devaki Amma waddling after them like a pregnant mastiff. Sundarikutty had gone in to usher a few guests to their seats, but she emerged in a rush to fall at their feet. She had traded her glittering polyesters for a sedate mundu-veshti, in keeping with her renewed role as humble retainer in need of help. As she swooped down on the girls and smothered them with her epic kisses, Kannan hurried forward and proffered a respectful namaskaram. Madhavan saar patted Kannan on the back, provoking open-mouthed awe in Satyen and Jolly. Devaki Amma gave Sundarikutty a tight-lipped smile. Babu began to smile as he saw Geetha but she was looking in another direction, and he felt it would be rude to call to her. Vikki and Raju nodded as they passed, and Divya and Mini gave him shy smiles. Nevertheless he felt a little put out by Geetha not looking his way. Was it the sunglasses? He pushed them hastily up to his head before he came face to face with Kamala.

Following the Nairs at a respectful distance was Valsamma and one granddaughter, Thankappan and his second wife, and Gaurikutty and

Kamala. She was looking as beautiful as the Goddess Lakshmi herself, in some cottony confection the colour of chandanam and as transparent as a cobweb – and as deadly too, he thought with a shiver. She had evidently refused to wear the sari Sundarikutty had bought for her – good for her. The blouse was obviously one of her old, tight ones, for glistening flesh poured out of it from all sides. Gaurikutty gave him a little wave and he smiled back absently as he looked beyond her and desperately tried to catch Kamala's eye. She was looking steadfastly ahead, not seeming to notice even when Gaurikutty squeezed her shoulder and tried to point out Babu standing on the steps.

Sundarikutty and Kannan led the Nair party into the hall leaving Babu standing desolately on the steps with only Satyen and Jolly beside him.

‘Eda, she didn't even look at you!’ Jolly observed.

‘Been feeding us some fat stories, have you, you fatherless bugger?’ asked Satyen with a smirk.

Babu began to protest. ‘Tcheh, of course not! Go kiss your mother, rascal! I know what it was . . . she . . . she must have been shy because she was with the Nairs.’

‘Not even a sideways glance,’ Jolly persisted and Satyen broke into a snigger.

Before he could defend himself, a flurry of activity indicated that the groom had arrived, with his parents and siblings. They were a striking-looking group, especially the groom and his mother. Venu had opted for a starched silk mundu with an aquamarine border and a matching shirt in aquamarine silk. Nalini had outdone herself – she was swathed in parrot-green silk and the high bun on her head was bedecked with more roses than the bush in the Nairs' garden. Gold glinted in the sunlight from her hands and neck and ears. Babu lowered his sunglasses to his eyes once more.

Sundarikutty beckoned him over as he was in charge of the ceremonial washing of Venu's feet and the garlanding of his future brother-in-law. But Babu was preoccupied – his suspicions had been confirmed. Kamala was not just pensive – she was deliberately ignoring him. There was no way she could have missed him standing on the steps with Satyen and Jolly. He was getting a little annoyed. Even if she was upset about Bindu getting married, why was she taking it out on him?

He poured the water carelessly over Venu's feet, not noticing his soon-to-be brother-in-law glaring at him for splashing his pristine off-white mundu. As

soon as he had tossed the garland over Venu's head, upsetting the carefully oiled coif a bit, Sundarikutty pulled him roughly away and shot him a stony stare.

Sunglasses back on their perch on his head, Babu trailed unhappily down the aisle towards the stage behind the groom's party. Satyen and Jolly broke away and settled themselves on seats at the back of the hall. Just ahead of them were Thankappan, Gaurikutty and Valsamma. Kamala had already disappeared into the ante-room where Bindu was getting ready, and would only make an appearance when she surfaced with the rest of the ashtamangalyam girls, heralding the bride. The Nairs were seated in the very first row on the left hand side; the peripheral members of the groom's party were being seated on the right. The only guests with better seats were the core members of the groom's party – Ration Raaman and his wife, sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren – who were being settled on red velvet sofas on the stage, just across from where the holy matrimony was to be solemnized.

'TSSST,' whispered Sundarikutty furiously, 'Why are you standing there gaping like a dehydrated dog? Go stand at the side of the stage and hand over things when I ask you to.'

Babu stirred from a daze to find that Venu was already seated. The wedding band arranged by Madhavan saar, a couple of old men in starched white mundus, had started playing the auspicious nadaswaram, trying valiantly to drown out the babel caused by a few hundred guests all talking at the same time. Kannan and Sundarikutty ducked behind the curtain and when they emerged, they were preceded by the ashtamangalyam and leading a bedecked Bindu, in a candy-floss-pink sari woven all over with gold. The congregation fell silent as people craned to see what Koovait Kannan had provided for his daughter on her wedding day. A collective gasp went up at the thickness of her oddiyanam, at the five chunky necklaces around her neck, the heavy bangles on her wrist and the rings on each but one strategic finger. Sundarikutty simpered; it had been the reaction she had been striving towards. Nalini smiled beatifically and performed an approving dhutam, sliding her head from side to side like a practised Bharatanatyam exponent.

But Babu had eyes only for one person. He looked miserably at Kamala, searching for answers, willing her to meet his gaze. Was she teasing him? Was she testing his interest? He tried to console himself with the thought. That was it of course; girls like Kamala were used to a lot of attention – there,



even now, in front of his wife, Thankappan was flagrantly ogling her, the old goat! He would have to pursue her more ardently.

He saw that she managed to stay composed, even smiling when the thaali was tied and rings exchanged, and the newly-married couple took the three sacred turns around the fire. And when it was time to ululate, she was the shrillest of the lot, her fingers pressing firmly on the luscious lips, her neck reverberating with the furious motion of her tongue.

He started as Sundarikutty clicked her fingers at him furiously. He hurried forward with the tray bearing two mundu sets, two suit-pieces, a thick gold chain and the key to a brand new motorcycle. It was handed over to Venu by Kannan and Sundarikutty. With some difficulty, Venu bent down to touch their feet; he was built more for strength than agility. A reciprocal tray of three silk saris and one gold set was passed to a more nimble Bindu by Nalini and Ration Raaman, and blessings were sought and given. The tray passed from Bindu to Sundarikutty and thence to Babu who put it on the table at the side, where his grandmother would watch over it like a trained Doberman to ensure that no light-fingered guests made away with it, or with any of the other presents.

The couple were taken around to touch the feet of sundry elders, starting of course with Madhavan and Devaki Nair. Then they were settled on to a mat – Venu sitting with his legs stretched out in front of him as he was unable to cross his legs – and a mass of relatives descended to feed them the auspicious bananas and milk, and shower them with gifts.

Kannan and Sundarikutty stood leaning on each other in relief; the impossible had been accomplished without a hitch. As the congratulatory crowd surged forward, Babu noticed Kamala edging away. He started to push his way through the horde to get to her. This was his opportunity to have a few words with her alone. A few irate guests pushed back at him. He ignored them and ploughed on.

Somebody clutched at him. He tried to shake off the intruding hand, but it held tight. ‘Babu!’ said a voice.

He turned around, a little disoriented. It was Gaurikutty. He turned back again and craned his neck. Kamala was moving away quickly, and all he could see was the back of her jasmine-bedecked head disappearing into the crowd. He looked back irritably at Gaurikutty.

‘Babu! Such a nice function,’ she said, oblivious.

He grunted.

‘Everything went off so smoothly! And Bindu was looking so nice.’

He scanned the throng desperately. The jasmine-ringed bun had disappeared.

‘I’m so glad there was no problem.’

Babu looked at her with dislike. ‘Yes, yes,’ he said. He noticed she was still holding his hand, and pressing it reassuringly. It seemed a bit odd. He looked closely at her – she was looking earnestly into his eyes – and then she started stroking his hand gently.

He snatched his hand away. My God, he hadn’t even considered the possibility! All the while he had been yearning for Kamala, and he hadn’t noticed Gaurikutty’s obvious fixation with him. It was natural, of course – he certainly had enough magnetism to snare the lovely Kamala; Gaurikutty must have been just like a snake in a charmer’s thrall, even if this particular charmer had had no intention of being enthralling.

‘Don’t worry, everything will turn out okay,’ she said.

‘Er . . .’ Babu gawped. Had she misunderstood his easy banter and camaraderie? And great – there were Satyen and Jolly pushing slowly but relentlessly towards him through the crowd, supercilious smiles on their faces.

‘I’m glad nobody found out. It’s good you kept it quiet.’

‘Heh?’

‘Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. Not till you want me to.’ Gaurikutty was whispering now. ‘I know I’m not supposed to know, but I overheard Kamala telling Valsamma.’

Babu frowned. What? Kamala telling Valsamma that Gaurikutty was infatuated with him? And Gaurikutty didn’t know that till she heard Kamala saying it? No, no there must be some other explanation. Oh Mahadeva – had Kamala told them about the afternoon in the bathroom? Maybe boasted a little? Babu reddened, though he couldn’t quell a gush of pride either.

‘Don’t worry, I don’t think Valsamma heard anything. And I haven’t told anyone. I’m sure everything will turn out all right in the end. I’m just glad it didn’t affect Bindu’s wedding.’

What was the girl babbling on about? Babu felt as though he had just been shaken awake from a deep sleep and asked to solve an equation.

Finally he found his tongue. ‘What the hell are you talking about, Gaurikutty?’

Gaurikutty stood back and looked at him evenly, a hand on her hip. ‘You

know!’

‘No, I don’t!’

Gaurikutty looked around warily, then leaned in close. ‘About your father!’

Babu pulled away and looked at her sharply.

‘Don’t worry, I won’t tell,’ she said hastily, seeing his expression.

‘What . . . what do you know about my father?’

‘You know . . . about him losing his . . . you know.’

Babu’s mind whirled. Thankfully Satyen and Jolly had got caught in a knot of unyielding guests about twenty feet away from them; he needed to think. He stared at Gaurikutty and, as realization dawned, horror clambered all over him. ‘And Kamala knows about this?’

‘Yes, of course! Wait . . . wasn’t it you who told her?’

Babu shook his head slowly. The light went from his eyes. His shoulders slumped. Things were suddenly becoming very, very clear.

Despite himself, he found himself turning and letting his gaze travel to where he knew Geetha was sitting. As he had suspected, she was looking at him with that strange expression; that expression that had been on her face for some time now; now that he knew what to make of it, from that day when his mother had gone to tell Devaki Amma about Kannan losing his job, about the jeopardy Bindu’s marriage was in, about the help they needed to salvage the union. His tormented gaze held hers for one long moment – and then, almost imperceptibly, Geetha shuddered, and then looked away.

## Twenty-three

Now that many years had interceded, Babu could look back on the events of that period with a sense of calm, a modicum of gratitude and only the slightest wistful pang. He could see now that if his father hadn't lost his job on the eve of Bindu's wedding, his life would probably never have taken the course it had.

The moment Gaurikutty had told him that Kamala knew about his father's unemployment, things had fitted into place like Mangalore tiles on a roof. He realized why Kamala had lost interest in him, why she refused to even look in his direction. He hadn't really given it much thought till then, but of course Kamala would pause to weigh her options in the changed circumstances. She might have been happy enough to dally with the heir of Koovait Kannan, to accept his little gifts and his doting attention, but she would naturally think twice about wasting her time on the son of an unemployed driver/plumber with uncertain prospects.

And the girl Geetha . . . of course, Devaki Amma must have told her whole family that Kannan had lost his job, probably over dinner in that very dining room that his mother had crawled back to, to grovel for a loan. And Geetha, who had treated him with easy camaraderie till that point of time, who had sat by his side to make palm-leaf boxes and had monopolized his cycle the entire summer, must have all of a sudden looked at him in a new light.

He had felt no anger, at least not towards Kamala or Geetha, perhaps because he could completely understand their point of view, absolutely imagine behaving in the same way if he had been in their place. But there was a dejection, a sense of having basked in a mercurial spotlight for too short a time, before receding into anonymity once more. An irrational notion that his father had betrayed him in some way. A chagrin when he relived his short-lived fantasies, his silly daydreams. And utter mortification as he watched his mother try to conceal his father's unemployment from Kuttipuram in general and Bindu's in-laws in particular and pretend that all was well. And then a desire, a desire that poor shiftless Babu had never felt before, a desire to succeed, a yearning for recognition, a need to amount to something.

As Kannan scurried around to submit applications to Gulf recruitment agents, answered vacancy ads, went to see if he could recover his old job as

the substitute tempo driver, even made a few house calls around Ambalakunnu to check if anybody needed any plumbing done, Babu made a decision. There would be no moments like this one for him, he vowed, no unpredictable jobs, no fickle employers, no terminations, no fawning on others to get your bills paid. From that moment on, Babu shelved all hopes of becoming a cinema-hall usher or a hoarding painter and resolved that he would complete his schooling come what may. Little did his parents know that all they had been trying to din into his head for years had crystallized into one moment of realization.

His father had been astonished, but pleasantly so, to find Babu immersed in his books the next term, without any shouting or nagging or nudging or urging on his part. And when his final-exam results came in, for the very first time, Babu had passed every subject on the first try and managed to acquit himself quite satisfactorily in several. Satyen had been bemused at this new avatar of Babu, and kept betting Jolly packets of beedis that it would last for one week, another month, a year at the most . . . Jolly won a lot of free beedis that term.

They stopped betting after that, partly because Satyen got left behind in the eighth standard, and then left school altogether when his father finally managed to land him a job at his trucking firm. As Babu gradually lost the need to cheat from Jolly's answer papers, and even outscored him in a subject or two, the group slowly drifted apart. Babu found new friends; those who harboured similar hopes of making good, of leaving behind their small, prospectless lives in Ambalakunnu.

As Sundarikutty had predicted, Wilhelm Keller's successor had never bothered to contact Kannan or answer his many pleas for employment. In time the word got out, of course, that Koovait Kannan was out of a job. Looks like that witch's luck has run out, Sundarikutty's neighbours crowed; as it is, she is lucky that it happened only after Bindu's wedding, they said, although Achuthan, the cowherd, had heard from his wife's sister-in-law's niece, Gaurikutty, that Kannan had actually lost his job *before* the marriage but had hushed it up to save the wedding. Nalini had got wind of the rumour and urged Venu to file a case of fraud against his in-laws – or at least lock them in jail for a night and give Sundarikutty a lashing or two with the lathi – but Venu had spinelessly demurred. Bindu was already pregnant; there was no looking back now anyway.

Finally, just as Sundarikutty was inventing new and virulent plagues to

befall Keller and preparing to ditch the pretence and take up an underpaid job as a housemaid in the Varghese household, which had eight children, twelve bedrooms, four dogs, three cats, two flower gardens and only two maids to tend to them all, they got another fateful telegram from Keller. He had found a new job, this time in Doobai, and he was inviting Kannan to join him. And thus Koovait Kannan was reincarnated once again, as Doobai Kannan. 'I knew that nice white man had a heart of gold!' Sundarikutty would exclaim often to her green-eyed neighbours.

When the war broke out in Kuwait a few years later and the papers were full of news about Kerala's sons and husbands returning to India in a hurry, everybody marvelled at how providential it had been that Kannan had lost his job in Koovait when he had, only to get a better one in Doobai. 'Mahadeva is great!' agreed Sundarikutty, and the Mahadeva temple witnessed a fresh resurgence.

By then Babu had not only passed his tenth standard examination but, to Kannan's delight, had also applied and got admission for a diploma course in civil engineering in Trivandrum. When he returned to Ambalakunnu after finishing the course, a contingent of around forty or so friends and neighbours and relatives waited at the bus stand with garlands to receive the only diploma holder in Kuttipuram. What was even more astounding than the diploma itself was that Babu had somehow managed to teach himself to speak, read and write a basic English in the intervening years; even Venu, now a portly assistant sub-inspector on the VIP detail, was impressed.

Kannan and Sundarikutty had their heart set on Babu taking a job in the Gulf, but Babu was adamant; he sent applications only to public sector companies in India, and was accepted after an examination and many interviews, at a modest but unwavering salary, at a Government of India fertilizer company in Trichy. Even when Sundarikutty complained that his old friend Satyen, who was only a truck driver in Bahrain, was earning twice the salary as him, without even passing the SSLC exam, Babu remained unmoved.

In time, he married a nurse from Kottayam and three children followed, two girls and a boy. He rose to the ranks of a junior engineer, and when Satyen came back jobless to Kerala when trouble started fomenting in Bahrain, Sundarikutty was proven wrong.

Now Sundarikutty and Kannan had passed into the great beyond and Babu's connections with Ambalakunnu had become tenuous; he returned only

occasionally to check on the old house and chuck Bindu's two children under the chin. There was no reason therefore for him to even think about that summer in Ambalakunnu. And yet, every now and then, when his wife was plaiting her hair and getting ready to don her nightie, when his children were in bed and he was slouched in front of the television apparently engrossed in the images flickering before him, his mind wandered back to that other place, that other time.

He had never gone back to Devaki Nilayam after that summer, not when Keshavan Nair had got married – hurriedly, Sundarikutty had said – to the plain but wealthy girl from the Warriar family. Not when Kannan had joined Keller in Doobai, not the following year when Madhavan saar had passed away and Kannan had tried to coax him to go and pay his respects. Nor when Gaurikutty had whispered to him during a lunch break at school that Kamala had asked about him, had sent a message for him to visit.

For many years he had not allowed himself to dwell on Kamala, but first loves are not easily forgotten; they leave behind imprints on the heart that linger long after they are gone, like a hollow in a tree after a woodpecker has flown its nest, like silt left behind by a river that has broken its banks. Even now, memories of her stole unbidden into his thoughts when he least expected it – the full, sweet lusciousness of the mango cheeks, the heat of her body next to his in the coconut grove, her loud, full-throated laugh as she had folded him in a damp embrace in the bathroom, the jasmine-ringed bun slipping away from him in the wedding crowd, inexorably, eternally. For long he had lived in terror of bumping into her at an Ambalakunnu corner and yet, when he had heard that Devaki Amma had arranged her marriage to an office clerk in Calicut, he had felt a dull loss at the thought that he would probably never see her again.

As for the Nairs, from what he had heard, they had experienced a change of fortunes too. Their business, which had apparently been suffering from strikes in one factory and pilfering in another, had been difficult to salvage after the dynamic Madhavan saar had passed away leaving the three inadequate sons to mount a rescue operation. It was duly sold and Sundarikutty had heard that the younger son Keshavan had frittered away not only his, but his mother's share too, within a few years. By the time Devaki Amma passed on, the Nairs were said to be in some debt, a rumour that was confirmed when Devaki Nilayam was hastily sold. As he thought of how Geetha had met his eye across the wedding hall, shuddered and looked away,

Babu couldn't repress a little tingle of glee.

If only Babu had known how much that summer in Ambalakunnu had disturbed Geetha too, perhaps he would not have gloated so. As Geetha had expected, Bindu's wedding had been one awkward, embarrassing ordeal. While Mini and Divya had giggled helplessly about failing to escape Sundarikutty's inhaling kisses at the doorway, Geetha had sat with her eyes lowered for most of the ceremony so as not to meet Kamala or Babu's gaze. For one awful moment she had caught Babu's eye across the room, and all the events of that mortifying afternoon had come flooding back. As soon as they'd finished lunch, eating moderately as Ambika had instructed, Geetha had fled to Apoopan's car.

'Did you see Bindu's super-frosted candy-pink lipstick?' Divya had whispered as she climbed in.

'What about Babu's sunglasses?' Mini had giggled, and Geetha had felt discomfited, as though it was she who had been sporting the multicoloured reflecting shades, she who had painted her lips an arresting pink.

'And what about that woman with the roses on her head?'

'That's enough,' Apoopan had cut in, uncharacteristically stern, and Divya and Mini had subsided in surprise.

It had been a relief to leave that unsettling summer behind in Ambalakunnu. As soon as they were back in Bombay, school, and life, had intervened, and for the most part, Geetha could pretend that she had not seen what she had seen, she had not felt what she had felt, that everything was as it used to be. Terrible Tasneem had inevitably discovered her bra, and had derived great pleasure for a few weeks, cornering Geetha at assembly, in the corridors, even once during PT period, to snap at it incessantly, excessively – until she found another victim. Mini had joined St Xavier's College, and after gaining some measure of fame for getting up on a canteen table and singing an off-key version of *Like a Virgin* to a group of seniors who were ragging her, seemed to have lost all interest in studies and appeared to be contemplating a specialization in Boys with electives on Dieting and Fashion. Raju had flunked Hindi in the first term of his ninth standard, sending Ambika and Unnikuttan into conniptions. Then Geetha had got her period, and there were cramps and stains and other things to think of. But sometimes, as Mrs D'souza droned on about the number of members in the Rajya Sabha, or as Geetha ran self-pitying rounds during PT class, her thoughts flitted back to the sooty walls of the kitchen, Valsamma drying clothes in the backyard,



Gaurikutty squashing worms with her fingernails, Kamala grinding batter in the veranda, and Babu jogging behind her as she balanced valiantly on the cycle, his rubber chappals thwacking loudly on the concreted parts of the compound. She wished she had not seen what she had from the terrace, and yet, increasingly, it did not seem so important anymore, somehow not so deplorable. Was it the faraway bustle of the classroom? Geetha's own growing maturity and awareness? Mini's incessant stream of stories about college crushes

and break-ups? Or an empathy arising from Geetha's first brush with attraction – in the form of the light-eyed junior from Raju's school who had inadvertently kicked a football in her direction and blushed as he came to retrieve it from her feet?

Sensing that she had over-reacted, perhaps even misbehaved, Geetha tried, in her own awkward way, to make amends on subsequent vacations in Ambalakunnu. She hung hesitantly around Kamala in the kitchen, searching for some pleasant conversation, some flattering compliment to bridge the unspoken gulf that had yawned open between them. Kamala chattered on blithely as though nothing had happened, and her pleasant acceptance of Geetha's capricious conduct, her total lack of rancour, made Geetha feel even more small, even more unworthy of such easy graciousness. But even though Thankappan still ate mounds of curd-rice in the kitchen veranda and Valsamma complained about the pains in her joints, though Meen Mommad still brought his baskets of fish around while the cats paced about, tails aloft, waiting for a moment to pounce, the afternoons in the kitchen never felt quite the same.

Perhaps it was because Babu never came around. Even though Geetha dreaded running into him, she hoped that when she did, she would have the poise, the presence of mind to make some conciliatory gesture, say some soothing words, which would perhaps atone for some of her inexcusable behaviour. But Babu never gave her that chance, and Geetha vacillated between remorse and relief. Then Kamala married and moved away and finally Geetha didn't feel obliged to hang around the kitchen anymore; no longer than it took to fetch a glass of water, anyway, or deposit a dirty vessel.

Geetha couldn't recall exactly when she learnt the truth about Dileep Valliathan's prolonged absence from Ambalakunnu and why Lalitha Valliamma had stopped talking to Keshavan Maama at the end of that summer. It must have been years later, but her thoughts flew immediately

back to that summer; to Babu and Kamala in the bathroom and to her own unforgiving revulsion, her harsh, unfair condemnation. Geetha cringed as she reflected on how closely her uncles' indiscretions reflected those of Kamala and Babu. And yet how easily she had avoided Babu's smiling gaze, how she had abandoned Kamala in the kitchen without so much as a twinge of remorse!

By and by she found out how Kannan had lost his job before Bindu's wedding, how Apoopan had stepped in to rescue the nuptials. She must have been older then, because instead of feeling foolishly conceited about Apoopan's last-minute, white-knight act, it made her pause, forced her to reflect. She had spent almost the whole summer with Babu and Kamala in the kitchen, and yet all of this had escaped her notice. Yes, she had heard Kamala and Babu and Valsamma and Gaurikutty discussing the wedding, the sari and jewellery Bindu would wear, the feast that was planned. She had seen Sundarikutty at the house when she had come to relay the news of the match to Ammooma. She remembered Bindu, Sundarikutty's scrawny little daughter, who was said to have joined a garment factory. Over the years she had heard Ammooma and Apoopan arguing about Kannan, the bumbling plumber who had gone to the Gulf and made good as a chauffeur. And yet she had not been able to put together the sum of all the parts to make the whole that was Babu. In her self-absorption, all she had seen was a convenient presence who would teach her to cycle and show her how to craft things from leaves. Not the teenage boy with a sister who was getting married, a father who sent home money from the Gulf, a mother who had to scabble around to make ends meet, and a neighbourhood girl to distract his attention from everything else.

And Kamala? Kamala must be having a family as well, and friends of her own and problems and joys that Geetha knew nothing about.

Eventually she got to thinking that it wasn't just Kamala and Babu's actions that had shaken her that afternoon on the terrace; it had not been merely her heightened sense of propriety that they had offended after all. It had been, perhaps, the loss of her one-dimensional perception of them as mere retainers, servile and obsequious, who lived but for the service of the Nairs; the robbing of their facelessness, the revelation of their identities as individuals, individuals with thoughts and feelings and actions completely independent of and indifferent to Geetha or any of the Nairs. It had been condescending, she realized then, to think that they were no more than their

carefully constructed personas, their class-appropriate roles; it was an innate feudal conviction no less strong, no more forgivable than Ammooma's.

Now, it would be nice to report that the events of that summer affected Geetha so much that she grew up and did a degree in social services, joined an NGO and today sallies forth sporting Kolhapuri chappals and hefting mirror-work jhola into the remotest villages to do good, cleansing works. But the truth is that with the passing of the years, that summer in Ambalakunnu merged into all the other summers, its events ceased to cause that raw, urgent distress and Kamala and Babu and Valsamma and Thankappan receded into the foggiest recesses of Geetha's mind. And yet, if there is a reason why Geetha catches herself before raising her voice to her maid, why she hesitates to turn down that incorrigible watchman's frequent plea for a loan, why she can never fob off the sad-eyed beggar at the traffic signal, then that reason could probably be traced to that discarded romance novel, those hot summer days in the kitchen, that afternoon on the terrace, and that one long look across a wedding hall.

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# Glossary:

## Malayalam Words and References

*aattu kallu*: stone grinder for grinding batters

*aiyyo*: an exclamation, usually of surprise

*Amma*: mother; also a respectful term for an elderly woman

*Ammaman*: uncle

*Ammayi*: aunt

*Ammooma (or Ammamma)*: maternal grandmother

*Apoopan*: maternal grandfather

*ari payasam*: a kind of sweet pudding made from rice and milk

*ashtamangalyam*: a procession of unmarried girls carrying lamps which precedes the bride as she is brought to the dais for her wedding

*avial*: a mixed vegetable curry

*Ayyappa*: Hindu deity worshipped in South India

*beedi*: a local cigarette

*bharani*: ceramic canisters used for storing pickles, etcetera

*bhasmam*: holy ash, *vibhooti*

*Bobanum Moliyum*: a popular comic strip which used to appear in the *Malayala Manorama* about the antics of two children, Bob and Molly

*boli*: a pancake-like sweet

*bonda*: a snack made with spiced potato mash dipped in batter and deep-fried

*chaddi*: underwear

*chandanam kuri*: a mark on the forehead made with sandalwood paste

*chandanam*: sandalwood paste

*chechi*: elder sister (also used to refer to an older lady as a term of respect or endearment)

*cheenachatti*: a wok-shaped vessel

*Chemmeen*: a famous 1967 Malayalam movie

*chukku vellam*: drinking water which has been boiled with a mixture of herbs

*chunambu*: lime paste used for smearing on betel leaves

*dakshina*: offering in a temple

*Dhanwantharam Kuzhambu*: a therapeutic Ayurvedic oil

*dhutam*: side to side movement of the head executed as part of Bharatanatyam performances

*eda*: a term of endearment or familiarity which roughly translates as 'hey, you!' the female equivalent is *edi*

*eerkillu*: bristles of brooms

*enda*: what?

*ente*: my

*Ezhuthachan*: a 16th-century Malayalam poet considered to be the father of the Malayalam language

*gopuram*: temple tower

*Guruvayurappan*: a form of Vishnu as seen in the famous Guruvayurappan temple in Guruvayur

*Hidimbi*: a demoness from Hindu mythology

*hundi*: locked metal container in a temple with a slot at the top in which devotees drop coins and notes as offerings to the deity

*idiappam*: string hoppers

*jambeka*: a kind of tree yielding edible, white-pink, sour fruit

*Jayabharathi*: a Malayali film actress

*kadala curry*: curry made with black chickpeas, usually an accompaniment to puttu

*kadala muttai*: peanut candy

*kakoos*: latrine

*Kamala Das*: famous Malayali writer and poet

*kanji*: the water drained out after rice has been cooked in it; also used to describe the dish that comprises of cooked rice in the water in which it is cooked

*kattan kaapi*: black coffee sweetened with jaggery

*kodam*: bulbous vessels traditionally used for collecting and storing water

*kunjay*: an endearment meaning child

*kunju*: child

*kutty*: an endearment meaning child

*Maama*: short for Ammaman, or uncle

*maidan*: field

*Malgova*: a variety of large-size mango

*Mammooty*: famous Malayalam film actor, celebrated for his good looks

*mandapam*: marriage hall

*Mathrubhoomi*: a Malayalam newspaper

*meen*: (as in Meen Mommad) fish

*moda*: a traditional wicker stool

*Mohanlal*: iconic Malayalam film actor

*Mohini*: according to Hindu mythology, Mohini is Lord Vishnu in the form of a beautiful danseuse

*mol*: daughter; also an endearment meaning daughter or little girl

*molay*: an endearment meaning daughter or little girl

*monay*: an endearment meaning son, or little boy

*moram*: straw tray used for cleaning rice

*MT Vasudevan Nair*: famous Malayalam writer and director

*mundu*: traditional off-white lungi worn by both men and women

*mundu-veshti*: traditional attire of mundu and an upper pallu-like covering called *veshti* worn by Malayali women

*murukku*: a type of savoury snack

*Muthassan*: grandfather on the father's side

*Muthassi*: grandmother on the father's side

*Mutta*: (as in Mutta Mani) egg

*muttai*: a sweet or candy

*nada*: sanctum sanctorum

*nadaswaram*: a traditional Kerala wind instrument  
*nagapadam*: a traditional Kerala necklace made of green stones set in gold  
*namaskaram*: namaste, a form of greeting, also used to describe the gesture of folded hands that accompanies a greeting  
*Nedumudi*: refers to Nedumudi Venu, a famous Malayali character actor  
*neyappam*: a sweet snack made with a batter of flour, jaggery, coconut and sometimes bananas  
*oddiyanam*: a belt-like ornament worn around the waist, usually made of gold  
*Onam*: a Kerala harvest festival  
*pal payasam*: milk payasam  
*pandal*: a large temporary tent-like structure  
*parippu*: dal (lentils), or a dal (lentil) preparation  
*patti*: dog or bitch  
*pavada*: ankle-length skirt worn by Malayali girls; pavada-blouse is the entire attire consisting of skirt and a blouse  
*pavam*: exclamation meaning ‘poor thing’; also means ‘harmless’ or a harmless person  
*pavans*: a measure of the weight of gold – 1 pavan equals 8 grams  
*payaru*: long beans  
*payasam*: kheer (a sweet dessert)  
*pazham pori*: a traditional snack made of bananas dipped in batter and deep-fried  
*pichathi*: (as in Pichathi Pappu) knife  
*poda*: an exclamation meaning ‘get lost’ (while speaking to a male)  
*podu*: an exclamation meaning ‘get lost’ (while speaking to a female)  
*puttu*: a steamed breakfast dish made with ground rice and grated coconut  
*rasam*: a watery, soup-like curry made with lentils, tamarind and spices  
*rudraksha mala*: sacred prayer-bead necklace made from the seeds of the rudraksha tree  
*saar*: corruption of ‘sir’  
*sadya*: a traditional banquet with many dishes served on a banana leaf  
*sambar*: a lentil curry, usually with tamarind  
*Seetha kalyanam*: devotional song about the marriage of Rama and Sita  
*Srividya*: a famous Malayali film actress  
*thaali*: a leaf-shaped pendant on a gold chain given to a bride by her husband and usually worn by married women  
*tharavad*: traditional joint family units; also refers to the traditional homes in which these traditional units once lived in  
*thendi*: drifter, beggar  
*thokkan*: giant, hefty fellow  
*thorthu*: a towel; also a towel-like upper garment worn by working-class or rural women along with a mundu  
*thorthu-mundu*: simple traditional attire of mundu (white lungi) and blouse worn with a towel (thorthu) around the shoulder  
*uperi*: a dry vegetable dish usually eaten as a side dish  
*uruli*: traditional wide vessel made from brass  
*Valliachan*: elder uncle

*Valliamma*: elder aunt

*Vanitha*: a Malayalam women's magazine; Vanitha means 'women' in Malayalam

*vettila-paaku*: betel leaf and areca nut

*Vishu*: New Year's day for Malayali Hindus

*Yesudas*: famous Malayali singer