

KURUMPACCIDY VILLAGE, JAFFNA - 1973

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It was cool enough in the mornings, the monsoon months. By Christmas, the normally tepid water in the well was even cold and, not being brackish like it was along the coast, it was drinkable without having to drink half a dozen half-limes in it to drown out the fish-oil taste.

It stayed cool too-almost till ten o'clock-despite the warm breeze that followed the frequent showers. My wet face, shoulders and things would be fanned dry within a mile or two as I cycled, cycled, cycled along the empty roads that snake across the bare, scrubby land of the interior of the peninsula. Completely naked children - from villages where schools and clinics were deemed taboo-would chase alongside me for a hundred yards, screaming with perfect delight. At night, I added a thin cotton blanket to the sheet to ward off pre-dawn chills.

At dawn the shadows of the palmyrahs were thick black stripes across the red-sand road that led from the compound to the village street.

The compound was always quiet early morning. Behind my small house, a man and some women had been at work in the tobacco plantation since seven. Occasionally they called to each other across the clearing. In the stillness, the rattle of the old fridge was enough to make me jump until all of a sudden, All India Radio's Tamil service, relayed from Madras, would blare out from the main house thirty yards away, obliterating the calm silence.

I ate my breakfast of boiled egg and yesterday evening's bread spread with margarine and slowly savored the one locally available luxury-Indian nescafe-care of the smuggler-mudalali whose fortress of a house towered over the palmyra fences at the junction.

Eight o'clock: the sea breeze would be starting to sweep across the top of the peninsula. I hurriedly locked the house and balancing my foolscap notebook on the handlebars of the bike I had sent by train from Kandy, began the ten-mile cycle over the flat-as-Holland landscape to Vaddukoddai-which didn't quite rhyme with "never say die".

Why "never say die"? Well, for one thing, besides myself the only other member of the female sex who cycled in Jaffna was the wife of the Japanese missionary. Once two teenage boys had leapt on me from behind the gateposts of Tellipallai Maha Vidyalayam, pulling me off the cycle into the ditch. Recognising them as brahmins by their fair, fat faces and long oiled hair tied in buns, I dusted my knees and pulled myself up to my full diminutive height to deliver a fluent lecture on the moral superiority of Gandhian 'passive resistance' over all other tried methods of physical dissent. Then having retrieved my ditched bike, I resumed my journey, inwardly seethingAnd for another thing, girls bicycles were not available in Sri

Lanka at that time-the sedate ladies cycle, complete with basket and baby seat which the missionary's wife rode, had been imported from Japan-so the crossbar on my boys' sport bike posed an ever-present threat: one mistake at speed on a pot-holed road could bring tears to my eyes.....)

The first mile was a maze of turnings, left and right. Then emerging out of this cloistered pocket of palmyra-fence suburbia, I was suddenly in the relatively wide open space of the main road, passing Myliddy Cooperative and the house close to the Cooperative where the albino boy cowered in the shades at the rear of the verendah. His skin was white as beach sand leached by poya moonlight. His hair was as bleach-blond as a western pop star's. Every day he started at me go past. Every day his pink eyes crinkled against the early rays of sunshine and his cracked, blistered lips parted in a half-smile. I didn't think he smiled too often but ours was a mutual sympathy-freak to freak.

Now I was on the metalled and tarred Palaly-Tellipallai road, cambered from the centre. I hugged the left side to avoid the buses and bullock carts, passing a stream of pedestrians-mainly gnarled, wizened women; their exposed breasts sagging, faded cloths pulled so tight round their waist, the loose folds of skin formed a tunnel for the sweat to roll down their spines. Most were landless labourers on their way to chili plantations-or the paddy-fields whose half-grown, waving sheaves shimmered like emerald oases between dense black patches of palmyra forest. A few carried baskets of fish or vegetables on their heads. The die-hard 'topless' women of Jaffna wore their caste status with dogged pride. But what kind of irony was it that these gritty old women should share the same badge of seminudity as the young, nubile, spoiled gadflies of modern western culture?.

Their close-faced men, in weathered pyjama sarongs, could be seen seated on bus floors with sacks of rice, onions or chilies hugged to their bare ribs. They could wear no shirt, no towel, no banian. 'High' caste men, claiming their right to the bus seats or cycling alongside, shirts flapping, towel thrown casually about the neck or wrapped turban-style round the head, seemed to carry their sartorial privilege with equable self-esteem. Cycling home in the evenings, I would see vellala men in their flimsy, hip-hugging silk vertis, white kurtas billowing, going into the cavernous interior of a kovil, an orthodox brahmin-hindu temple, whose outer walls, painted with fat, cherry-red stripes, seemed to me to belong more to a gigantic ice-cream parlour than a religious edifice, especially one that took itself and its 'rights' so seriously. From behind high walls came the hysterical whine of the nadaswaram accompanied by a frenzy of drumming. Sometimes this exotic cacophony would be overlaid by the wonderfully fluid staccato of a duet of female temple singers.

Carnatic singing-my introduction to that esoteric musical form had come the first Sunday I spent in Jaffna. From a house hidden

somewhere behind a palmyrah grove, the sleepy afternoon silence had seen split by a long sinuous phrase, barely interpolated by breaths, from a man - a tenor - in a mellifluous roll of sound eliding from one note to another at great speed. After the barest of pauses, this was followed by the voice of his girl-pupil but her light contralto, while imitating precisely his phrasing, had produced a string of notes as lightly fluttering as the strings of butterflies that coursed through Kandy town during the Sri Pada season. The palmyrahs creaked through those Sunday afternoons like the masts of old sailing barques.....

Weeks later, the rains had almost ceased and it was Thai Pongal-harvest time. At six in the morning, on the cement slab that served as rice-drier by day and patio by night, a magical design was being created by my young neighbour from the main house. Half-bending, half-squatting, her gold bangles jingling, she poured perfectly executed spirals from slender bamboo 'pipettes'. Beside her were ranged little containers of coloured rice-flours-turquoise, orange, scarlet, yellow, white and royal blue-from which she drew her more intricate 'yantra' mystic ground of pentangles and circles within an endlessly connected, whorled symmetry: the eternal knot. In the centre of the 'yantra' was a small fire made of a few sticks of wood contained within a tripod of bricks. Over it an aluminum pot bubbled with Pongal 'cunjee', a sticky mess of rice, cadju, treacle, sultanas, milk and ghee-the original, enriched version of my favourite childhood tinned-pudding, "Ambrosia Creamed Rice".

My neighbour's classic 'Nefertiti' profile, exposed by her tightly drawn oiled hair, never ceased to amaze me. But this morning, gold glinted from every part of her - neck, ear, nose, fingers, wrists, ankles, toes. Golden threads woven into the crimson of her sari flashed in the first apricot rays of the sun. In the clear dawn of light, she seemed to have fallen from another planet. I sat on the back step, clutching my knees, to admire her dexterity. The culture gap yawned between us but I could discern this much: she was giving of her religion and her culture to me the outsider, the alien-and in so doing was bringing merit to her house-hold and honour to herself. The web of an ancient tradition momentarily enfolded us both, host and guest: a tradition whose nuances were as delicate and yet immutable as skeins of spider silk.

But there was something else at work as well-plain old gratitude. And why should she be grateful to me? Because for one hour each weekday evening I had listened, nodding intermittently-usually to cover my embarrassment at being totally non-plussed but occasionally with genuine sympathy-as she had poured out her troubles to me in Tamil. I had scarcely understood a phrase but the spirit of her woes had come as a great wave of words, as soaked in sorrow as sea in brine, drenching me and filling my dreams at night with obscure fears and jagged images. Her huge black eyes would burn into mine or else she would stare at the red cement floor, twisting her slender brown fingers, before starting on another torrent of misery and regret. I sipped the Nescafe unobtrusively. She had carried it in both hands across the compound, great bars of shadow falling from the surrounding palmyrahs. Her bare feet had made no sound; she did not wear anklets, and as the sun had died blood-red behind the giant fan-shaped parchment leaves, I would hear a faint knock at my door.

There she was, cup and saucer in both hands, smiling. I would invite her in. Ask her to sit. The coffee was always too milky, too sweet and too cool. I drank it dutifully, listening to the rise and fall of her voice; taut with misery at first and then softening with nostalgia amidst the gathering dusk. Cataracts of Tamil phrases, loaded with painful emotion, rained around me. Every now and then I would recognise a word I could translate: I would linger on it wonderingly. After half an hour, I was trying in vain to piece together these assorted clues as more and more words spun past me into oblivion.

There was no comfort I could give. An hour would pass. I was growing weary with keeping so still. The backs of my knees were pasted to the rough plastic of the arm-chair. I had studied small yellowing newsprint in Jaffna College archives all day, making notes until my wrist and fingers had turned to jelly. And then cycled the ten miles back to Kurumpacciddy in 90 degree heat. I would find myself wishing that she would be quickly purged of her sorrow and would leave me in peace. But I hadn't the heart to cut her off in mid-flow and send her away. She was so very sad. And so very beautiful. And to whom else could she say these things? So we would sit on in the almost-dark: she endlessly talking and I, steeled by politeness, surreptitiously scratching my mosquito bites; not daring to turn on the light for although it would break the spell and I would be released, she would have to face my uncomprehending stare and in the knowledge of her utter isolation, would have to return across the compound to her fountain of sadness and drink of it again.

For this woman, my age or a year younger-twenty-one-perhaps-with a three year old son and a baby girl still suckling at her breast, had made a gesture the enormity of whose consequences I could dimly imagine. She had bowed before Kama, the god of desire: she had broken every rule in this society bound by the iron-hoops of caste "distinction" (and note how that cunningly chosen word avoids the opprobrium associated with "discrimination" or "prejudice") by running away, by marrying 'beneath' her and if she hadn't been burnt or stoned to death (for this was nearly the last quarter of the 20th century and these were the highly educated and cultured Jaffnese) she was being driven inch by inch, like a nail by the sledgehammer of intolerance, into a wall of suicide despair. How could I join the side of the glittering-eyed bigots and turn on the light? No, I couldn't. Nor could I take any solace from the glare of the electric light-for wasn't all this 'modern' science yet another falsehood, yet another and maybe even more insidious form of cultural totalitarianism.

But part of me was longing for silence and when she left finally, passing on her bare soles the well, its long boom lit by a swinging bulb, I would go to the back door and sit on the step and listen to the palmyrahs creak and the tobacco leaves swish in the small plantation and gaze at the limpid stars, pink, green, orange, blue as rich and bright as lamps, hanging there in the great vault of the sky and feel some kind of peace come down at last not just on me but on all the desperate inhabitants of this fractured, tortured society in this, so beautiful and so tragic land.